

***Al-Marakbi* and Ceaseless Visibility: The Creation of “Docile Bodies” and a “Disciplinary Society”**



Sameh Mahran. Courtesy: Al Ahram.

“When asked about his opinion on the phenomenon of ‘political control of a population,’ Foucault responded, “. . . power had to gain access to the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes, and modes of everyday behavior . . . I believe that the political significance of the problem of sex is due to the fact that sex is located at the point of intersection of the discipline of the body and the control of the population.” “This insight is often reflected on in the relationship between literature that deal with the body and the politics of discipline imposed on it by the various institutions (whether religious or social) in the form of censorship.” Foucault found that the panoptican design of the nineteenth century prison is a metaphor for how discipline can be exercised on a whole society the same way it is on prisoners living in a structure/building that deprives them of privacy to a torturous degree. A good illustration of that exercise of power by way of constant observation of a pseudo-religious society, and hypocritical and corrupt law-enforcement officer over the disempowered masses resonates in Sameh Mahran’s play in two acts and an epilogue, entitled *Al-Marakbi (The Boatman, 1997)*.

The play revolves around a couple who has been engaged for seven years without a hope of ever getting married due to their lack of means and the inflated housing prices in Egypt. As a result, the two young people suffer sexual frustration and lack of privacy. Their desperation leads them to a boatman who offers them a boat ride where they can have physical intimacy on his boat once they are in the middle of the sea. His fee is a mere bottle of wine and hashish. So they set sail. Far away from land, the boatman barter with them; he demands to either have sex with both of them or never to return them back to shore. The young woman commits suicide by jumping into the sea in the middle of the night and the young man ends up in a mental institution. The play ends with a short epilogue that displays a national celebration for the success of harnessing sexual desires of the masses, thereby curbing population growth.

In a society where there is ceaseless visibility by law enforcement figures and the general public, who have turned into “docile bodies” ready to report or chide the “resistant bodies” wishing to break away from the herd-mentality, sexual closeness is at the top of the list of social improprieties. Sexual relationships outside of marriage are also prohibited by religion in conservative societies, therefore considered transgressions against public morality. From this point of view, society at large can be seen as a giant panopticon prison where everyone is under surveillance, and members of that society are expected to practice censorship over each other as well as auto-censorship in order to be deemed inculpable of devious behavior, thus ‘good’ citizens.

This paper attempts to examine *The Boatman* from the point of view of surveillance by tracing the destructive power of constant invigilation of the two protagonists. I argue that Foucault’s image of the panopticon penitentiary structure, which he refers to as a metaphor for an apparatus that instills discipline by way of constant observation, can explicate the central conflict in the play and clarify the protagonists’ predicament. This control mechanism produces knowledge of the exact conduct of the incarcerated individuals. Foucault identifies this knowledge as the essence of power. In my analysis of *The Boatman*, I will compare the social world of the play to the structure of a panoptican prison that aims to produce self-censoring docile bodies, whereby members of society at large emerge as analogous to prison wardens even though they are also prisoners within their restrictive social order. With their ceaseless gaze over each other, everyone in that society is akin to an informer.

In “Panopticonism,” Foucault states that, “Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere.” Likewise the protagonists of the play are trapped in a social world that constantly

