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When Big Brother Meets Big Business: A Comparative Study of Surveillance Capitalism and Control in Indian and Western Dystopian Fiction

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Abstract : *The rise of digital infrastructure has brought a paradigm shift in power dynamics, the mechanics of governance, and the role of an individual living in a tech-mediated world. Dystopian fiction has always served as a crucial diagnostic for this new reality, translating abstract anxieties about technology into the lived experience of control. To understand this, this research paper has examined three novels: The City Inside by Samit Basu, The Immortal King Rao by Vauhini Vara, and The Circle by Dave Eggers, all of which, in their own way, take the readers to the world of Surveillance, Algorithmic Governance, and Privacy Loss in capitalist as well as in postcolonial spaces. This study incorporates, among other ideas, theories of Surveillance Capitalism (Zuboff, 2015), Data Colonialism from (Couldry and Mejias, 2019), Panopticism (Foucault, 1977), and Technological Dystopianism. This research paper presents a qualitative study of selected texts, including a comparative analysis. It has sought to examine how these three novels present a pertinent cautionary tale on technological ethics, the role of humans in it, the relationship between technology and Power, and new forms of freedom in the digital age. This research found that there has been a prominent rise in the Indian/South Asian literature, including with Postcolonial vulnerability, socio-economic inequality, and collaboration of corporation with state in general, and also how literature is concerned with the role of technology in shaping this world; whereas voluntary privacy, techno-utopian models, and transparency market remain a concern in Western literature.*

Keywords: *Surveillance; Data Colonialism; Digital Capitalism; Comparative Literature; Algorithmic Governance; Postcolonial Studies; Dystopian Fiction.*

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Introduction:

"What happens when they control all searches and have full access to all data about every person? When they know every move everyone makes? … Now, you and I both know that if you can control the flow of information, you can control everything" (Eggers, 2013). Our current realities are being converged by such literary visions, blurring the line between consumer convenience and corporate control. These anxieties about information control and power are not new but have long been central to dystopian literature, which has historically imagined societies shaped by surveillance, domination, and the erosion of individual freedom.

Dystopian societies are typically characterised by politically oppressive systems, restricted personal

freedom, extreme social inequality, and various methods of control. George Orwell, in his novel *1984*, and Aldous Huxley, in *Brave New World*, depict totalitarian regimes that suppress individuality and regulate human behaviour through fiction. As the twenty-first century progressed into the digital age, with computers becoming deeply integrated into everyday life, dystopian writing evolved accordingly. This shift gave rise to digital dystopian novels, where authors began to explore the darker consequences of technology, data, and algorithmic control.

In contemporary society, these forms of control have not disappeared but have been reconfigured through digital technologies that operate within everyday life. Digital surveillance has become an increasingly pervasive presence in everyday interactions with digital devices. When search engines and social media platforms recommend products that users have previously searched for, it reveals how online actions are continuously tracked and analysed through algorithmic systems. These predictive mechanisms demonstrate how surveillance operates quietly within contemporary digital life. Such practices are also a defining feature of dystopian societies, where every online action, including selfies, videos, product searches, and data entries, becomes subject to monitoring and control. Data collected by governments and corporations is then used to influence individuals and exercise power, transforming everyday digital participation into a site of regulation and dominance.

The Big Tech firms are now analysing how users behave online to foretell what they are most likely to do next. They rely on adjusted algorithms, trends, and their online activities every day, intending to influence and direct their actions. According to Shoshana Zuboff in her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, "a new form of information capitalism seeks to predict and alter human behaviour as a way of generating profit and gaining market power." (Zuboff, 2015). Using the work of Zuboff on Surveillance Capitalism, this paper has examined how surveillance in India compares with that in the Western world, as presented in novels like *The City Inside, The Circle,* and *The Immortal King Rao.* These novels reflect how different cultures experience technologies of surveillance.

The Indian surveillance model remains a product of colonial means of governance. These means, such as caste enrolment, census, and racial definitions, continue to reverberate in a postcolonial, digital world, as highlighted in various studies of data colonialism and the history of surveillance studies (Couldry and Mejias, 2019). Because a shift from paper to algorithm-based regimes does not eradicate the former, these patterns are incorporated into data extraction. This paper, through its examination of the selected novels, seeks to highlight how surveillance capitalism manifests in a nation that has been divided along the caste line and how purely Western theories are insufficient to deal with this Indian experience.

