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**RESEARCH PAPER****Digital Panopticon and Shattered Self: Unveiling AI Surveillance in  
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**ABSTRACT**

The paper aims to discuss the emergence of AI surveillance in contemporary dystopian fiction, which presents the reimaged digital panopticon disintegrating human identities and resulting in a shattered self, as portrayed in Eggers' *The Circle*. Artificial Intelligence refers to the imitation of human intelligence by machinery, especially in making decisions, pattern recognition, and technological surveillance. *The Circle* depicts this through Mae Holland, whose integration into the tech company that values transparency above privacy causes the disintegration of an authentic self. Using the qualitative method, the study employs the concept of a digital panopticon to examine how AI-powered surveillance influences the protagonist. The findings reveal that Mae succumbs to self-regulation, leading to identity fragmentation, highlighting the psychological and social consequences of AI surveillance and its threat to individuality. It recommends the ethical advancements in technology, along with check and balance of tech companies, and priority of real human connections to protect individuality and privacy.

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**KEYWORDS**Digital Panopticon, The Circle, Dave Eggers, AI Surveillance, Dystopian  
Fiction

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**Introduction**

Dave Eggers's novel *The Circle* is 21st-century contemporary fiction that exposes the extensive incorporation of artificial intelligence surveillance in daily lives of individuals. Dystopian fiction as noted by Zeb et al. (2023), "is a cultural product that serves as a mirror and a prism, reflecting society's innermost anxieties and desires" (p. 78). The dystopian literary genre, which has been fascinating to readers, has undergone significant changes as the challenges of the twenty-first century ranging from political turmoil to rapid technological advancement and ecological crises are more interlinked than ever. Kumar (2023) says, "Eggers stipulates a dystopian future etched by widespread surveillance, in which every individual is relentlessly monitored, with no way out" (p. 37). Eggers's *The Circle* follows a young lady, Mae Holland who is hired as a customer experience at 'The Circle' an influential tech giant that promotes transparency and connectivity. The Circle develops revolutionary technologies, such as surveillance systems driven by Artificial Intelligence to monitor individuals across the globe. As Mae progresses in the company, she has to sacrifice her privacy and individuality as she gets increasingly immersed in the philosophy of complete transparency as Ekler (2023) notes, "It is fair to give credit to the artistic aspect of the novel in its discussion of the eponymous company's dystopic intentions" (p. 69). The narrative explores the repercussions of a hyperconnected world, where constant automated surveillance and deterioration of boundaries lead to identity fragmentation and shattered self. The transformation of the protagonist from an optimistic employee with distinguished individuality to an active participant in Circle's repressive dictatorship operates as a cautionary tale about the consequences of unchecked

technological power. According to Paul and Criado (2020), “Authors with dystopian visions have molded their fictional narratives to address the contemporary concern” of environmental dilemma, economic injustice as well as moral consequences of technological advancements in this era.

The research argues that *The Circle* by Dave Eggers is a dystopian illustration of a digital panopticon, an extension of Foucault’s concept of Panopticon, where AI-backed surveillance eliminates individuality and human identity, resulting in the shattered self and identity fragmentation. The research major focus is on the transformation of the protagonist Mae Holland from a distinct, ambitious, and idealistic lady into an amenable participant in Circle’s ideology of complete transparency. It portrays how AI-powered monitoring systems enforce self-regulation leading to the fragmentation of identity. Circle’s dogma of utmost openness and connectivity in the guise of progression forms an ingrained oppressive structure that manipulates behavior and erodes identity. By examining the transformation of Mae and the social structures within the fictional narrative, the paper addresses the psychological and societal consequences of living under constant surveillance.

### Literature Review

One of the most talked-about topics in modern literature and theory is the intertwining of identity, technology, and surveillance. Michel Foucault’s concept of the ‘panopticon’ serves as a foundational theory for comprehending modern surveillance. Foucault (1977) defines a panopticon as a power framework that enforces self-regulation through pervasive visibility, in which individuals internalize the observer’s gaze. Through the concept of the panopticon, Foucault explored the relationship between the structure of social control and people in a disciplinary situation and, the power-knowledge concept. According to Foucault (1977), “Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice” (p. 27). Foucault believed that the actual concern is not that individuals are arbitrarily oppressed by society, but instead in how society systematically develops and constructs their identities, as power gradually influences and pervades their conduct. David Lyon (2006) extends the concept of the panopticon to the digital age, claiming that recent surveillance technologies create a ‘digital panopticon’, that penetrates everyday life. Lyon (2006) provides an in-depth study of the dynamics driving current trends, as well as the processes and results involved in the collection, organization, and treatment of personal information, as well as its manipulation and commercialization (p. 47). The digital realm introduces surveillance that is participatory, automated, and omnipresent.