scrutinizes and censures their behavior, thus forcing them to repress their sexual desires for each other. This society, which represents present day Egyptian society, deems relationships outside the institution of marriage to be sinful and considers them moral transgressions against religion and public morality. Society also deems public display of affection a lewd act, indeed, a crime that threatens its social moral code of decency, thereby warranting punishment by the force of law. To be caught in the act of physical expression of sexual desires or passion is thus criminalized by both society and law. In this context, the police, members of society, and religious authorities would be considered “institutions of social bod[ies],” which according to Foucault, carry out the dictates of state power—not to mention that religious authority in certain fundamentalist societies might actually consider stoning the perpetrators for committing deeds leading to fornication. In such vigilant societies, such as Egypt’s, there is a very strict difference between marital relationships and relationships outside marriage, the first is considered a ‘normal’ acceptable one and the second a criminalized “abnormal,” therefore unacceptable. This binary view of human relationships oftentimes brings about severe scrutiny of the individuals who find themselves in the unhappy situation of being in a committed relationship or are ‘engaged to be married’ but not allowed to consummate their nuptials until all financial requirements of the marriage are completed. Paramount to those requirements is the man owning an apartment wherein the couple will live. Without it, the parents of the woman will typically not allow the marriage to go forward. With the inflated real estate prices in Cairo particularly, but all around Egypt as well, and with the low-income-gain across the board, and high unemployment rate, there is little hope for the majority of young men to afford an apartment. Hence their choices for marriage are limited to two possibilities: either not to marry at all, which is very prevalent and has resulted in high rates of spinsterhood among the female population, or get engaged until the young man can save up to buy an apartment, which would mean an incredibly protracted length of time. Thus, modern economy and social requirements and pressures of marriage more often than not result in engagements not ending up with marriages. Another outcome of these stringent conditions of marriage is that many couples find themselves in a relationship of limbo for many years. Their desire for each other in the meantime is deemed “abnormal” if not downright reprehensible, and requires constant invigilation by society at large in order to keep it in check. *The Boatman* is a case in point of such a predicament.

The play problematizes two kinds of power: social and economic. The first is reflected in how society imposes strict boundaries on the bodies, especially when using public space. The second is expressed in the fact that the lack of means deprives individuals from owning their own abodes/living spaces (private spaces), and thus have no choice but to use public spaces (streets, public transportation, etc.) for their rendezvous. Having no alternatives, lovers frequently seek intimacy in public spaces, thereby opening themselves up to social inspection and fury; this rage results in their losing agency to defend themselves against charges of depravity. The implication is that poverty augments the power of society over the poor as they seek financial support from their social units (family), and thus must abide by their moral codes and rules. The central conflict in *The Boatman* is in fact this very power-game between society, on the one hand, and the young couple, on the other. The fact that the two protagonists are nameless is symbolic of the pervasiveness of their experience among their generation. Nehad Selaiha attests that the predicament of the couple, “. . . boldly uncovers and ruthlessly anatomizes the plight of millions of young people in Egypt today who are condemned by the combined forces of moral taboo and economic circumstance to eternal celibacy.”

In *The Boatman*, the young man and woman can only meet in the streets of their city by the sea. Being unmarried but (only) engaged to be married assigns to them the awkward and suspicious category of

being in a semi-illegal relationship, one that threatens to break social taboos, laws of religion and public morality if not monitored closely. Being aware of their own visibility by virtue of their exclusion from social norms, the two take refuge in convoluted and byzantine conversations. While their exchanges reveal their deep sexual desire for one another, to passersby the couple appears to be having banal *tete-a-tetes*. With the public space being the only zone available to them for their dates, the young couple stands on a boardwalk overlooking the sea with their backs to the street. The only privacy that the two can enjoy is their chatter, therefore they allow themselves to go wild with their imagination via language while their bodies continue to appear to the public as ‘docile.’ The subtext at hand is that conversation creates the only private forum allowed to them and it reflects the level of oppression inflicted upon them as they are under constant observation by the passersby. The play opens with the following indicative lines:

Young man: I want to kiss you.

Young woman: Kiss me.

Young man: I’m afraid someone will walk by.

Young woman: Think of something else.

This conversation reveals the model behavior of the couple by Foucault’s panoptic standards. They have been engaged for seven years, yet have maintained the order of society by withholding their sexual desires. Under the constant social gaze, they maintain the ability to only talk about their desire, as opposed to consummating it. As language is their single communication *modus operandi*, the more convoluted their lexicon becomes the more intense their desire for one another is conveyed.

