

Panoptic Shadows in the Selected Non-Fictions of Blaine Harden

Mr. K. Kalaivanan^{1*}, Dr. E. Sugantha Ezhil Mary²

¹PhD Research Scholar, Vels Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Pallavaram, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

²Professor, Department of English, Vels Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Pallavaram, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Corresponding Author: MR. K. Kalaivanan (PhD Research Scholar, Vels Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Pallavaram, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India)

Received: 16/03/2026

Accepted: 17/04/2026

Published: 28/04/2026

Abstract: The paper studies on the surveillance, resistance and resilience in the selected major non-fictions of Blaine Harden with respect to Michel Foucault's theory of panopticism referred in his text *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1995). Though the hypothesis of panopticon has been extensively implied to prisons and digital surveillance, this research widens its implications to autocratic reigns, colonial dominance and violence, ecological supremacy as portrayed in the non-fictions of Blaine Harden. Through the analysis of *Escape from Camp 14*, *The Great Leader and the Fighter Pilot*, *King of Spies*, *Murder at the Mission*, and *A River Lost*, the paper advocates that Harden's works build a visible structure of power that disciplines the subject from each novel into 'docile bodies'. Nevertheless, these texts document resistance, defection, testimony, ecological awareness concurrently which interrupt panoptic sovereignty. With the aid of Foucault's Panoptic discourse analysis and postcolonial observation, this paper exhibits that Harden's non-fictions presents a unified voice of surveillance and resistance over various geopolitical and historical milieu. The study bestows the studies of surveillance, trauma, postcolonial literary criticism and totalitarianism by locating panopticism as a merging point for understanding contemporary writing.

Keywords: Panopticism, Surveillance, Docile Bodies, Subaltern, Trauma, Colonialism.

Cite this article: Kalaivanan, K. & Mary, E. S. E. (2026). Panoptic Shadows in the Selected Non-Fictions of Blaine Harden. *MRS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Literature*, 3,72-73.

1. Introduction

The modern world controls people not by violence by through the systems of visibility, control and discipline. Michel Foucault's theory of panopticism, which was actually acquired from Jeremy Bentham's prison design conception, hypothesizes how the constant observation pressurizes individuals to regulate themselves. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault demonstrates how modern institutions implement panoptic surveillance to create "docile bodies" (Foucault 1995).

This study contends that the works of Harden dramatize the conception of panopticism beyond institutional array. Harden's narratives unveil the existence of surveillance in North Korean labor camps, colonial frontiers, intelligence agencies and ecological governance. His works not just blindly document exploitation of human rights, they also mention emotional policing, enforced confession, control and ideological discipline.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Blaine Harden Studies

Existing research predominantly treats Harden's works in isolation:

- *Escape from Camp 14* is primarily examined as testimony of trauma.
- *King of Spies* is considered within intelligence doctrine.

- *Murder at the Mission* is studied as settler colonial critique.

Vikram Seth's examination of *Escape from Camp 14* in the *Journal of Asian Studies* locates the work within human rights discourse nevertheless it does not inspect surveillance framework across Harden's texts. Likewise, the UCSB working paper "Policing Literary Theory" claims panopticism to an individual text rather it abandons Harden's broader body of work unexamined. Hence there is no study comprehensively that has applied Foucauldian panopticism across all five major nonfiction works of Blaine Harden.

2.2. Theoretical Foundations

- Michel Foucault – *Discipline and Punish*
- Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson – "The Surveillant Assemblage"
- David Lyon – *Theorizing Surveillance*

Haggerty and Ericson widened Foucault's centralized model into decentralized surveillance networks (Haggerty and Ericson 2000). Lyon places panopticism within digital and biometric modernity (Lyon 2007). However, these works hardly document nonfiction as a representational site of surveillant power.

3. Theoretical structure of Panopticism

The panopticon operates through asymmetrical surveillance, internalization of discipline, production of docile bodies, power/knowledge nexus and extension into modern society. Foucault's theory discloses how subjects become complicit in their own regulation. Harden's nonfiction illustrates how such internalization handles not only in prison surveillance yet across geopolitical systems.

4. Panopticism in Blaine Harden's Non-fictions

4.1. *Escape from Camp 14* (2012)

The life of Shin Dong-hyuk within the North Korean labor camp is documented in *Escape from Camp 14* by Harden (Harden 2012). Surveillance annihilates privacy and imposes emotional repression. Regulated culture constructs artificial behaviour as mentioned by Foucault as "docile bodies". The camp represents complete observation where the fear of getting caught enforces obedience.

4.2. *The Great Leader and the Fighter Pilot* (2015)

Panopticism under Kim Il Sung's regime is explored in this work. The regime builds a mythic gaze as cited by George Orwell in 1984, governs citizens even in absence of real time surveillance. Defection becomes an act of resisting internal gaze (Harden 2015).

4.3. *King of Spies* (2017)

In *King of Spies*, surveillance acts as decentralized via Cold War intelligence networks (Harden 2017). Echoing Haggerty and Ericson's "surveillant assemblage," the CIA's operations build streaming layers of visibility (Haggerty and Ericson 2000). Authority and power transmits through secrecy and documentation.

4.4. *Murder at the Mission* (2021)

Murder at the Mission reveals colonial panopticism. It is where settler institutions regulate indigenous people through licit and religious oversight. Archival suppression becomes a tool of historical discipline (Harden 2021).

4.5. *A River Lost* (1996)

In *A River Lost* biopolitical surveillance is indicated by ecological governance (Harden 1996). The river becomes subject to regulatory observation, scientific categorization, and economic instruction extending panopticism into environmental discourse.

5. Resistance and Subaltern Voice

Representing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theoretical conception of subaltern, Blaine Harden's works foreground mediated marginalized voices (Spivak, 1988). The resistance emerges across defection, testimony, archival reclamation and ecological activism whereas surveillance disciplines, narrative itself becomes counter-surveillance.

6. Findings

- a. Panopticism runs across totalitarian, authoritarian, colonial, subaltern, and ecological contexts.
- b. Emotional policing is core in Harden's depiction of North Korea.
- c. Intelligence networks represent decentralized surveillance assemblages.
- d. Postcolonial chronicles function as historical surveillance tools.
- e. Resistance is merged within narrative testimony.

7. Conclusion

Blaine Harden's non-fictions collectively forms surveillance across modern history. Through the perspective of Michel Foucault's panopticism, Harden reveals domination of power in the name of regime, colonial frontiers, environmental systems across prisons in his narratives. Yet, those non-fictions does illuminate resilience. Harden transfigures surveillance into testimony, discipline into critique and silence into resistance by narrating subaltern voices. This unified theoretical understanding stocks a significant gap in research and provides a space for surveillance studies, postcolonial criticism and trauma studies with contemporary non-fictional discourse.

This unified theoretical reading fills a significant research gap and contributes to surveillance studies, postcolonial criticism, and trauma theory within contemporary nonfiction studies.

References

1. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995.
2. Haggerty, Kevin D., and Richard V. Ericson. "The Surveillant Assemblage." *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2000, pp. 605–622.
3. Harden, Blaine. *A River Lost: The Life and Death of the Columbia*. Knopf, 1996.
4. *Escape from Camp 14: One Man's Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West*. Viking, 2012.
5. *The Great Leader and the Fighter Pilot*. Viking, 2015.
6. *King of Spies: The Dark Reign of America's Spymaster in Korea*. Viking, 2017.
7. *Murder at the Mission*. Penguin Press, 2021.
8. Lyon, David. *Theorizing Surveillance: The Panopticon and Beyond*. Routledge, 2007.
9. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271–313.