Several scholars have worked on dystopian fiction which has served as a medium for critiquing societal structures and technological advancements. Literary works such as George Orwell’s *1984* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* have explored the threats of totalitarian control and loss of identity. Fatubun (2023) notes, “Both works of literature criticize totalitarianism, which confines people in society through rigorous monitoring” (p. 147). Eggers’ *The Circle* continues this tradition by illustrating a dystopian vision of the world in which the concept of openness and surveillance threatens to eliminate individuality and autonomy. Scholars like Bueno (2018) investigate *The Circle* focusing on the intersection of transhumanism, human advancements in technologies, and their societal ramifications. Eggers’ *The Circle* explores the existing and future possibilities, portraying a fairly realistic picture of how technological advancements may affect our society in the near future (Bueno, 2018, p. 169). Social media platforms and surveillance gadgets have frequently been criticized for their dehumanizing effects as noted by Keen (2012), “Social media has been accused of damaging human relations, among other

negative implications” (p. 66-7). Bueno (2018) maintains that Eggers opposes the dehumanizing implications of human enhancement technologies, specifically social media tools and monitoring gadgets (p. 185). Eggers's fictional narrative stresses the need to experience life through physical human presence while allowing for the choice to disconnect in a world increasingly dominated by the fantasies of disintegration and digital existence.

### Material and Methods

The research employs qualitative research methodology, combining textual analysis with theoretical and critical frameworks to investigate the novel's critique of technological dominance and its effects on individuality. The study is a qualitative literary analysis focusing on Dave Eggers's *The Circle* as a primary text analyzing its depiction of artificial intelligence surveillance, the digital panopticon, and the resulting fragmentation of identity. The research is descriptive and interpretive to uncover the psychological and social implications of technological advancements as illustrated in the novel. Secondary sources also have been employed including scholarly articles, books, electronic sources, and critical and theoretical perspectives to support textual analysis. While this research offers an extensive examination of *The Circle*, it is limited by its focus on a single text. The results are peculiar to Eggers' novel and may not apply to other works of dystopian literature. As a literary analysis, this study does not include any human beings or sensitive data. All sources are properly credited to prevent plagiarism and maintain academic integrity. The study follows ethical guidelines for research and writing.

### Results and Discussion

Panopticon architecture is omnipresent and insidious in contemporary society as it is no longer confined to the prison structure; instead, it has spread throughout society. Panopticism in the present digital era is more subtle as individuals are compelled to follow social norms and perform adequately without ever realizing its consequences. Lyon (2006) maintains, “Present-day surveillance expands beyond the Panopticon to create a digital infrastructure of constant monitoring”. The watchtower has been replaced by omnipresent surveillance cameras, creating a culture of constant visibility and self-regulation. Eggers (2013) portrays this digital panopticon through “SeeChange” (p. 41) cameras which enable real-time monitoring of individuals across various parts of the globe. The Circle's ideology is represented by its motto; “ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN” (p. 40) illustrating the company's desire and commitment to total transparency which is presented in the pretext of creating a safer and more democratic society. The Circle executives Eamon Bailey and Tom Stenton argue that openness reduces corruption, promotes accountability, and fosters trust between individuals and institutions. Bailey points out that, “Who would commit a crime knowing they might be watched anytime, anywhere?.....Tyrants can no longer hide” (p. 40). Although risks must be identified and avoided as noted by Bostrom (2005), “human enhancement technologies have enormous potential for meaningful and positive uses that can substantially improve human life” (p. 56). However, The Circle's ideology and initiative of ultimate transparency pose the risk of power exploitation through the mechanism of digital control. Bailey's assertion, “We will become all-seeing, all-knowing” (p. 42) illustrates the knowledge-power dynamics of The Circle as Foucault (1977) maintains that power becomes more efficient through the process of observation and knowledge follows behind. One of the Circle's founders, Kalden exclaims, “Once it is mandatory to have an account and once all government services are channeled through the Circle, you'll have helped create the world's first tyrannical monopoly” depicting the potential risks of corporate monopolization of information, illustrating the ways through which digital panopticon can lead to a form of global technological tyranny, “Does it seem

like a good idea to you that private company would control the flow of all information" (p. 219). Eggers ingeniously crafts as noted by Kumar (2023) "this narrative to underscore the illusory veneer of transparency that characterizes the present era" (p. 40).

