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Mapping Surveillance and Normalisation: Biopolitics in Perumal Murugan's *A Lonely Harvest*

Dr. B. Rajan
Assistant Professor,PG & Research Department of English,The New College, Chennai

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Abstract:

Using Biopolitics as a framework to map the surveillance and normalisation of power, this essay analyses Perumal Murugan's *A Lonely Harvest* to examine how it governs human life by managing conduct, bodies, reproduction, and social norms. The novel traces the aftermath of Kali's death and how his wife, Ponna, negotiates widowhood, pregnancy, motherhood, sorrow, and the persistent scrutiny of her village community. To analyse these factors, this study uses surveillance and normalisation. The study explores how these two factors operate as an interconnected configuration of biopolitical control over Ponna's body and behaviour. The regulation of Ponna's life depends not exclusively on direct patriarchal authority. Family members, neighbours, customs, communal speech, ritual practices, and expectations around widowhood and legitimate reproduction also shape her life. This paper employs qualitative textual analysis using Michel Foucault's concepts of biopower, surveillance, normalising judgement, disciplinary power, and the Panopticon. A close reading of selected passages from the novel confirms that her suffering is monitored regularly, her everyday movements are eyed, her widow's body is standardised through dress, her reproductive status is subjected to communal validation, and her child's legitimacy is publicly established. The village in *A Lonely Harvest* represents community as a dispersed disciplinary instrument in which domestic affection and social control frequently become indivisible. By applying biopolitical theory to the novel, the study deepens understanding of how literary narratives uncover the intimate mechanisms through which social norms govern women's bodies.

Keywords: biopolitics, surveillance, normalisation, gender, disciplinary power

Introduction

A key concern in contemporary cultural studies is the relationship between the individual body and social power. In these literary texts, power operates not only through political institutions but also through customs, families, religious practices, communities, and social expectations. To understand how power operates, Michel Foucault's concept of biopower can be useful, as it focuses on the sovereign exercise of authority through the

regulation of bodies and populations across different social contexts. In this scenario, individuals are not only forced to listen and obey because of power dynamics; they also face a series of challenges: being observed, classified, evaluated, corrected, and motivated to conform to accepted norms. Foucault distinguishes between disciplinary power and biopower and explains how they can operate simultaneously. The first focuses on the individual body, while the latter addresses relationships among populations and processes such as birth, reproduction, health, sexuality, and mortality. Each individual's body is always disciplined, while their life is organised around social expectations and their environment. In those contexts, normalisation becomes key because individuals are measured or controlled against established standards of acceptable behaviour.

When someone diverges from these standard behaviours or expectations, they may be considered abnormal, dangerous, impure, sinful, shameful, socially problematic, or punishable. To examine these kinds of literary representations, the explanation of Foucault's disciplinary society provides two useful terms: i) surveillance and ii) social conformity. For this kind of investigation, Perumal Murugan's *A Lonely Harvest* is well-suited because it engages with rural Tamil society, caste, gender, sexuality, desire, family, and agrarian life. It focuses on the connection between individual desire and collective social ordinance. He is one of the most eminent contemporary Tamil writers, whose fiction engages with rural Tamil society,

It emphasises family, gender, caste, sexuality, reproduction, labour, ritual, and community. It also spots a woman’s body at the intersection of widowhood, motherhood, sexuality, family honour, and communal judgement. The novel mentions Ponna's experiences before and after her husband's death. Even after her husband's death, her body does not belong to her and lives on its own. Family and society try to influence her. This study therefore analyses the importance of surveillance, which is not limited to physical watching or scanning. It goes beyond watching to include circulating information, monitoring behaviour, anticipating social judgement, regulating speech, and internalising communal expectations. Likewise, normalisation prescribes forms of womanhood as cultural norms, becoming the standard against which Ponna is measured. She is watched because others take care of her, but the same surveillance bounds her freedom. The writer shows how the community both protects and disciplines her. This aspect is key to a biopolitical reading. However, these issues still need to be analysed through surveillance and normalisation to decode the everyday mechanisms of her life.

