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The Gaze Reclaimed: Panoptic and Synoptic Dynamics in Syrian Narratives

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Abstract
Contemporary Syrian writers have contributed to what has come to be recognized as Arab Spring narratives, while engaging with broader global concerns of power politics. Focusing on *The Shell* (2006) by Mustafa Khalifa and *The Silence and the Roar* (2004) by Nihad Sirees, this paper brings into dialogue the frameworks of panopticism and synopticism to examine the reclamation of the gaze and the disruption of authoritative narrative monopolies. While prison writing and discourses of surveillance have been predominantly interpreted through Foucauldian models of panopticism, comparatively little attention has been paid to the counter-discursive potential of Mathiesen's concept of synopticism and its subversive capacities. This study situates Syrian narratives within a broader transnational context of literary engagements with surveillance and prison writing, highlighting how panoptic structures are both reproduced and contested within narrative form. At the same time, it foregrounds the synoptic dynamics embedded in these texts, particularly through acts of writing and voicing that enable visibility from below. By examining how mechanisms of surveillance and control are represented and resisted, the paper argues that literary articulation itself functions as a synoptic practice—one that reclaims the gaze, destabilizes hegemonic modes of seeing, and empowers marginalized voices through narrative expression.

***Keywords*:** Panopticism, Prison Literature, surveillance, Synopticism, Syrian Literature
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Introduction

> He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication.
>
> – Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

Michel Foucault's assertion that modern power operates through the internalization of surveillance offers a critical framework for analyzing systems of control. Syrian prison narratives, however, push these panoptic dynamics beyond their original formulation, exposing more pervasive mechanisms of domination and discursive surveillance. Under the pervasive surveillance of an authoritarian regime, Syrian prison writing emerges as a microcosm of disciplinary power, encapsulating the lived experience of control, coercion, and self-regulation. The socio-political and historical conditions of Syria have been recently documented in *Syria's War and the Descent into Horror* (Laub et al., 2025), which characterizes more than four decades of rule by a regime that fuses autocracy with kleptocracy. Within this system, social life is tightly regulated through diffuse yet omnipresent mechanisms of surveillance and censorship, while the constant threat of arbitrary detention disciplines behavior at both individual and collective levels. In Foucauldian terms, power operates not only through external enforcement but through its internalization, as individuals come to anticipate and reproduce the constraints imposed upon them. The right to speak and to represent Syrian experience is thus systematically curtailed, with the regime asserting authority over public narratives while silencing dissenting voices. Against this backdrop of institutionalized repression, Syrian writers translate these pressures into fiction, constructing allegorical spaces that expose the psychological and social consequences of panoptic control and extend its implications beyond the prison and the nation-state.

Set amid the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the works of Syrian writers, Mustafa Khalifa and Nihad Sirees, depict contemporary Syria at a time of intense political and social upheaval. In his memoir, *The Shell: Memoirs of a Hidden Observer* (2006), Khalifa, a novelist and political writer, reinscribes his experience of imprisonment for thirteen years in Syria. This work, while recounting the return of the protagonist, Mustafa, from France, a Christian often been mistaken for a Muslim by police officers, it depicts the relentless surveillance, strict control, and psychological abuse imposed by prison authorities. Similarly, Sirees' allegorical novel *The Silence and the Roar* (2004) negotiates the discursive surveillance imposed on Syrian intellectuals and their enforced silence. Through the character of the Syrian writer, Fathi Chin, the narrative represents the panoptic dynamics of internalized surveillance and silencing of dissident voices. Through their representations of contemporary Syria and its socio-historical milieu, Khalifa and Sirees offer useful material for negotiating the interplay of discursive and non-discursive formations of panoptic structures of power within the Syrian context.

Michel Foucault's concept of panopticism as theorized in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), describes a modern modality of power grounded in surveillance, normalization, and the internalization of discipline. While rooted in Jeremy Bentham's architectural model of the Panopticon, Foucault extends the concept beyond physical institutions to encompass diffuse social mechanisms that regulate behavior through the possibility of constant observation. While this model emphasizes the power dynamic of visibility—where the few observe the many—Thomas Mathiesen's notion of synopticism introduces a complementary structure in which the many observe the few, particularly through mass media and collective spectatorship. Thomas

Mathiesen's concept of synopticism, introduced in *The Viewer Society* (1997), refers to a mode of social control that reverses the directional logic of Foucault's panopticism. Whereas panopticism is structured around hierarchical surveillance—where individuals internalize discipline under the gaze of an unseen observer—synopticism operates through mass-mediated visibility, enabling large audiences to watch, monitor, and evaluate a relatively small number of individuals, often those in positions of prominence or authority. Taken together, these frameworks provide a more comprehensive approach to the Syrian prison narrative. Panopticism elucidates the internal logic of disciplinary power within the prison, highlighting how subjects are rendered visible, normalized, and compelled toward self-regulation. Synopticism, in turn, enables an analysis of how these carceral experiences are mediated, disseminated, and collectively apprehended in the public sphere. Their integration thus facilitates a multi-layered understanding of power that encompasses both the material conditions of confinement and the discursive processes through which imprisonment is represented, remembered, and contested in the Syrian context.