Digital panopticon, along with power dynamics, actively transforms individuals' behavior, resulting in shattered self and fragmentation of identity, which is evident in the transformation of Mae Holland in the novel. Her transformation demonstrates the ways through which AI surveillance can alter personal identity, as her original idealism, "Mae thought. Who else but utopians could make utopia" (Eggers, 2013, p. 21), is replaced by unwavering compliance with the company's dogma, "SECRETS ARE LIES / SHARING IS CARING / PRIVACY IS THEFT" (p. 168). At the beginning of the novel, Mae is portrayed as an enthusiastic and determined employee, who is eager to be part of the Circle, which she sees as the peak of innovation and advancement. Her initial admiration of the tech company is evident through her thoughts, "The best people had made the best systems and the best systems had reaped funds, unlimited funds, that made possible this, the best place to work" (p. 21). Eggers portrays the utopian perception of individuals about technological advancements through the internal thoughts of Mae as she believes in the utopian vision of connectivity and openness. Utopia and dystopia are two sides of the same coin as Bueno (2018) notes, "Critics and reviewers have classified Eggers's *The Circle* as both dystopian and a satirical utopia for our time" (p. 174). Her enthusiasm is boosted by the company's assurances of inclusivity, efficiency, and data democratization, all of which are consistent with her ambition to be a part of something transformative.

However, as Mae becomes more entrenched in the company's scenario, her identity begins to fragment under the strain of constant monitoring and obligation to maintain her online presence on Circle-powered social media applications. The consequences of the digital panopticon as Lyon (2018) argues, "go beyond surveillance as it transforms our sense of self and identity". Gina sets up a "Zing Account" (Eggers, 2013, p. 56), which Mae considers 'extracurricular'. Mae is instantly corrected, "I don't have to tell you that this company exists because of the social media you consider *extracurricular*" (p. 55). She is encouraged and obligated to improve her rank through constant presence on the Zing which brings a lot of changes in her daily life. The Circle's manipulative disciplinary methods, as seen in Mae's kayaking confession, illustrate the psychological control inherent in the digital panopticon. When Denise and Josiah show disapproval of her unauthorized activity, "Mae I am looking at your profile, I am finding nothing about you and kayaking. No smiles, no ratings, no posts, nothing" (p. 105). Mae learns that even solitary leisure must be publicly communicated to retain her social and consumer value. As Zahara (2020) asserts the Circle's manipulative disciplinary approaches and relational force aimed to convert human individuals into docile bodies" (p. 4). Mae's self-examination - "What kind of person she was?..... *Be a person of some value to the world*" (p. 107) illustrates her gradual shattering of self as she absorbs the belief that personal experiences are worthless unless they are posted, shared, and verified online.

Mae's identity is completely transformed under the constant gaze of the digital panopticon, with the kayak theft marking her shift from external surveillance to internalized self-regulation and the loss of her individuality. Lyon (2018) maintains the digital realm introduces surveillance that is participatory, omnipresent, and automated. Mae's final sink into the digital panopticon occurs as she gets captured on SeeChange cameras borrowing a kayak without permission. Her instant reaction is self-loathing and confusion: "Mae's head echoed with self-denunciations. She hated who she was" (Eggers, 2013, p. 154). She feels guilty not only about the deed but about being exposed. Bailey's interrogation illustrates the company's manipulative disciplinary approach, which compels her to be constantly transparent. Her enforced transparency, initiated by the

locket camera hanging over her heart, begins the entire dissolution of her private personality. The camera becomes an all-seeing eye, catching and broadcasting every moment of her life. The transition from infrequent monitoring to continuous visibility mirrors the digital panoptic mechanism, in which individuals are never aware that they are being observed but assume perpetual monitoring as Foucault (1977) claims that the constant possibility of being monitored enforces individuals to check and control their behavior (p. 201). This situation compels Mae to adapt to an idealized, performance character, where even her circadian rhythms become public data, "She was allowed to turn off the SeeChange cameras in the room, but she found she rarely did" (p. 183). Zuboff (2019) maintains, that "individuals in surveillance capitalism are reduced to the data points, and their behaviors are harvested and monetized" (p. 8) as she is commodified as her actions are judged and quantified by the number of 'smiles' and 'frowns', and her online presence is demanded, appreciated and dictated by the Circle's consumers.

