



# Surveillance and Selfhood: A Foucauldian Reading of Familial and Social Discipline in Mannu Bhandari's Female Protagonists

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## Abstract:

*This paper investigates how women characters in Mannu Bhandari's fiction negotiate identity and selfhood under structures of surveillance, drawing from Michel Foucault's theories of discipline, bio-power, and the panopticon. While Bhandari's work has frequently been examined in terms of domestic realism, gender inequality, and post-independence patriarchy, few studies explicitly analyse her representation of women through the theoretical lens of Foucauldian surveillance. This paper fills that gap by revealing how institutions such as the family, school, and workplace function as disciplinary regimes, shaping women's behavior through both external control and internalized self-regulation. The analysis focuses particularly on how Bhandari's female characters internalize the societal "gaze," thereby complicating the idea of autonomous subjectivity. By interpreting Bhandari's narratives through Foucault's theories, the paper adds a new dimension to feminist readings of her work and extends Foucauldian frameworks into South Asian literary contexts.*

**Keywords:** Mannu Bhandari, Michel Foucault, surveillance, bio-power, discipline, selfhood, feminist theory, internalized gaze, Indian literature, gendered subjectivity

## 1. Introduction

In a society that increasingly regulates women's lives through both overt and covert means, literature becomes a crucial site for examining how power infiltrates the most intimate spaces of the self. The female subject in Indian literature is often portrayed as caught between tradition and modernity, silence and agency, repression and revolt. Mannu Bhandari, one of the most prominent figures in post-independence Hindi literature, offers an acute portrayal of this tension through women who grapple with questions of identity, autonomy, and conformity. While her work has been acknowledged for its feminist ethos and realist style, it has rarely been interpreted through the lens of surveillance and power relations as theorized by Michel Foucault. This paper proposes a Foucauldian reading of Bhandari's women, arguing that her narratives illuminate the subtle mechanisms of surveillance—familial, institutional, societal—that discipline women into self-regulating subjects.

Foucault's analysis of power challenges the conventional understanding of authority as something that is merely repressive, external, or top-down. Instead, he conceptualizes modern power as diffuse, productive, and internalized functioning through surveillance, normalization, and discipline (Foucault, 1977). In his metaphor of the panopticon, drawn from Bentham's prison design, Foucault illustrates how constant visibility induces a state of conscious and permanent self-regulation. This principle extends beyond prisons to schools, hospitals, military barracks, and even the domestic sphere. When applied to literature, particularly realist fiction concerned with gender, Foucault's theory offers a powerful interpretive framework for analyzing how characters internalize societal norms and behave accordingly, even in the absence of direct coercion.

Bhandari's women are prime subjects for this analysis. Her narratives often unfold within the private spheres of family and marriage—spaces that are typically considered apolitical but are, in fact, saturated with power. Whether it is the divorced mother in *Aapka Bunty* (1971) navigating societal judgment, or the raped and marginalized woman in *Mahabhoj* (1979) whose body becomes a battleground for political narratives, Bhandari's fiction explores how women are watched, judged, and disciplined. These women are not merely passive victims; they are active participants in their own regulation, internalizing the social gaze and modifying their behavior accordingly. In this sense, their selfhood is not innate or free-floating but produced through the very mechanisms of surveillance and control.

This perspective offers a departure from earlier feminist readings of Bhandari that focused primarily on her critique of patriarchy or her portrayal of modern, “new” women. While such interpretations have been invaluable, they sometimes risk flattening the complex ways in which power operates in her fiction. A Foucauldian reading allows us to probe deeper into the psychological and structural dimensions of her characters' behavior. It also aligns with contemporary feminist theory, which increasingly recognizes the importance of understanding how power works not just through oppression but through the shaping of desires, conduct, and identities (Bartky, 1990; McNay, 1992).

Mannu Bhandari's literary contributions have been extensively studied for their realistic portrayal of women's lives, particularly in the context of the emerging middle-class female subject in post-independence India. Scholars like Narayan (2005) and Tharu and Lalita (1991) highlight her role in the *Nai Kahani* movement and emphasize her nuanced treatment of domesticity, emotional labor, and moral complexity. Narayan (2005) describes Bhandari's protagonists as “conflicted yet resilient women caught in transitional societies,” pointing to the psychological depth she lends to her characters.