Drawing on the combined frameworks of Foucault's panopticon and Mathiesen's synopticon, this study aims to explore how Syrian writers have given literary form to both discursive and non discursive panoptic dynamics alongside the reversal of the gaze and reclaim of narrative voice a site of counter-surveillance and collective witnessing. The paper investigates, among other questions, the configuration of panoptic dynamics through space, time and internalized surveillance, while simultaneously negotiating the discursive and non-discursive reversal of this power structure through the logic of synopticism. In doing so, the study situates Syrian prison narrative within the global genre and emphasizes how Arab intellectuals have contributed to reclaiming the gaze, and thus, the discursive subversion of surveillance.

Literature Review

While the negotiation of boundaries and cultural identity emerge as major concerns in literary studies of Syrian literature and post-Arab spring novels respectively (Witwit, 2017; Alghatani, 2024), significant attention has recently been directed to how Syrian writing contributes to global prison narrative and surveillance discourses. Taleghani's *Readings in Syrian Prison Literature* (2021) situates Syrian prison writing within a broader transnational tradition of carceral literature, placing it in dialogue with narratives from the United States, Guantánamo Bay, Eastern Europe, and China. Crucially, she resists reading these texts as transparent testimonies, instead arguing that they are produced under conditions of censorship, exile, and delayed circulation that fundamentally shape their form and voice. Syrian prison literature, in her account, emerges through fragmentation, experimentation, and mediation, reflecting the constraints under which it is written and transmitted. In this way, Taleghani intervenes in wider debates about authorship and representation under authoritarian regimes, foregrounding literary form as a site of ethical and political negotiation. Similarly, McManus's *The Networks of Prison Narrative* (2023) expands the analytical frame by situating Syrian prison narratives within broader social and relational contexts. Rather than isolating individual testimonies, McManus conceptualizes these works as part of interconnected networks of voice, memory, and circulation that extend beyond the individual subject. More recently, Baker (2025) reads Syrian prison narratives as a form of resistance, arguing that these retellings construct a collective Syrian identity and contribute to the nation-making in the absence of a state archive. Taken together, these studies position Syrian prison literature as a

vital contribution to global prison writing, demonstrating how narrative practices resist erasure by mediating voice, preserving memory, and asserting political visibility under conditions of authoritarian constraint.

Recent scholarship has shifted the study of incarceration from predominantly testimonial and human-rights frameworks toward spatial and heterotopic approaches that foreground the production and continuity of carceral power. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, Shamma and Keynoush (2023a, 2023b) offer a compelling reconceptualization of the prison as a tightly regulated space that both reflects and reproduces dominant structures of authoritarian control, while permitting only constrained forms of resistance. Their Foucauldian framework is particularly valuable in redirecting attention from testimonial modes to the material and symbolic production of power. They further develop this argument by demonstrating how prison architecture mirrors broader societal dynamics, positioning space as a key mechanism through which surveillance operates and hierarchies of power are normalized. Their work frames the prison as both a material and symbolic apparatus that disciplines through spatial design while revealing the broader logics of surveillance underpinning authoritarian governance.

Prison writing has frequently been approached through Foucauldian frameworks. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1995) offers a foundational grounding for understanding how aspects of surveillance transcend the physical architecture of the prison. His theorization of the panopticon, a structure in which the potential of being watched produces internalized self-regulation, highlights how disciplinary power emerges not merely from direct observation but from the internalization of its continuity. Wrobel (2022) extends this argument by revealing how literary forms appropriate panoptic logic, using metaphor, narrative design, and character psychology to dramatize the absorption of surveillance into the social body. Studies including Baral's (2022) reading of *1984* and Paquette's (2024) examination of Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* further demonstrate panopticism's adaptability across genres, revealing how literature reconfigures mechanisms of self-regulation that extend beyond the physical prison. These approaches demonstrate how surveillance studies illuminate not only sociopolitical structures but also the formal dynamics of narrative, revealing how literary texts engage with, reconfigure, and discursively reproduce the power politics of the gaze.