This paper navigates the novel through Michel Foucault’s key concepts of biopolitics, disciplinary power, surveillance, and normalisation. The objectives of this paper are: firstly, to examine the surveillance of Ponna’s body, movements, grief, and behaviour. Secondly, to analyse the normalisation of widowhood and gendered conduct. Thirdly, to investigate the biopolitical regulation of pregnancy and reproductive legitimacy. Fourthly, to examine how communal speech and punishment reinforce disciplinary social order and,

finally, to demonstrate how family and community participate in the production of normalised femininity. This paper tries to answer the following questions: i) How is surveillance a tool that controls social and gendered behaviour? ii) How does the village community shape ideas about widowhood, women's behaviour, and reproductive expectations? iii) How does communal surveillance control Ponna's body, sexuality, and reproductive choices? iv) How do care and concern within the community also become forms of discipline and social control?

This study matters because it shows how reproductive legitimacy becomes a collective concern. Her pregnancy is not treated as a private biological matter; instead, it becomes a public concern about legitimacy and social status because it connects to family honour, lineage, widowhood, social reputation, and communal knowledge.

Literature Review

This section reviews literature on Perumal Murugan's works on reproductive politics and the female body, then on themes such as patriarchy, widowhood, and gendered identity. His novel, One Part Woman, has attracted considerable critical attention because the main character, Ponna, is treated not simply as a personal experience but as a socially produced crisis. Ramakrishnan et al. examine Murugan's duology and discover how caste, gender, and established social structures influence individual choices and relationships. Recent criticism and research articles on his works argue that the blame for the condition of childlessness is disproportionately transferred onto the woman, especially Ponna, who faces a series of complications related to surveillance. Her womb becomes a symbolic central point of social discussion and scrutiny. From a feminist perspective, his work shows the female body's transformation into an object of social expectation. Subhashini et al. demonstrate how patriarchal structures regulate feminine identity and restrict the agency of women within oppressive social systems (1969). Parveen and Radhakrishnan examine how the writer's representation of the female body reveals how identities are limited to reproductive functions alone. Their study places reproductive rituals within a system of objectification in which women's bodies are evaluated and respected only based on their ability to reproduce. This kind of study is important because it highlights the social power of the reproductive body. However, focusing on objectification can sometimes downplay the mechanisms through which the body is continually observed and regulated. This paper joins the discussion by exploring how surveillance operationalises reproductive control in everyday life across societies.

Ponna's conversion from the role of wife to widow does not emancipate her from patriarchal expectations**.** Instead, widowhood introduces another set of social rules governing dress, sexuality, movement, behaviour, and emotional expression. Studies of feminist criticism of *A Lonely Harvest* observe that widowhood intensifies Ponna's marginalisation through socially imposed identities, such as those of widow and mother. Normalisation provides an idealised model of womanhood, subjecting widows to stricter controls over their bodies, clothing, sexuality, and social conduct. However, this study builds on feminist

scholarship by interpreting these expectations as disciplinary practices. In *A Lonely Harvest*, Ponna's pregnancy becomes a matter requiring public confirmation and approval. This shift of authority from private reproduction to public knowledge suits a biopolitical reading.

Research Gap

The existing scholarship establishes that Murugan's works expose caste hierarchy, patriarchy, reproductive control, female objectification, and social stigma. Recently, several scholars have also begun examining *A Lonely Harvest* in particular. However, a more systematic analysis of normalisation and surveillance as interconnected power dynamics is still needed. This study fills this gap by arguing that Ponna's experience is not controlled only by patriarchal ideology. It is produced through a network of communal expectations, reproductive customs, gendered norms, and the observation of matters and threats of punishment. The village therefore functions as a distributed corrective field in which power is exercised through watching, judging, categorising, and correcting.