Conceptual Framework:

Shoshana Zuboff describes Surveillance Capitalism as a system where corporations extract personal data to predict behaviour, creating a monopolistic power structure in which companies act not only as service providers but as dominant data controllers. While the West enforces strict data laws like the GDPR, India's weaker regulations allow expansive data collection with minimal oversight. Understanding this digital economy requires tracing how power shifts from disciplinary institutions to biopolitical control. Foucault (1977) explains how nineteenth-century surveillance operated through institutions such as hospitals and schools, whereas Haggerty and Ericson's (2000) "surveillant assemblage" shows how contemporary surveillance becomes decentralised as data flows across biometrics, social media, CCTV, and medical systems.

Colonial surveillance was top-down and racialised, relying on caste lists and censuses for control, and these structures reappear in postcolonial digital forms such as biometric IDs and databases. Datafication forces individuals into voluntary visibility, with Big Tech acting as a new empire through "data colonialism" (Couldry & Mejias, 2021). States demand citizen transparency while maintaining their own secrecy, creating asymmetric visibility that harms subaltern groups whose data becomes extractable and essential for survival (Birchall, 2017).

Literature plays a critical role in revealing these power structures. From Orwell's *1984* to

Eggers' *The Circle*, writers expose how surveillance permeates contemporary life. Hinchliffe (2019) shows how dystopian fiction tracks the shift from traditional state surveillance to digital systems that enter public, private, and bodily spaces. Bevington (2024) extends this by illustrating how post-apocalyptic narratives interrogate data capitalism and accelerated technological control, making literature a vital space for critique and resistance.

Literature Review:

Zuboff's article *Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilisation* (Zuboff, 2015) offers a starting point for understanding how digital technologies convert behavioural data into a form of economic power. Here, Zuboff (2015) argues that data produced from traces left by users in their behavioural lives becomes a key input for developing a prediction product that then influences users' actions in their future behaviours. According to Zuboff's idea of Surveillance Capitalism, convenience and personalisation reinforce data extraction, with Big Other as a ubiquitous, invisible platform that influences users' behaviour.

Extending from economic reasoning to structural analysis, Haggerty and Ericson's *The Surveillant Assemblage* (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000) reconfigures surveillance as a decentralised system of institutions, sites, and biometric technology. Their notion of data doubles illustrates how subjects are disseminated in data that moves along various systems without being controlled by a centre. This assemblage of surveillance renders it mobile, layered, and inescapable, providing a way of reading how contemporary subjects, as well as fictional ones, are situated in relation to diffuse surveillance.

Further studies investigate how global inequalities frame data extraction. *More than Extraction: Rethinking Data's Colonial Political Economy* suggest that datafication reimplements traditional notions of racial and colonial hierarchies by establishing a new form of enclosure in which "social and emotional life are placed in extractive condition" (Dalton and Thatcher, 2023). Their work further develops Zuboff's theories by highlighting that those who are most impacted by data exploitation are those in the Global South. *The Genesis of Data's Original Sin: Transitioning from Surveillance Capitalism to the Era of Data*

Colonialism also suggests that a colonial history of data extraction can be traced to surveillance capitalism. He suggests that digital technology emulates imperialism— "appropriating, monopolising, and forming subjects" (Gao, 2023) and, as a result, data extraction can be seen as a technologically enhanced form of colonialism.

Couldry and Mejias, in their book *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonising Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism*, synthesise all these debates around data colonialism. The authors contend that "ubiquitous data extraction," "colonial subordination," and "capitalist expansion" combine with the aim of "render[ing] communication and life themselves an extractive frontier" (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). Their argument synthesises precisely why platforms, identity regimes, and other digital architectures are tools of a "new empire" (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

These theoretical approaches cross over into literary studies. Suvin's *On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre* (Suvin, 1972) brings in cognitive estrangement, which describes how dystopian and science fiction use this device to estrange reality to expose the hidden structures of power in it. This theoretical approach is very important when analysing novels like *The Circle*, *The Immortal King Rao*, and *The City Inside*, which explore concepts of technological control, caste, government, and institutional failure. Hinchliffe, in *The Representation of Surveillance in Dystopian Fiction of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Hinchliffe, 2019) argues that literature reflects this transition from a world of institutions watching over our lives to a world of ubiquitous electronic surveillance. Finally, Bevington, in *An Exit Out of the Hive: Post-Apocalyptic Fictions of Data Capitalism and Technological Acceleration* (Bevington, 2024), argues that post-apocalyptic fiction provides a criticism of data capitalism and increased technological control. Finally, a critical postcolonial perspective for a proper understanding of Indian dystopia as a subgenre of science fiction has been offered by Banerjee in *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History, and Hybridity*

*(*Banerjee, 2020). Here, he asserts that Indian dystopias are quite distinct from Western dystopias in that technological fears are placed in narratives of caste order, political disorder, and globalisation. This work further reiterates that Indian as well as American dystopian fiction needs to be examined in distinct cultural contexts.