While panopticism has been widely used to analyze dynamics of surveillance in literature, Mathiesen's theorization of synopticism offers a counter perspective, disrupting the monopoly with its openness to plurality and diversity. In *The Viewer Society* (1997), Mathiesen argues that modern media setups invert the panoptic relation, enabling 'the many' to watch 'the few,' often producing new forms of public scrutiny and collective visibility. This mode of knowledge production embraces the integration of multiple voices and interpretive frames. Yet, synopticism has received comparatively little attention in literary studies, particularly within the context of Syrian prison writing. Placing synopticism in dialogue with Syrian prison literature provides a productive framework for examining how narratives simultaneously render power visible and articulate forms of oppositional gaze.

Under conditions of censorship and state surveillance, Syrian writers have mobilized narrative as a form of testimony. Miriam Cooke's *Dissident Syria* (2007) demonstrates how Syrian narrative becomes a mode of counter-documentation; a means of preserving memory, challenging official narratives, and asserting visibility in contexts of enforced silence. Her work situates

literature as a politically engaged practice that transforms writers into witnesses who record, interpret, and resist the state's control over what may be seen, said, or remembered. Cooke further develops these insights in *The Cell Story: Syrian Prison Stories after Hafiz Asad* (2011), where she argues that prison narratives constitute a distinct mode of witnessing shaped by extreme surveillance and enforced silence. She underscores 'mental writing' as a crucial survival strategy, notably in *The Shell*, where memory operates as an archive for otherwise forbidden documentation. Cooke argues that works such as *The Silence and the Roar* and *The Shell* destabilize the boundary between prison and society, illustrating how carceral logics of surveillance, fear, and coercion circulate within public life. Her reading affirms that Syrian prison literature not only archives repression but actively reclaims narrative agency.

Drawing on the dialectics of voicing the silenced, Taleghani (2015) describes *The Shell* as one of the first literary accounts to break the silence surrounding Tadmor, analyzing its memory-based diary structure as a form of resistance against enforced muteness. She argues that the narrator's position as a 'voyeur' inside the communal cell transforms him into a hidden witness who records what the prison intends to erase, producing a counter-archive that captures both daily brutality and the fragmented temporality of trauma. Complementing this perspective, Das et al (2024) draw on trauma theory to demonstrate how the physical and psychological violence endured by the narrator generates a liminal identity suspended between imprisonment and freedom. Their reading situates *The Shell* within a broader corpus of Syrian prison testimonies, showcasing its function as both a historical testament to Tadmor and as a narrative exploration of trauma's enduring presence.

Emphasizing its critique of spectacle, censorship, and the performative staging of power, McManus (2014) situates Nihad Sirees's *The Silence and the Roar* within a broader tradition of Syrian satire that exposes the orchestration of mass devotion and media control, revealing the state's theatrical self-fashioning. Fallon (2017) builds on this analysis by foregrounding the coercive regulation of intellectual life, highlighting how the novel dramatizes the state's enforced mobilization of artists and writers in sustaining its monopoly over authoritative narrative.

Despite substantial scholarship on Syrian prison literature, limited attention has been given to how multiple, competing voices operate simultaneously to both reproduce and resist discursive and non-discursive mechanisms of power. By bringing Michel Foucault's theorization of surveillance and power into dialogue with Mathesian synopticism, this study addresses that gap, offering a framework that captures the interplay of voices within prison narratives while revealing their subversive agency. With particular focus on Mustafa Khalifa's *The Shell* and Nihad Sirees's *The Silence and the Roar*, this approach helps expose not only the micro-politics of power within the prison but also the hegemonic silencing that extends beyond it, ultimately reclaiming the counter-narrative of the oppositional gaze.

Methodology

With particular focus on Mustafa Khalifa's *The Shell* and Nihad Sirees's *The Silence and the Roar*, this study situates Syrian literary interventions within the global context of prison writing. By bringing together the frameworks of panopticism and synopticism, as developed by Michel Foucault and Thomas Mathiesen, the paper aims to offer a nuanced reading and a fuller understanding of the subversive agency of Syrian prison writing.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1995), Michel Foucault traces the historical evolution of the prison from a space of public, physical punishment to a modern disciplinary mechanism that fosters self-regulation and internalized surveillance. Drawing on Jeremy Bentham's concept of the panopticon (1791), Foucault (1995) discusses a spatial design in which inmates are visible to an unseen observer, promoting constant self-surveillance and discipline (pp. 200-201). Beyond its architectural dimensions, Foucault emphasizes that panopticism functions as a principle of power that produces knowledge, shapes behavior, and enforces social norms (pp. 203-204). Foucault's panoptic model extends beyond the prison to regulate power dynamics in other institutions, including schools and workplaces, particularly in authoritarian contexts where citizens' actions and thoughts are closely governed (p. 205). This framework provides useful tools for analyzing the panoptic structures in Syrian literature, illuminating mechanisms of control. The study will analyze the representation of panoptic space and temporality as well as the construction of the docile subject. According to Foucault, the panoptic organization of space—characterized by enclosure, partitioning, and constant visibility—renders subjects permanently observable and therefore self-regulating. Complementing this, disciplinary temporality operates through regulated schedules, repetition, and the segmentation of time, structuring daily life into controlled sequences. Together, these spatial and temporal arrangements produce docile subjects by embedding surveillance and control into the fabric of lived experience. As a methodological lens, this framework enables an examination of how Syrian prison narratives both represent and contest these mechanisms, revealing the tensions between imposed discipline and acts of narrative resistance.