Feminist scholars have focused on Bhandari's interrogation of gender roles, especially the burdens of motherhood and wifedom. Sharma (2017) argues that *Aapka Bunty* is a radical novel for its time because it foregrounds the mother's right to personal fulfillment over conventional ideals of maternal sacrifice. Singh (2012) further expands on this by suggesting that Bhandari's realism challenges the ideological foundations of patriarchy through seemingly mundane domestic narratives.

However, these readings largely overlook the theoretical dimensions of power and surveillance embedded in Bhandari's texts. Despite the evident presence of institutional critique—through courts, schools, and bureaucracies—there is limited critical engagement with how such structures function as sites of disciplinary power. The few Foucauldian readings of Indian literature tend to focus on English-language texts or those by male authors, thereby leaving a gap in the analysis of vernacular women's writing (Chakrabarty, 2000).

Foucault's theories have been applied in gender studies to understand how surveillance operates in everyday life. Bartky (1990) theorizes how women come to discipline their bodies and behaviors under the invisible gaze of patriarchal society, extending Foucault's ideas into feminist terrain. McNay (1992) critiques and expands Foucault's work by highlighting the gendered nature of discipline and self-surveillance. These feminist adaptations of Foucault form the theoretical foundation for this paper.

By bringing together Bhandari's fiction and Foucault's theory, this paper aims to contribute not only to Bhandari scholarship but also to broader conversations around surveillance, gender, and postcolonial subjectivity. It raises important questions about how women internalize control, how institutions subtly enforce conformity, and how literature can reveal the invisible workings of power.

## 2. Research Questions

The questions that guide this inquiry are as follows:

1. How do Mannu Bhandari's narratives portray mechanisms of surveillance—familial, social, institutional—that regulate women's behavior?

2. In what ways do her female protagonists internalize the “gaze” of others in public and private spaces?
3. How can Foucault’s concepts of discipline, bio-power, and the panopticon be used to interpret Bhandari’s representation of selfhood and gender?

### 3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in literary and critical theory. The primary method of analysis is textual analysis—close reading of selected works by Mannu Bhandari, including *Aapka Bunty*, *Mahabhoj*, and selected short stories such as *Yahi Sach Hai* and *Trishanku*. These texts are examined using Michel Foucault’s theoretical frameworks as articulated in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), *The History of Sexuality* (1978), and relevant secondary interpretations.

### 4. Discussion

#### 1. Familial, Social, and Institutional Surveillance in Bhandari’s Narratives

Mannu Bhandari’s fiction intricately maps the domestic and institutional terrains of post-independence Indian society where women’s bodies, choices, and behaviors are subject to constant scrutiny. Her narratives depict a subtle but persistent network of surveillance that disciplines women through familial expectations, social reputation, and institutional norms. The mechanisms of surveillance are not overtly carceral but are deeply embedded in the fabric of everyday life, making them all the more effective in shaping subjectivity.

In *Aapka Bunty* (1971), the protagonist Shakuntala is a divorced woman who struggles to maintain her dignity in a society that views her independence as deviance. The court proceedings over her son’s custody become a site of institutional surveillance, where the judge, lawyers, and even the child are participants in monitoring and evaluating her maternal fitness. Her every gesture—how she speaks, how she dresses, how she disciplines Bunty—is weighed against the idealized standards of motherhood. The courtroom becomes a panoptic space, not because of its physical design, but because of its role in enforcing social norms through observation and judgment.

Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power involves the observation, classification, and correction of deviant behavior through institutions like schools, hospitals, and courts (Foucault, 1977). In Bhandari’s fiction, the family itself becomes an institution of discipline. In *Trishanku*, the young female protagonist lives in a joint family where the surveillance is not legal but moral. Her elders constantly remind her of her duties, curtail her desires, and expect her to fit into the prescribed gender roles. There is no explicit punishment, yet she internalizes the family’s gaze, fearing shame and exclusion.

Similarly, in *Mahabhoj* (1979), the institutional surveillance is political and legal. The protagonist, Bisu’s mother, becomes a symbolic figure whose body is both exploited and policed. After her son is killed in a police firing during a political rally, she is manipulated by party leaders for electoral gain and later discarded. Her trauma and suffering are commodified, and her identity is reshaped to suit institutional narratives. As Foucault (1978) argues, bio-power regulates not just individuals but entire populations, managing their health, reproduction, and death. In *Mahabhoj*, bio-power manifests through how the state intervenes in the lives of the poor, using violence and policy as tools of regulation.