Hypothesis:

Dystopian literature from Indian and American cultures paints a very contemporary picture concerning technology and data exploitation, where surveillance capitalism is bestowed with corporate power, victimising individual liberty and privacy.

Ancillary Hypothesis:

These cultural and socio-political contexts set the parameters of literary representation for surveillance capitalism in the dystopian textual world. Consequently, American texts highlight corporate monopolies and market consumerism, and Indian texts explore socio-economic disparities and postcolonial vulnerabilities.

Aims and Objectives:

The main objective of this research is to critically examine how digital dystopia, shaped by surveillance capitalism and corporate control of data, is represented in contemporary literature across three cultural contexts: India and America. Using Samit Basu's *The City Inside*, Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao*, and Dave Eggers' *The Circle* to analyse how these narratives construct anxieties around technology, privacy, and power.

Research Gap:

Most of the works on Surveillance Capitalism are centred on Western contexts, where the focus is on the individual and corporate tracking, which means these theories do not fully explain how surveillance works in places like India. There is also very limited literature that studies Indian digital surveillance through caste, society, and colonial histories, so the Indian experience remains under-explored in mainstream research. Along with this, very few studies directly compare Western and Indian systems, creating a clear gap in understanding how Surveillance Capitalism shifts across different cultural, political, and historical settings.

Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative literary analysis to explore how Digital Dystopia is represented through the lens of surveillance capitalism in fiction from three cultural contexts: India, Britain, and America. The selected texts — Samit Basu's *The City Inside,* Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao* and Dave Eggers' *The Circle* were chosen because they imagine societies shaped by technology, corporate control, and loss of privacy, all central to contemporary dystopian discourse**.**

Analysis of Selected Novels:

The present research examines how three contemporary novels, Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao*, Dave Eggers's *The Circle*, and Samit Basu's *The City Inside*, conceptualise Surveillance Capitalism and articulate its cultural, political, and social implications. Each novel imagines a distinct socio-technological order structured by data extraction, behavioural governance, and algorithmic control. Through these narratives, this research investigates how Surveillance Capitalism manifests across different cultural settings, how compliance is produced, and how resistance is imagined within technologically mediated societies. The analysis is divided into three sections, one for each novel, followed by a comparative study.

1. *The Immortal King Rao*: Algorithmic Sovereignty and Postcolonial Data Power: In Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao*, the future of Surveillance Capitalism appears not as a drastic shift from the past; it seems more like a legacy. The novel's strength, in contrast to the Western ones, lies in the connection of technological dystopia to the real legacies of colonialism and the Indian caste system. This narrative isn't solely about a forward-looking corporation; it explores how emerging power dynamics rework and enhance previous systems of oppression. This point is evident right from the start, when the main character's mother, a young Dalit woman in post-independence India, yearns for a basic bar of Pears soap. The narrator, Athena, reveals the colonial ideology embedded in that desire, quoting an 1899 advertisement: "The first step towards lightening The White Man's Burden is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness. Pears' soap is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilisation

advances" (Vara, 2022). This instance serves as a striking link that ties the historical endeavour of colonialism to the future of "data colonialism," indicating that the harvesting of human experience is merely a contemporary "civilising mission" (Vara, 2022).

This dystopian novel expands on Shoshana Zuboff's concept of "instrumentarian power", dominance through data, and drives it to a chilling new endpoint (Zuboff, 2015). The main character, King Rao, a man who dedicates his life to avoiding the strict social norms of his origins, paradoxically ends up designing a new, worldwide code. He designs "an engineered, calm and peaceful transition to Shareholder Government, under which the world's citizens collectively owned its corporations" (Vara, 2022), a realm where existence is no longer directed by human governance but by a detached, seemingly impartial "Master Algorithm." According to the narrator, Athena, this algorithm utilises individuals' data to guide significant societal choices, ranging from resource allocation to criminal justice (Vara, 2022). In this system, human autonomy is subtly undermined, not through coercion, but by a seamless convenience that anticipates our every need. It is a world where our choices are made for us before we even realise we have a choice to make.