Mahran’s choice of the *fusha* (classical Arabic) as opposed to the vernacular is thus highly appropriate as its heightened inflections and ostentatious expressions—which are hardly ever used in the spoken language—reflect the complexity and social claustrophobia of the couple’s predicament. In very general terms, classical Arabic, as a spoken language, tends to attract attention to its own impressive linguistic properties, its rich lexicon and wide-ranging grammatical structures, all of which can result in eloquent ambiguities and unspecific yet suggestive prose. These linguistic attributes allow the protagonists’ conversation to carry multiple nuances: intellectual, on the one hand, and explicitly sexual, on the other. This use of language as, both seemingly innocuous but inherently sensual, is brilliantly employed by the playwright throughout the play. Mahran creates a deliberate balance between intimate conversation and public surveillance. The more watched the couple is by onlookers on the street, the more convoluted their vocabulary and linguistic structure become.

Young woman: But don’t you think that knowledge and innocence are opposites that can never meet?

Young man: As if you’re implying that we are not suitable for one another.

Young woman: No. All I’m trying to emphasize here is that we need to find a new approach to that dialectic in order to synthesize a new rationale; one that allows my innocence some of your knowledge, and your knowledge some of my innocence.

Young man: A good idea. But you know of course that our country is overcrowded to an annoying degree.

Young woman: Should I understand from this answer that you are against rational thinking?

Young man: I am for family planning.

Indeed language in the play is akin to musical notes that keep rising to reach a crescendo. The high point reflects the couple's rising passion and sexual desire while the sudden drop of tempo signifies the realization of their public exposure. Their failure to consummate their desire invariably brings them back to reality by realizing that the utterances of passion can pass the social gaze as more-or-less seemingly acceptable behavior, but any enactment of desire beyond mere 'chatter' would be a prohibition.

The young engaged couple continue their conversation, reminding each other that they have given in to their destiny as individuals living under the constant visibility of their panoptic society and that they take great pride in having conformed to their society and have become docile bodies:

Young Woman: And yet I blame you for some minor things.

Young Man: I am a liberal person, criticism doesn't distress me.

Young Woman: I mean your constant attempts at kissing and touching me.

Young Man: Could we actually be *that* similar?! No one would believe how similar we are. This is *exactly* what I have against you too. What a truly great surprise this is.

Young Woman: You are wonderful

Young Man: You are amazing.

(They stretch their arms and their hands touch slightly)

Young Woman: I want to kiss you.

Young Man: Kiss me.

Young Woman: *(Pulling back her hand)* I'm afraid someone will walk by.

While the only freedom provided the couple is language, they always end their long-winded exchanges with a desire to kiss. The circulatory pattern in their conversations leads to a need for physical contact, which is invariably aborted due the social gaze. This augments their sense of imprisonment as the oscillation in their subtext: of being in public but wishing to be invisible; of reminding each other of the "normative" and acceptable codes of behavior, and of trying to break away from those social norms is a continuous concern throughout the first act of the play. The push and pull of the couples' sexual desire and their disadvantage for having no choice but to express it in a public space rather than privately is a perfect manifestation of Foucault's theory of discipline, as the couple invariably circumvent their desire

and conform to normative behaviors submissively. Their reaction to surveillance is the exact outcome that Foucault predicts is achieved in the behavior of individuals under constant observation:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmates a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercise it..."

Thus, consistently, the moment they slip up, forgetting the continuous social gaze and attempt at touching each other, their Foucauldian-docile-bodies-mentality almost immediately emerges to alert them to fact that they are in fact in public and are under the watchful eyes of their community. Conscious of their relentless lack of privacy, the young man expresses his wish to be free of that constant gaze even if it were by way of imagination and daydreaming:

Young Man: The most beautiful thing about fish is that they don't need to take their clothes off.

Young Woman: And they make love just like that, no need for privacy.

Young Man: But don't you find that somehow insolent?

Young woman: Certainly. What insolence!

Young Man: Insolence and immorality

Young woman: Immorality and disgrace.

Young man: Disgrace and vulgarity.

Young woman: Vulgarity and lewdness.

Young Man: And then all the new generations of fish will be illegitimate. Do you realize the magnitude of this crisis?

Young Woman: Air pollution, water pollution. O Lord, where are we all going?