Through these examples, it becomes evident that Bhandari’s narratives portray a landscape of pervasive surveillance, where women are constantly watched—by the state, by family, by community—and judged according to norms they did not create but are expected to uphold.

#### 2. Internalization of the Gaze in Public and Private Spaces

While external surveillance is a recurring motif in Bhandari’s fiction, what makes her portrayal psychologically profound is how her women characters internalize the “gaze” and begin to monitor their own behavior even in the absence of observers. This internalized surveillance aligns with Foucault’s idea

of the panopticon—where the possibility of being watched is enough to produce compliant behavior (Foucault, 1977).

In *Yahi Sach Hai*, the protagonist's inner conflict about choosing between two men is not merely a personal or romantic dilemma—it is a moral one shaped by her understanding of how others will perceive her. Even though she aspires for emotional honesty and personal freedom, she is constrained by the fear of social judgment. The need to be seen as virtuous overrides her desire for authenticity. This results in what Sandra Bartky (1990) calls the “micropolitics of the body,” where women adjust not just their actions but also their feelings, thoughts, and desires to align with patriarchal norms.

In *Aapka Bunty*, Shakuntala is deeply conscious of how society views her post-divorce status. She rehearses her interactions with others, chooses her words carefully, and constantly questions whether she is a good mother. Although there is no physical observer in many scenes, the invisible gaze of society operates through her own conscience, shaping how she perceives herself and others. This aligns with McNay's (1992) observation that discipline is most effective when it is internalized, when “subjects come to regulate their own conduct without the need for external surveillance.”

Moreover, this internalization extends to bodily comportment. In *Trishanku*, the young woman carefully dresses, walks, and speaks in ways that conform to what is expected of a “good” girl. Her internal monologue is filled with guilt, anxiety, and self-doubt—not because anyone directly rebukes her, but because she has learned to judge herself through the eyes of others. The private becomes public in this psychic surveillance.

This idea resonates with Foucault's broader thesis in *The History of Sexuality* (1978), where he argues that modern power operates not by repressing sexuality but by producing it as a discourse. Similarly, Bhandari's women are not silenced in obvious ways; they speak, act, and think—but always through the filtered language of social norms. Their desires are not extinguished but restructured, and their sense of selfhood is constantly negotiated under the watchful eye of an abstract “other.”

### **3. Resistance and Reclamation of Agency: Counter-Surveillance**

Despite the panoptic mechanisms that govern their lives, Bhandari's women are not passive. There are acts of resistance—subtle, quiet, yet significant—that challenge the disciplinary regime. In *Mahabhoj*, for example, the character of Chhoti defies caste and gender roles by bearing witness to the truth despite coercion. In *Aapka Bunty*, the mother's choice to divorce, though painful, is an act of self-assertion that resists both patriarchal and maternal norms.

Here, we may draw from Foucault's (1978) later work on bio-power, where he acknowledges that power is not only repressive but also productive—it produces new subjectivities and possibilities of resistance. The mother in *Aapka Bunty* begins to forge a new subjectivity beyond her role as a wife and mother. She enters the workforce, claims sexual and emotional autonomy, and, in doing so, becomes a subject of her own gaze rather than merely being subjected to others'.

McNay (1992) expands on this, arguing that the body is not only an object of power but a potential site of agency and contestation. Bhandari's women embody this idea—they resist not necessarily through loud rebellion, but through everyday acts of refusal, negotiation, and self-definition.

### **5. Conclusion**

Mannu Bhandari's fiction offers fertile ground for a Foucauldian analysis of gender, surveillance, and subjectivity. Through her nuanced portrayal of women negotiating familial, social, and institutional norms, Bhandari reveals how power operates not just externally but internally—through the disciplining gaze of others and the self. Foucault's concepts of discipline, bio-power, and the panopticon illuminate

how her characters are produced as gendered subjects within a network of surveillance that extends from the courtroom to the kitchen.

Her narratives compel us to rethink autonomy—not as the absence of control but as a form of agency that is always relational, shaped by the forces that constrain and define it. By reading Bhandari through Foucault, we open new avenues in both feminist and postcolonial literary studies, bringing critical theory into dialogue with vernacular realism. Her women are not simply literary characters but emblematic of a broader social condition where surveillance is the price of respectability, and selfhood is a negotiation between desire and discipline.

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