Yet the real terror lies in Vara's vision that extends beyond monitoring our actions to extracting the depths of our very souls. This may be the most unsettling idea in the novel, the notion of "mnemonic surplus", data produced directly from consciousness (Vara, 2022). This is most powerfully and tragically illustrated through King Rao's ambition for his own invention. His goal is not merely to connect human minds but to achieve a form of digital immortality, to "upload his mind to it before he dies. What he wanted was to immortalise his thoughts and memories, so that I could have my father's guidance available to me for all time (Vara, 2022). This desire drives him along a sinister route of "cognitive extraction." Rao, realising his own ageing mind lacks the plasticity for the technology, concludes that he requires the youngest possible test subject: "A child. No, an infant. No, an embryo" (Vara, 2022). And thus, his daughter, Athena, is brought into existence for this specific goal; her life is a "project" aimed at perfecting his system. The technology, the system, is effective, yet it operates in the most invasive manner possible, for instance, when the narrator's father's consciousness starts to merge with her own. It's a deeply distressing breach encapsulated in her stark, sorrowful acknowledgement: "These were his memories, not mine" (Vara, 2022).

This inescapable, inherited burden provides a stark contrast to the voluntary participation seen in a novel like *The Circle*. In Vara's world, compliance is not a choice made for social validation; it is a prerequisite for survival. The existence of the "Exes", anarchists who are exiled to the Blanklands after challenging the system, illustrates the brutal binary of this society: you are either a shareholder inside the grid or an outcast erased from it. Resistance, therefore, is not a quiet, individual act of refusal. It is a violent, collective, and historically grounded struggle. The Exes are not born from a philosophical disagreement but from a physical confrontation, "Ex-led protests that turned into riots that culminated in the fire at the Shareholder Campus" (Vara, 2022). By grounding its vision of surveillance, control, and resistance in the specific histories of caste and colonialism, *The Immortal King Rao* offers a vital, humanised, and necessary alternative narrative to the Western-centric discourse on our digital future.

2. *The Circle*: Transparency, Voluntary Surveillance, and the Seduction of Utopia: Dave Eggers's *The Circle* represents the Western techno-dystopian imagination, where surveillance capitalism emerges primarily through voluntary transparency and technological seduction. The corporation's mantra, "Secrets are lies. Sharing is caring. Privacy is theft" (Eggers, 2013), captures how effective persuasion replaces coercion. Unlike Vara's world, where socio-economic inequality drives participation, Eggers imagines compliance as the result of ideological conversion.

Mae Holland's transformation embodies this process. Initially ambivalent, she becomes increasingly convinced that total visibility equals moral purity. *The Circle* promotes a culture in which individuals internalise surveillance as virtue: self-exposure becomes both a social expectation and a civic responsibility. As Mae declares in one broadcast, "The world deserves to know everything" (Eggers, 2013), illustrating how surveillance is reframed as a collective good.

Foucault's panopticism is particularly applicable here. *The Circle's* omnipresent cameras create a

structure where being watched and watching others become normalised. However, Eggers departs from classical disciplinary models by presenting surveillance as entertainment and social bonding. The masses willingly engage in constant monitoring of public figures, producing a culture where privacy is perceived as deviance.

Unlike in *The Immortal King Rao*, power in *The Circle* is not overtly authoritarian; it is soft, participatory, and emotionally gratifying. The novel critiques neoliberal individualism by revealing how the desire for visibility can be exploited to produce a docile, hyper-connected public. Resistance comes from isolated individuals, Ty or Mercer, whose warnings are ignored or suppressed. Their failure demonstrates Eggers's pessimism about collective resistance within a society seduced by digital convenience.

3. *The City Inside*: Soft Authoritarianism, Platform Labour, and Everyday Surveillance: Samit Basu's *The City Inside* presents a distinctly Indian urban dystopia, positioned between the algorithmic sovereignty of Vara and the corporate utopianism of Eggers. Basu's India is characterised by pervasive data infrastructures, influencer economies, and a political environment where surveillance is normalised as an administrative routine. Rather than depicting a single omnipotent corporation, Basu shows a diffused ecosystem of state surveillance, corporate monitoring, and platform-mediated control.

The protagonist, Joey, working as a Reality Controller, exemplifies the pressures of platform labour. Her job requires constant emotional regulation, algorithmic responsiveness, and audience management, all forms of data labour that blur the boundaries between public identity and private self. Meanwhile, Rudra's narrative highlights how socioeconomic precarity drives compliance: individuals live within "zones" where safety, access, and mobility depend on surveillance approval. "They don't want people to live like humans.