In the above exchange and recurrently, Mahran blends dark humor within the couple's sense of misfortune. While the two obviously envy the freedom and invisibility of the fish at sea and covet their undetected life under the water, they quickly break their fantasy and return to adopting the views of their society. Therefore, they denigrate the fish's desires and copulation as licentious and lewd acts. If anything, their judgmental attitude towards the notion of (fish's) desire as a natural instinct reflects the level of their indoctrination into the panopticon mindset of their society. In fact this scene strongly reflects Foucault's idea of Bentham's prison whereby to create a docile body, the prisoner must be both locked up and visible all the time. Likewise, the young couple reflects that constant observation has not only imprisoned them within a censorious society, but has also confined and stymied their imagination.

Their next fantasy is to go to the cinema where they can be, like the fish, invisible in the darkness of the movie house. There they imagine that they can take more physical liberty with one another:

Young man: How about [going] to the cinema?

Young Woman: And there your hand will find its way to my breast.

Young Man: And you will unbutton my pants . . .

Young woman: (*She moves in his direction and bends down to him*) Do you desire me?

Young man: Desire kills me. What then?

Young woman: We can get rid of such things as desire just as we get rid of teeth decay. The important thing is to endure, to take refuge in our own skin.

The leitmotif of fantasy/reality-check keeps recurring every time they disrupt their own fantasy by reminding themselves of their situation. However, this pattern is eventually broken when they at one moment lose their sense of reality and place and actually kiss in public. At this moment, the repressive agent, embodied in the policeman on patrol, immediately appears to control, incriminate and punish the couple for indecent behavior in a public space, a crime punishable by law. This scene, in fact, epitomizes Foucault's notion of discipline and punishment, exercise of power and obedience as he proclaims that "The police apparatus served as one of the principal vectors of [panopticism] [and it was] one and the same gaze [that] watches for disorder, anticipates the danger of crime, penalizing every deviation. And should any part of this universal gaze chance to slacken, the collapse of the State itself would be imminent."

Therefore the performative act of indignation and control that the policeman displays by virtue of his uniform and law enforcement function immediately transforms the couple from freedom seekers to docile bodies willing to please authority at any cost—even bribery.

(Meanwhile they keep flapping their arms aimlessly in the imaginary water. They bump into each other. They cling to one another. They touch each other's faces. They exchange a long kiss. In the meantime, a policeman and his wife enter. They turn around the young couple who are still busy kissing).

(The young man and woman open their eyes.)

Policeman: What do you think you're doing in the middle of the street?

Policeman's Wife: They are... Can't you see?

(The young man and woman look around them in shock.)

Policeman: The authority of the government is being ridiculed. You've dragged its dignity into the mire.

Policeman's wife: Don't let them go! This is a commitment of an indecent act in a public place. Worst

than this, it's happening in your precinct. Hey you, woman!

Young woman: We were looking for a way back.

Young man: She's right. We had just found our way back.

Policeman's wife: The streets have become chaotic. People just do as they please.

Policeman: I'll give you both a lesson. I'll make you understand that the state will always have the upper hand.

This scene is also poignant for the multiple levels of meanings and significations it represents: state authority, patriarchy, social pressure and abounding corruption on all levels. The policeman is portrayed in the scene as taking his wife for a promenade by the sea, but his stroll is disrupted by the couples' display of passion on the streets, the merging of authority (policeman/patriarch) and society (husband/wife) appears as a vitriolic and menacing force whose function is to harass the young couple. According to Foucault, the docility-utility method aims to discipline individuals in order to create malleable docile bodies out of them, ones that are ready to adhere to any senseless restrictions or orders. By witnessing the couple in the physical act of touching, caressing and kissing in public, the policeman and his wife access knowledge about the young people, thus, according to Foucault, gaining power over them. The policeman threatens to report them unless they pay him a bribe to silence him. Owing to this knowledge/power dichotomy, ". . . it is possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power." Thus, the corrupt policeman and his wife use the power of their knowledge of the couple as a tool of extortion to wield a bribe out them.