Theoretical Framework

To trace patterns of power, Michel Foucault's concept of biopower may be useful because itinvolves regulating and optimising life. In contrast, power is traditionally associated with the authority to take or permit life. The population has become a target of political and social management. In The History of Sexuality, Foucault argues that power in contemporary society increasingly concerns bodies and populations. The binding nature of sexuality is evident between individual bodily conduct and broader population processes. Here, reproduction becomes a crucial point where individual life and collective interests intersect. The concept is directly relevant to *A Lonely Harvest* and to his distinction between disciplinary power and biopower, which can overlap. Disciplinary power personalises and trains bodies, whereas biopower regulates populations and vital processes. In the novel, Ponna is watched individually, but the reason for her surveillance extends beyond her behaviour. The legitimacy of lineage and family reproduction are connected with her pregnancy. Her behaviour becomes connected to communal morality and controlled widowhood. Thus, the novel argues that one woman's body becomes part of a wider social management of life.

Foucault's concept of disciplinary power explains how individuals are observed, examined, classified, controlled, corrected, and normalised through judgement. The individual behaves as though observation is always possible, and therefore surveillance can become internalised. Foucault identifies hierarchical observation, normalising judgement, and examination as important techniques of disciplinary power. Surveillance does not necessarily require constant physical force. The possibility of being observed can itself produce conformity. Normalisation is equally important. A community establishes expectations concerning appropriate behaviour and distinguishes acceptable conduct from deviation. Individuals are then encouraged to regulate themselves in accordance with these expectations.

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Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on close textual analysis of A Lonely Harvest. It investigates selected passages from the novel to identify patterns across the themes of surveillance, normalisation, reproductive regulation, gender discipline, and communal punishment. The study is interpretive and theoretical, guided primarily by Foucault's theories of biopower and disciplinary power. It approaches the novel as a cultural text that represents power structures and social relations.

Analysis and Discussion

This section analyses Perumal Murugan's *A Lonely Harvest* to examine biopolitics, focusing on two themes: surveillance and normalisation. Ponna's grief and emotions are accumulating because of her domestic surveillance. She faces this condition after her husband's death. She is forced to experience emotional moments every day in her life, and her family also increases her emotional strain by monitoring her closely in every aspect of her life. This surveillance appears caring, and the observers' language reveals it as a deeper disciplinary structure. The following lines confirm it: "In those early days, someone or other was always shadowing her, knowing well that she would pursue such morbid thoughts in her grief" (Murugan 19). The passage exemplifies the intersection of disciplinary power and biopower—the expression "someone or other" hints at the dispersal of surveillance. In the real sense, there is no single permanent observer.

Rather, different people watch and scan Ponna's activities. Her grief therefore accumulates under continuous observation. Her emotional response is not entirely identified as private grief, but it becomes a prospective risk. The community's constructs distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable grief. Foucault's disciplinary model helps explain how surveillance operates when individuals are made visible to others. The observer need not necessarily use force, as the observation itself establishes a power relation in this context. Her emotional state becomes an object of social management and care, and therefore becomes inseparable from surveillance. It becomes more systematic at night. She is unable to sleep properly, which leads Vallayi and Seerayi to organise themselves into shifts to be with her and monitor her with utmost care. Here, the domestic space has become a site of constant monitoring: "Since Ponna didn't sleep at night, Seerayi and Vallayi took turns staying awake, since they feared that Ponna might give them the slip and harm herself in some way" (Murugan 90). The phrase "took turns staying awake" in the passage unwrapped organised surveillance.

Watching is no longer occasional in this context because it has become routine. The family creates a tight schedule around Ponna's body and movements. Her movement must be anticipated and controlled. Foucault explains that disciplinary power operates through the regulation of time and space, placing individuals within organised structures where their movements can be observed. Thus, the passage demonstrates how surveillance penetrates domestic life, and the village's disciplinary system begins not in a formal institution but within the household itself. Murugan extends the idea of surveillance through the human-

animal relationship. The dog becomes an unexpected participant in the monitoring system. The writer narrates that "even if they heard a little rustle from inside the hut, they'd both quickly awaken and sit up. If Ponna walked outside at night, the dog followed her. And they followed the dog" (Murugan 90).