They want them for data, and then for meat"(Basu, 2022). The simplicity of the short clause carries the whole logic of commodification - the first step is attention, then absorption into the capital's circulations.

Unlike Eggers's emphasis on voluntary visibility, Basu illustrates how individuals are compelled into surveillance systems by insecurity, fear, and bureaucratic entanglement. His depiction resonates with Couldry and Mejias's concept of data colonialism, wherein everyday life becomes a resource for extraction. Basu's urban India is not governed by a single algorithm but by a dense web of soft authoritarian mechanisms, from neighbourhood watch apps to micro-influencer ranking systems.

Resistance in *The City Inside* is understated: characters navigate, negotiate, and occasionally subvert the system, but no large-scale rebellion emerges. The novel suggests that in contemporary India, surveillance capitalism is not a dystopian future but a lived present, normalised through everyday infrastructures.

4. Comparative Analysis: A comparative examination of Dave Eggers' *The Circle*, Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao*, and Samit Basu's *The City Inside* shows that although all three narratives engage with common global concerns regarding the increasingly invasive digital world, surveillance capitalism is not a singular occurrence but rather one deeply refracted through unique cultural and historical perspectives. The source of power, the experience of the surveilled subject, and the very imagination of resistance are shown to be culturally specific, demonstrating that the future of digital control is deeply dependent culturally, highlighting that the future of digital governance is significantly reliant on the historical context.

The structure of power in each narrative is a direct reflection of its cultural context. In *The Circle*, a single, centrally organised tech corporation represents power and promotes total transparency as a virtue. This embodies a form of gentle, smiling totalitarianism arising from the idealism of American Silicon Valley, where dominance is attained through seduction rather than overt coercion. In sharp contrast, Indian novels portray power as intricately linked to the state and historical social frameworks. Basu's *The City Inside* showcases a tumultuous blend of established wealth, caste dynamics, and modern media drama, whereas Vara's *The Immortal King Rao* provides a

comprehensive portrayal of a global Socio-Capitalist State that directly connects corporate dominance to the impacts of colonialism and caste hierarchy. In these writings, power is not a novel corporate giant but a technological improvement of established, profoundly inequitable social structures.

These varied power dynamics create distinct digital subjects. The ideal subject of *The Circle* is the "datafied citizen" who actively engages in her own observation to obtain social approval, resulting in the complete eradication of the private and individual self, a fundamental Western concern. The topics in the Indian novels, nonetheless, are shaped in a context of uncertainty. Basu's topic revolves around a "riskily linked gig worker" (Basu, 2022) compelled to endure burnout for survival, whereas Vara's focuses on a "data successor" (Vara, 2022) whose identity encompasses both an algorithm and a historical weight. This highlights a key difference in compliance: in the West, it is a voluntary action motivated by desire, while in the Indian context, it is an enforced necessity influenced by systemic inequality and the risk of social exclusion. For these characters, monitoring is not an option but a necessity for survival.

As a result, the types of resistance envisioned in every novel are tailored to the power systems they challenge. In *The Circle*, resistance is portrayed as a personal shortcoming, an individualistic and outdated withdrawal that proves to be both tragic and futile. The Indian novels, on the other hand, portray more intricate, community-oriented types of resistance. *The City Inside* depicts quiet, daily acts of resistance intended to regain an inner realm from the commercialised "Flows" (Basu, 2022). *The Immortal King Rao* envisions a powerful, twofold resistance that is historical and political, linking the current struggle for liberation with a deep-rooted history of anti-colonial and anti-caste injustices. In the end, although all three novels caution against a future ruled by digital dominance, they show that the human experience of this reality varies. *The Circle* mourns the disappearance of the liberal individual, whereas *The Immortal King Rao* and *The City Inside* showcase a reality where technology serves as a potent new instrument for intensifying and hastening long-standing inequities.

Conclusion:

This comparative analysis reveals that societies under surveillance show the intricate intersections of technology, power, and identity. *The City Inside, The Immortal King Rao,* and *The Circle* contain warnings and, at the same time, throw light on how digital infrastructures are changing the human condition.

On one hand, South Asian stories emphasise the postcolonial precariousness and the deeply ingrained inequalities; on the other hand, Western stories show self-surveillance as a result of corporate utopianism. In fact, all three novels make a similar point that the very dangerous practice of surveillance capitalism and data colonialism should not be allowed to go unchecked.

The research finds that tech-related issues are not only mirrored by contemporary Dystopian Fiction but also constitute a vital concern in the literary domain that questions the ethical future of human freedom in a tech-savvy world.

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