Responding to Foucault (1997), Thomas Mathiesen in *The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's 'Panopticon' Revisited*, develops the concept of synopticism, where the many observe the few, primarily through mass media. Synopticism operates as a counter-framework to panopticism, highlighting how the right to gaze can be shifted, and consequently disrupting the dominant discourse. Combining Michel Foucault's account of panoptic power with Mathesian synopticism enables a more comprehensive understanding of narrative representational agency as a form of discursive resistance. While Foucault's framework elucidates how surveillance, spatial control, and temporal regulation produce hegemonic structures and disciplined subjects, synopticism foregrounds the simultaneous presence of multiple perspectives that exceed and destabilize this control. Together, they reveal how Syrian prison narratives not only expose the operations of hegemony but also generate a plurality of marginalized and unheard voices, transforming narration into a site of resistance.

While both Khalifa's *The Shell* and Sirees's *The Silence and the Roar* represent panoptic control, they simultaneously offer ways to discursive subversion through the reconfiguration of synoptic observation and counter-narrative. Through the interplay of panoptic and synoptic dynamics, the study will analyze Khalifa's and Siree's narratives in relation to their sociohistorical contexts. Between the 'silence' of the marginalized and the 'roar' of the advantaged, the study investigates, how Syrian intellectuals find in literary form a mechanism to disrupt the monopoly of the master narrative and offer a multiplicity of unheard voices.

Analysis

Within suppressive systems, literary representations offer a medium for voicing the unsayable. The genre of Prison narrative has emerged to recount and refract the carceral experience and the panoptic logic underlying the normalization of surveillance. According to Baker (2025), prison writing has become central to the shaping of the Syrian cultural and national identity. Drawing on the Foucauldian frame, this study explores the representation of panoptic structures within the prison and beyond, negotiating the discursive and non-discursive mechanisms of surveillance. With particular focus on the two Syrian narratives, namely Khalifa's *The Shell* and Sirees' *The Silence and the Roar*, the paper examines the production of panoptic structures through the configuration of space and temporality, in the Syrian sociohistorical context that maintains submission and suppresses agency.

Panoptic Structures of Space and Time

Reinscribing his thirteen-year imprisonment, Khalifa's memoir articulates a panoptic space in which every bodily gesture, verbal utterance, and spatial movement is subordinated to a hierarchical gaze. Echoing Foucault's argument (1995) that modern imprisonment preserves traces of earlier forms of punitive violence through rationing, corporal punishment, and psychological degradation (pp. 15–16), Khalifa represents the prison cell as an intensely regulated environment where constant surveillance engenders internalized discipline. The cell, structured through systems of oversight and command, emerges as a microcosm of the panoptic regime, demonstrating how routinization, enforced visibility, and hierarchical authority collectively produce submission. By contrast, Sirees extends the logic of panopticism beyond enclosed space, envisioning the city itself as a diffuse panoptic field. The narrative opens with a city reverberating with orchestrated noise—bullhorns, patriotic anthems, and incessant chants of "Long live…Long live"—that permeate both private and public domains (Sirees, 2013, pp. 7–8). The narrator, Fathi Sheen, is unable to evade these pervasive structures of observation and compelled participation, underscoring how urban space is reorganized into surveillance system. Unlike Khalifa's bounded prison, Sirees's city produces discipline through enforced participation, hypervisibility, and ritualized forms of collective performance.

Both Khalifa and Sirees engage with the panoptic structuring of temporality, demonstrating how the regulation and surveillance of time function as crucial mechanisms through which authoritarian power disciplines its subjects. As Foucault (1995) argues, modern institutions seek to maximize the utility of bodies through precise scheduling, repetitive routines, and standardized rhythms (p. 220). Cooke (2011) commented on the absence of the passage of time, arguing that Syrian prison narratives articulate a 'No-time' disoriented between "glacial" and "instantaneous" temporalities (176). Time thus becomes a disciplinary instrument that organizes behavior, shapes consciousness, and regulates collective life.