The passage creates a chain of observation, noting that the dog watches Ponna and that the family watches the dog. So, the surveillance system therefore becomes almost automatic by default. The phrase "little rustle" is more than enough to activate the observers. Surveillance is an embodied habit in the novel, where Seerayi and Vallayi do not wait for evidence of wrongdoing; instead, they respond to the slightest sign of movement. This shows how disciplinary vigilance produces a state in which ordinary behaviour becomes potentially significant in that context of surveillance. Foucault's concept of panopticism is useful here because surveillance becomes a network rather than a single gaze. It is not about somebody watching Ponna, but about the entire arrangement producing visibility. He further states that disciplinary society is a system in which surveillance can become dispersed throughout the social body and system. That passage clearly states that survival has become normal within the perspective of Ponna's domestic environment. It is no longer experienced as an exceptional response. It becomes part of everyday life.

In the novel, certain incidents reveal how normalisation occurs under the widow's surveillance. Here, Ponna is under surveillance and is usually accompanied by normalisation. After she becomes a widow, her body is expected to adapt to a culturally recognisable image of widowhood. Her attire becomes one of the most visible instruments of this process. Vallayi "could not bear to look at Ponna in a white sari—a widow's attire" (Murugan 26) because the white sari means more than mourning. It completely transforms Ponna's social identity. Her body becomes fair as a widow through clothing. Her sari, therefore, acts as a visible marker by which the community categorises her status. Ponna is expected to show her widowhood through her appearance and dress. So, her identity is consequently normalised through an external sign.

Foucault's concept of normalising judgement explains how social categories have become standards. In particular, individuals are not simply categorised. They are expected to strictly follow particular norms. Her widowhood is therefore produced through social expectations concerning how a widow should appear and behave. The disciplinary body becomes readable openly. The dress code of widowhood helps the community identify whether she conforms to the expected widowhood category. Normalisation operates through the body's visible presentation. Widowhood is not simply a personal condition; it becomes a socially regulated identity under which she lives. The ordinance on widowhood becomes open when she is told that her future is defined by confinement and sacrifice alone. Gender norms have been established here using the language to describe female life. The writer argues that: "Your lot now is to wear this sari and just stay confined to this place. ... A

woman's life involves sacrificing everything and staying within very narrow bounds" (Murugan 285).

The phrase "your lot" implies that her future has already been determined. Her identity as a woman produces a prescribed social destiny. The phrase "staying within very narrow bounds" turns gender into a spatial discipline. Her body is not only watched, but it is confined, and movement becomes a measure of moral respectability. The woman who stays within the arbitrary boundaries is considered proper, while movement beyond them may provoke suspicion. The disciplinary theory explains how power operates by arranging bodies within restricted spaces. It determines where an individual may be, what they may do, and how they should behave inside and outside. The village's gender norms therefore function as a disciplinary technology. This is also considered a biopolitical issue because gendered regulation of family and others controls sexuality and reproduction. Her sexuality is especially vital because controlling her sexuality protects assumptions concerning lineage and social order. Thus, the normalisation does not merely describe Ponna. It actively produces the acceptable widow. Her social identity is constructed through restriction. Throughout Ponna's pregnancy, Murugan narrates how the story moves toward the biopolitical legitimacy of the fetus. Biopolitics occurs in the story, confirming the regulation of Ponna's pregnancy. Her fetus becomes an object of communal knowledge and discussion because its genuineness impacts lineage and social order. The following passage confirms that:

The rationale behind this custom was to prevent anyone from saying later that she managed to get pregnant after her husband's death. If they did not know until after the final rites that the wife was pregnant, the custom was to inform the village council still. (Murugan 222)

The passage explains how pregnancy transforms into a matter of communal confirmation and her pregnancy itself becomes socially knowable, which troubles her in return. The village council acts as an institution of reproductive knowledge. It documents pregnancy through collective awareness to prevent future accusations. They decide that the female body becomes a record they must interpret and verify. Foucault identifies reproduction as one process through which power becomes concerned with populations. The fetus binds an individual body with questions of lineage, inheritance, legitimacy, and social continuity. The passage confirms that the novel presents reproduction as a communal rather than purely private matter. Her body becomes a site of biopolitical governance. The regulation of pregnancy reaches its final stage in public testimony. She must establish the child's legitimacy before the entire village: "Ponnayi now stands in front of the entire village to declare that the child growing inside her is very much her husband's... The sun and moon over us bear witness to this, saami" (Murugan 325).