Mae's psyche becomes more obvious in her transformed conduct and repressed urges in the increased presence of omnipresent surveillance. Her relationship with Kalden previously distinguished by spontaneous, intimate encounters becomes impossible under the monitoring eye of the SeeChange audience as Lyon (2018) says, "the fear of being watched leads to the loss of freedom and creativity". Mae acknowledges this loss, "Every day she'd done without things she didn't want to want" (Eggers, 2013, p. 181). Her inability to engage in unsanctioned activities reflects the success of the digital panopticon in restructuring her identity around public validation and conformity. The spontaneous, authentic Mae who once sought solitude in kayaking or intimacy in private spaces is replaced by a fragmented persona whose value is measured in viewers, zings, and ratings. This fragmentation extends to the protagonist's family bonds, leading to the extremely intrusive broadcast of her parents' intimate moments. As Mae's camera catches her parents, "Her father was sitting on the bed, and her mother was kneeling on the floor, his penis in her hand. In an instant they all knew the ramifications" (p. 202), in compromising position, her personal and familial boundaries are obliterated. This event represents the ultimate breach of privacy, as the purity of the family unit is surrendered for the sake of transparency. However, Mae's response is telling; rather than opposing the system that violated her privacy, she internalizes the notion that privacy is the enemy. Individuals are reduced as noted by Ransom (1997), "to a political force and are intended to be exploited according to the best possible use of their skills" (p. 46). Normalization is employed as a tool as Foucault (1977) believes that the main goal of disciplinary power is to compel other forces to conform to the disciplinary framework as a norm which is evident through the response of Circle's management in compelling Mae to forget about the incident.

The Circle's digital panopticon not only dictates Mae's external behavior but also shatters her internal sensation of self. She is constantly conflicted, torn between genuine desires and the demands of her surveilled existence. She is constantly conflicted, torn between genuine desires and the demands of her surveilled existence. The discourse of The Circle perpetuates this cognitive dissonance through slogans like, "SECRET ARE LIES / SHARING IS CARING / PRIVACY IS THEFT" (Eggers, 2018, p. 168). Mae internalizes this ideology, shattering individuality until she willingly participates in her subjugation. This fragmentation of identity is manifested through her complete detachment from her past. As mentioned earlier, she enjoyed kayaking where she could experience the sensation of freedom and self-reflection. However, as she gets more immersed in the Circle's ideology, her moments of seclusion are replaced with a desire for public approval. Her internal conflict is portrayed by the moment of self-reflection, where she briefly questions the company's ideology, "The volume of information, of data, of judgments, of measurements, was too much, and there were too many people, and too many desires of too many people, and too many opinions of too many people" (p. 224). This moment of clarity reveals the

psychological toll of living within a digital panopticon, where the constant influx of information and the pressure to conform to societal expectations overwhelm Mae's sense of self. Despite this fleeting awareness, Mae ultimately succumbs to the Circle's demands, illustrating the dehumanizing effects of technological overreach. Mae is unable to resist the company which shows an inability to give away the benefits she is getting from the Circle. It highlights the contemporary social trend in which individuals give away their independence to get the materialistic benefits of openness and internet connectivity.

The alteration of identity and self of the protagonist Mae highlights the way through which an ever-watching eye of the digital panopticon is supported by artificial intelligence. Through the character of Mae, Eggers warns his audience about the personal consequences in the form of identity theft and shattered self because of the contemporary emergence of social media. That's why the paper presents the fiction's relevance and applicability to current discussions related to the privacy and independence of individuals in the hyper-connected era.

### Conclusion

To conclude, *The Circle* by Dave Eggers is a powerful criticism of the social as well as psychological consequences of surveillance supported by AI and the overreach of technology in this contemporary world. It highlights the ways through which the digital panopticon in this era of high technology results in the erosion of identity, human relationships, and individuality. The transition of the protagonist from a future-oriented and optimistic employee to a resistant member of the company shows dehumanizing effects in a hyperconnected scenario. The novel speaks about the present issues of how modern technology can affect human personal connections and freedom. The research mirrors the current scenarios in the sense that social media is converting society into dystopia because of its surveillance tendencies through artificial intelligence. The commercialization of personal individuality, acceptance of surveillance by tech companies, and ending of privacy are no longer theoretical but real aspects of the present era. Eggers gives the audience a sensation of warning about the erosion of individuality and risk of unchecked technological dominance in the society which is moving towards an era of smart and AI-based technology.

### Recommendations

The research recommends that people and society must critically interact with surveillance technologies, questioning their moral implications and opposing continuous monitoring to protect their freedom and privacy. To establish a harmony between technology and humans, online and offline life, digital literacy is crucial to aid individuals in avoiding the risks of hyperconnectivity. Governments must hold tech companies accountable, enforcing transparency and stricter regulations to tackle surveillance capitalism. Individuals must promote real human interactions and connections in a world where digital influence is expanding.

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