In Khalifa's memoir (2017), temporality is structured through an alternation between dated entries and categorical headings, signalling both the endurance of prolonged captivity and the erosion of temporal differentiation within the prison. While specific dates such as "April 20" mark the passage of time, thematic sections such as "Shaving," "Food," and "The Break" expose the monotony and repetition that undermine the prisoner's sense of temporal autonomy (pp. 36–62). The imposition of rigid schedules—where prisoners are ordered to sleep, sit, and move according to precise commands—reveals how surveillance penetrates the most basic temporal rhythms of

daily life. Even ostensibly private acts, such as bathroom use, are timed and monitored, with the head prisoner enforcing schedules that replicate institutional authority (Khalifa, 2017, pp. 25–26).

Whereas Khalifa's memoir emphasizes the continuous regulation of time as a means of sustaining subjugation, the one-day temporal frame of Sirees's narrative intensifies the experience of temporal confinement. For Fathi Sheen, the public celebration of the Leader's twentieth anniversary, along with the crowded, march-filled streets, disrupts the ordinary flow of time and the familiar rhythm of a working day (Sirees, 2013, pp. 20–21). Through these contrasting temporal structures, Khalifa and Sirees ultimately present time as a panoptic mechanism of control—a rhythm imposed from above that governs both public life and the private consciousness.

Panopticism and the Production of the Docile Subjects

In both *The Shell* and *The Silence and the Roar*, the production of the docile body—central to Foucauldian disciplinary theory—operates in conjunction with spatial and temporal panoptic structures. As Foucault (1995) theorizes, disciplinary power functions by rendering the body both useful and compliant, subjecting it to regimes of surveillance that induce self-regulation. In *The Shell*, the pervasive fear of observation compels Muslim prisoners to perform the "Fear Prayer" in absolute stillness, exemplifying how surveillance is internalized as bodily self-policing (Khalifa, 2017, p. 32). Similarly, the mandated walks in the prison yard—where prisoners move in queues, holding the trousers of the man ahead, with eyes closed and heads lowered—constitute a ritualized choreography of submission. Khalifa's comparison of the prisoners to rats holding one another's tails underscores the dehumanizing effects of such regulated movement (Khalifa, 2017, pp. 41–43). Within this system, motion is stripped of agency, purpose, and individuality, transforming every bodily gesture into an act dictated by authority.

In Sirees's narrative, bodily discipline is similarly enacted through collective performance in public space. Mandatory marches, oppressive heat, and enforced chanting reveal how the regime converts bodily movement into a visible demonstration of loyalty (Sirees, 2013, pp. 15–19). Public punishment for those who deviate from prescribed behavior reinforces the linkage between physical nonconformity and ideological transgression (Sirees, 2013, pp. 13–14). The disembodied voice of the megaphone, which "eliminates any judgment about thought or personality or love," operates as a mechanism for suppressing individuality and synchronizing citizens' bodies with the collective rhythm imposed by the state (Sirees, 2013, p. 20). Drawing on Foucault's assertion (1995 that the body becomes "a fragment of mobile space" that can be arranged and articulated to serve institutional needs (p. 164), Sirees depicts civilians as components within a vast, state-engineered choreography. Through this enforced coordination, bodily discipline emerges as a central mechanism for maintaining authoritarian control.

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Taken together, Khalifa's and Sirees's texts not only illustrate Foucauldian panopticism but also complicate and extend its logic through their narrative representations of authoritarian control. While Foucault (1995) conceptualizes surveillance as a rationalized mechanism that renders individuals visible to correct deviance and produce disciplined, self-regulating subjects, both Syrian narratives depict a far more expansive and intrusive regime of visibility. In both texts, surveillance exceeds the boundaries of institutional spaces and punitive moments, permeating thought, belief, domestic life, and professional activity. The panoptic apparatus is thus reconfigured as an instrument of ideological domination, mobilized to enforce propaganda, regulate religious practice, intervene in close relationships, and structure the conditions of labor. By dramatizing this totalizing extension of visibility, Khalifa and Sirees reveal a form of panopticism that no longer targets behavior alone but seeks to discipline consciousness itself, thereby surpassing the corrective logic of the classical panoptic model.

Synoptic Dynamics

While Foucault's panoptic model illuminates how authoritarian power disciplines bodies and orchestrates visibility from above, it does not fully account for the more complex dynamics of observation embedded within these narratives. In both *The Shell* and *The Silence and the Roar*, surveillance operates not only as a top-down mechanism but also as a circulating social practice. As the gaze of authority is cast upon citizens, those same citizens become observers of the regime—its performances, spectacles, and the violences it seeks to obscure. This shift from being seen to seeing introduces a second logic of visibility aligned with Thomas Mathiesen's concept of the synopticon, in which the many observe the few. Synopticism thus provides a framework for understanding the reversal of the gaze, as well as the forms of witnessing, documentation, and counter-visibility that emerge within these texts.