The child's legitimacy requires public visibility. Her private reproductive experience becomes a communal performance altogether. The invocation of the sun and moon introduces a broader symbolic dimension. The testimony is presented as something requiring

witnesses beyond individual assertion. The natural world itself becomes part of the verification process.

From Foucault's perspective, the examination makes an individual visible, situates the individual within a system of knowledge, and produces a legitimate identity. He connects disciplinary power to procedures through which individuals are observed, assessed, and classified. Her testimony therefore does not simply communicate information. It produces social knowledge about the child's identity. Thus, the biopolitical control reaches its highest intensity when the reproductive body is publicly interpreted. The child's legitimacy becomes a communal fact rather than a private belief.

Surveillance is not limited to bodies; the language itself is monitored. The community establishes boundaries concerning what may be said about Ponna: "Saami, no one should speak words of blame, words of suspicion, words of insinuation, words of insult against our Ponna" (Murugan 327). Categories of unacceptable discourse include blame, suspicion, insinuation, and insult. The community that has previously watched and judged her now attempts to regulate the language used to describe her. This does not necessarily eliminate surveillance. Instead, it demonstrates the community's attempt to control the meaning generated by surveillance. Foucault's concept of power/knowledge is relevant here. Power produces and controls knowledge in part through discourse. What may be said, who may say it, and which interpretations are considered legitimate are all important elements of social power. Controlling discourse protects the communal order established around her pregnancy. She is controlled not only through observation but also through managing what observation is allowed to mean.

The writer also focuses on the intergenerational eye on the body in the novel. That surveillance becomes intergenerational when older and younger community members observe Ponna, and the writer records those moments in his novel. Those acts of watching are therefore reproduced across generations to witness: "In this way, they managed to keep one eye on Ponna while also sharing things with each other" (Murugan 101). The idiom "keep one eye on Ponna" suggests divided attention. She is not the sole focus of activity, yet surveillance continues in the background, with or without her knowledge. This is precisely what makes the system powerful: it creates an impact and an imprint in her mind and those watching; eventually, it becomes habitual. In other ways, surveillance can coexist in every aspect of life. It may be through ordinary social interaction. People can share information, talk and work while simultaneously monitoring Ponna. Foucault's account of disciplinary society emphasises that surveillance can become embedded in ordinary practices rather than remaining confined to formal institutions. The passage demonstrates a social form of panopticism in which the gaze is reproduced through interpersonal networks. Ponna does not need to be constantly confronted. She exists within a field of potential observation. It is not an isolated reaction to Ponna's situation but a routine social practice.

Conclusion

This paper analyses Perumal Murugan's *A Lonely Harvest* using the theoretical lens of biopolitics, disciplinary power, and surveillance. The novel's protagonist, Ponna, is shaped by a network of everyday communal scanning rather than a single nearby formal authority. Her family, relatives and neighbours completely monitor her sorrow, every movement, and trauma of widowhood. This control is effective because it is masked as communal protection, responsibility, and custom rather than explicit compulsion. In this context, surveillance is considered care. Her pregnancy is considered not as a private biological factor; rather, it is a public concern and worry regarding legitimacy and social status. The intersection of disciplinary and biopower reveals that her body and her reproductive capacity become the primary sites. This paper argues that biopolitics does not require modern state institutions such as prisons or surveillance cameras. Instead, it operates closely through cultural norms and traditions. It also explores how people participate in social regulation. Thus, Ponna is not merely a passive victim despite the pervasive discipline. Her communal structures constrain her forcefully, yet they also offer spaces for solidarity and negotiation. The novel thus illustrates Ponna's struggle under authority. Within seemingly benign cultural traditions, they control how life, identity, and social belonging are defined, challenging readers to recognise the embedded mechanisms of control.

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