If the panopticon renders subjects compliant through the pressure of constant visibility, the synopticon unsettles this paradigm by exposing authority itself to collective observation. As Mathiesen (1997) argues, panopticism and synopticism "develop in intimate interaction, even fusion, with each other," often operating simultaneously within the same social and institutional formations (p. 223). This fusion is evident in both texts, where regimes that impose pervasive surveillance simultaneously render themselves legible to the counter-gaze of prisoners, citizens, and writers. Within these narratives, synopticism unfolds through two interconnected modalities. The first emerges through acts of witnessing, as characters observe the rituals, performances, and violences through which authority manifests itself. The second takes shape in writing as a synoptic practice—a mode of recording that enables the reclamation of epistemic authority and the articulation of counter-visibility.

Whereas witnessing remains bound to the immediacy of perception, writing transforms observation into durable documentation, thereby reversing the Foucauldian logic of the archive. Foucault (1995) characterizes modern power as one that "engages [individuals] in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them" (p. 189), positioning subjects as objects of institutional inscription. However, when memory, narrative, and literary production become instruments of

recording, the documented subject is reconstituted as the documenting observer. In this sense, Mathiesen's (1997) theorization of the synopticon clarifies how regimes that once monopolized visibility become themselves the objects of sustained observation. Through this transformation, Syrian prison narratives emerge as a synoptic instrument that preserves what authoritarianism seeks to erase, producing a counter-discourse that both exposes and archives the operations of power.

Literal synopticism in *The Shell* and *The Silence and the Roar* emerges through moments in which characters directly witness the operations of authority, transforming perception itself into a subtle form of resistance. These scenes foreground the body as an instrument of seeing—whether through an eye peering via a fracture in the wall or a citizen observing the staged choreography of power performed before the masses. What the regime presents as ritual or routine is reconstituted, through the characters' gaze, as an archive of its abuses and contradictions. In this sense, literal witnessing constitutes a primary manifestation of synopticism in both texts: an act through which individuals register, interpret, and mentally record dimensions of authority that exceed the regime's control over visibility. The title of Khalifa's memoir, *The Shell: Memoir of a Hidden Observer*, foregrounds this logic of concealed seeing, foreshadowing the synoptic dynamic that structures the narrative. The narrator describes himself as "a tortoise that has sensed danger and retreated inside its shell… secretly watching and observing, recording, and waiting for release" (Khalifa, 2017, p. 53). This metaphor does more than convey isolation; it articulates a spatial and psychological position in which observation becomes both a strategy of survival and an act of quiet defiance. Concealment affords him a vantage point inaccessible to those embedded within the apparatus of power, enabling him to witness its operations without being fully subsumed by them. The shell thus functions as both refuge and observational post, allowing him to perceive the world within and beyond the prison cell while remaining unseen.

The narrator's concealed vantage point transforms enforced confinement into a privileged site of observation, enabling a form of synoptic seeing that exposes the inner workings of authoritarian power. This position materializes when a small, walnut-sized opening appears in the cell wall, functioning as a makeshift viewing lens. Through it, the narrator acquires a perspective unavailable to other inmates, allowing him to observe the prison yard, the guards, executions, and the daily routines of coercion otherwise obscured by the cell's enclosure (Khalifa, 2017, pp. 83–84). What this aperture reveals is not merely the persistence of violence but its profound arbitrariness: prisoners are beaten without cause, condemned without explanation, and executed with nothing more than a name and a verdict. Over months of "continuously watching and spying on the prison yard through the peephole" (Khalifa, 2017, p. 93), the narrator becomes intimately familiar with the guards' faces, gestures, and habits, even as he remains unsettled by the unpredictability that governs their actions. What the regime presumes to be hidden is thus transformed into an ongoing spectacle, through which sovereign violence reveals its instability, disorder, and absence of procedural or moral justification.

When the narrator eventually discloses the hidden aperture to his cellmates, the act of seeing expands from individual observation to collective witnessing (Khalifa, 2017, pp. 148–149). The opening thus operates not merely as a physical rupture in the carceral architecture but as a site of exposure where knowledge, agency, and despair converge. While it enables the prisoners to reclaim the gaze, what it reveals is a world governed by arbitrariness and cruelty—the vision

strains comprehension and undermines hope. In *The Shell*, this recovered gaze does not remain directed outward. The narrator turns it inward, toward the micro-politics of the cell, where internal hierarchies and exclusions replicate the coercive structures imposed by the prison regime. As the only Christian among predominantly Muslim inmates, he is marked early on as "a Christian, and a spy," a designation that immediately marginalizes him within the group (Khalifa, 2017, p. 47). This hostility intensifies when Abu Al-Qa'qa', an extremist prisoner, calls on others to "trail [him] and bring down the punishment of God on [him]," transforming religious identity into a rationale for surveillance and punishment within the confined space (Khalifa, 2017, pp. 141–142). These dynamics demonstrate that witnessing in *The Shell* extends beyond exposing state violence to revealing how disciplinary logics are reproduced within enclosed social formations. Synoptic vision, in this context, not only uncovers the operations of authority from above but also exposes the internalization and redistribution of power among the prisoners themselves.

In *The Silence and the Roar*, synoptic witnessing initially emerges through the regime's televised coverage of the Leader's twentieth anniversary celebration. The broadcast presents images of ecstatic crowds, synchronized chants, and carefully choreographed displays of national unity, all meticulously produced by the state's media apparatus. This spectacle is not directed solely at the public; it is also staged for the Leader himself, who, as Fathi observes, "regularly watched video clips of the masses chanting for him in marches or in crowded gatherings" (Sirees, 2013, pp. 81–82). The media thus generates a recursive spectacle in which both citizens and rulers consume an image of devotion manufactured for their gaze. Rather than eliminating direct witnessing, however, the broadcast mediates and distorts it, compelling viewers to confront the disjunction between lived reality and its state-produced representation. In this gap, synoptic perception emerges as a critical faculty: citizens become aware not only of what is shown but of how it is constructed, exposing the mechanisms through which authority stages and circulates its own legitimacy.

The narrative then shifts from the mediated space of the screen to the immediacy of the street, allowing Fathi to witness the march in its unfiltered, embodied form. What the camera frames as patriotic fervour is revealed, at ground level, as a scene marked by exhaustion, violence, and desperation. Fathi observes individuals collapsing from heat and overcrowding, trampled underfoot, beaten when attempting to leave, and carried away without acknowledgment of their suffering (Sirees, 2013, pp. 105–109). Whereas the broadcast projects seamless choreography, the street-level perspective exposes a population physically coerced into obedience, propelled forward by a combination of police force and collective panic. In this contrast, synopticism emerges through the disjunction between lived visibility and state-sanctioned representation. The street becomes a space where authority cannot fully regulate perception, where the reality of coercion exceeds official framing. This visibility reaches its most unsettling articulation in the hospital, where the casualties of the march are delivered anonymously and their deaths reframed as patriotic sacrifice—"it's only death on behalf of the Leader… it's a tremendous honour" (Sirees, 2013, p. 40). Here, Fathi encounters bodies suffocated and trampled, stripped of identity and processed without recognition. In contrast to the televised spectacle, the hospital constitutes a synoptic space that ruptures the regime's constructed image, exposing the material consequences of its performance and the human cost it seeks to obscure.

Writing as a Synoptic Practice

Synopticism, however, is both constrained and actively contested by the power politics of censorship. In *The Silence and the Roar*, censorship operates as an institutional regulation of perception, designed to control who may speak and what can be publicly articulated and circulated. As a novelist, Sirees reflects the extent to which Syrian authoritarianism polices narrative production, and these constraints are mirrored within the fictional world of the text. Here, censorship extends beyond language to encompass affect itself: even love songs are prohibited because "all feelings must be oriented toward the Leader," revealing how emotional life becomes subject to ideological control (Sirees, 2013, pp. 58–60). The regime's closure of all independent newspapers, leaving only two state-sanctioned publications, further demonstrates how such filtration monopolizes interpretation, ensuring that visibility remains the prerogative of the state while foreclosing the emergence of counter-narratives (Sirees, 2013, pp. 30–31). In *The Shell*, censorship assumes an even more extreme form through the material deprivation of both writing and reading. The regime seeks not only to silence speech but to eliminate access to documentation, memory, and knowledge itself. Khalifa's narrative captures this logic vividly: prisoners endure years without encountering a single printed text, and a stray newspaper becomes so precious that inmates construct a human pyramid to retrieve it (Khalifa, 2017, pp. 181–183). Although the prison contains "the highest proportion of holders of university degrees in the entire country," inmates are denied even the most basic tools of literacy, exposing the regime's determination to extinguish not only knowledge but also the capacity to record and transmit it (Khalifa, 2017, p. 2). Across both texts, censorship functions as a mechanism that preserves the state's monopoly over visibility by confining it to officially sanctioned forms while suppressing the counter-visibility that writing and documentation might otherwise produce.

Despite institutional censorship, archiving in these texts emerges as a deliberate act of resistance. *The Shell* constructs its narrative through a distinctive mnemonic mode, transforming memory into a foundational practice of documentation. The memoir recounts thirteen years of imprisonment through the narrator's retrospective perspective, foregrounding recollection as both method and medium. Deprived of pen and paper, the narrator develops what he terms "mental writing" to preserve his experiences: "When I decided to write this diary, I'd already gradually converted my mind into a tape recorder on which I recorded everything I saw and some of what I heard. And now I am downloading 'some' of what this tape contains" (Khalifa, 2017, p. 3). This declaration reconfigures memory as an intentional archival practice rather than a passive repository, enabling the preservation of experience within a space where writing is prohibited. This narrative strategy reflects a broader authorial commitment that Khalifa articulates beyond the text. In a 2016 interview with Al Jazeera, he describes *The Shell* as both "a document and a testimony," emphasizing that its commemorative function extends beyond literary representation to encompass historical and ethical responsibility. The narrator's meticulous mental recording thus parallels Khalifa's own effort to safeguard experiences the regime sought to erase, linking the private act of remembering within the prison to the public act of writing beyond it.

If *The Shell* transforms memory into a concealed archive, *The Silence and the Roar* reveals how state-produced media—intended as propaganda—is reappropriated into a site of synoptic documentation. Through Fathi's encounters with televised parades and orchestrated displays of devotion, the novel shows how the regime's efforts to manufacture its image inadvertently generate a visual record that can be reinterpreted as testimony. The broadcasts, which depict the

Leader's cameraman "filming every move he made, particularly his right hand as it rose to salute the masses" (Sirees, 2013, p. 45), are meticulously crafted to glorify authority. Rumors that these recordings are archived in the Leader's palace for his private viewing (Sirees, 2013, p. 21) further underscore their function as instruments of self-legitimation. Yet the narrative reopens and re-signifies this closed archive of power. What is preserved for the regime's consumption becomes, for observers like Fathi and for readers, a counter-archive that exposes coercion, exhaustion, and the constructed nature of political spectacle—realities that writing captures and preserves beyond the fleeting moment of broadcast.

Within authoritarian contexts, writing constitutes a subversive challenge to the state's monopoly over narrative production. Mathiesen's (1997) concept of "institutional elites," who reproduce dominant ideology, clarifies this dynamic by highlighting why regimes treat intellectuals as potential threats capable of reshaping perception rather than reinforcing it (p. 227). In her readings of Syrian prison narratives, Cooke (2011) pointed to the challenge faced by intellectuals to speak truth to power. In *The Silence and the Roar*, Fathi's refusal to align his literary work with state ideology results in his dismissal, erasure from media archives, and marginalization within intellectual circles (pp. 65–66). This systematic silencing exemplifies what Aziz Al-Azmeh and Joanna Dillabough (2023) describe as the necropolitics of narrative—the regime's power to determine which voices endure within public memory (p. 6). *The Shell*, however, exposes a more overtly violent articulation of this logic. Within the prison, educated inmates—doctors, engineers, professors, and writers—are singled out for intensified humiliation and brutality. Their knowledge renders them particularly dangerous, as it equips them to interpret, remember, and potentially document the structures of state violence. Across both texts, intellectuals are targeted not merely for dissent but because they embody a synoptic threat: their capacity to observe, record, and reinterpret reality challenges the regime's control over visibility and meaning.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how surveillance operates in *The Shell* and *The Silence and the Roar* through the interplay of domination and visibility. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of panopticism, the analysis has shown that both texts depict authoritarian power as a system that disciplines space, time, visibility, and the body, producing subjects who internalize control through the constant possibility of observation. At the same time, by incorporating Thomas Mathiesen's concept of the synopticon, the study has demonstrated that these surveillance structures are neither total nor stable. Instead, they generate points of rupture through which prisoners, citizens, and writers reclaim the gaze, document lived experience, and contest the monopoly of authority over representation. The findings reveal that Khalifa's and Sirees' narratives not only expose the mechanisms of panoptic power but also enact forms of synoptic resistance through witnessing, memory, and writing. In doing so, they reposition contemporary Syrian literature within broader traditions of prison writing and global discourses on surveillance, visibility, and power. These texts illustrate how narrative itself becomes a critical site where authoritarian control is both reproduced and challenged, transforming literature into an instrument of counter-visibility and historical preservation. Future research may extend this inquiry by exploring how synoptic practices operate across other forms of cultural production, including visual art, particularly in contexts shaped by

ongoing conflict and displacement. Further comparative research could illuminate how analogous configurations of panopticism and synopticism operate across diverse cross-cultural and postcolonial contexts, thereby positioning Syrian narratives within a broader transnational framework of surveillance, resistance, and narrative power.

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