After manipulating the couple, the policeman and his wife coax them to find a secluded space, away from all surveillances, where they can find privacy. The policeman offers to take them to his brother who owns a boat; he would take them on a sea trip and turn a blind eye to their physical encounter for a bottle of wine and hashish. The corruption displayed to the couple at this point represents the failure of both the state and local patriarchy to provide safety and protection to young people and represents a dystopic reality where patriarchy has a free hand to harass youth.

The second act of the play reinforces the close association of body and space. On land the couple neither has power over their space nor bodies. Being on a boat gives them the hope that they may control both while out at sea. According to Foucault, "Space . . . [is] treated as the dead, the undialectical, the immobile," therefore, contrariwise, the sea, as a wide-open moving (as opposed to static) space, amplifies and represents fluidity and vagueness of all elements: space, time and corporeality. However, the second act dismantles this fantasy of freedom and replaces it with an intensification of both the element of ceaseless surveillance and claustrophobia. As the couple procures their privacy aboard a small boat, they have no notion that they would be in yet another prison, for they become victims of a vicious authority figure when their sea trip takes a turn to the macabre. The Boatman whom they paid to allow them a few hours of privacy and pleasure on his boat transforms into a ghoulish center of power, more malicious than the stifling, yet organized and familiar, social power they left behind. Once on the boat, the game changes: the Boatman becomes the powerful warden, they the prisoners and the boat their panoptican prison in the middle of the sea. Foucault's adage that "visibility is a trap" cannot be more germane in this act. In their attempts at escaping the gaze of society, the couple find themselves in the domain of what

Nehad Selaiha describes as, “a sinister, hermaphroditic figure.” However, while society institutes ceaseless surveillance over them in order to establish order and discipline among its members, the boatman seeks total psychological and physical domination over them as he now has total control and sway over their destiny.

At the beginning of the act the Boatman accepts their gift of liquor and hashish, and promises to let them enjoy some private time together. But before long he denies them privacy by watching them closely. Moreover, he applies scare techniques and adopts a commanding, almost violent, voice to pressure them not to sit next to each other in order to maintain balance of the boat. He also claims that the boat has wandered into a dangerous zone in the sea and that he expects turbulence:

Boatman: (*Angrily*) Go back to your place and keep maintaining the balance of the boat! I’ll hold you responsible if the boat drifts toward the Mountain of Magnet.

(*The young man returns to his place in fear*)

In blatant defiance, the young woman refuses to believe his fabrications or be coerced by his threats. Instead she continues to try and engage her fiancé in physical intimacy. The young man, on the other hand, caves in to the Boatman’s intimidations; his submission appalls the young woman. At this point, the Boatman stops the boat and barter with them. He threatens them and demands sexual intercourse with the two of them; it is either this or he would not take them back to shore,

Boatman: This is my boat. I own it. You want to enjoy yourselves alone, huh. Well, you either swim back to the shore –and this is your prerogative—or I take part in your pleasure and this is mine.

Young woman: (*She screams*) Did you hear that?

(*The young man is in shock*).

He’s haggling with us.

Young man: (*To the boatman. In shock*) Is what she’s saying true?

Boatman: They say morons learn by repetition. All right then, I’ll repeat what I just said in some other way. It is your right to enjoy her, and it’s her right to enjoy you. It is also my right to enjoy you, and you to enjoy me, and for me to enjoy her and she me. This way the world becomes a vast warm place where differences and categories don’t exist. This is true justice. (*He shouts out*) We’ll be partners till death.

With the sea trip turning into a metaphorical descent into hell, the young couple finds themselves captives of a madman. The level of harassment they encounter on the boat puts them into a corner: either to acquiesce and endure a bizarre reality that can only lead to their moral degeneration if not total destruction, or to refuse and die. The young woman chooses death; she throws herself into the sea. The young man cowers and eventually loses his mind. His “moral disintegration” (Selaiha) makes him sink into madness. In the epilogue he appears in a bi-gendered outfit, part man and part woman as he recites his dialogue from the beginning of the play with his, now dead, lover.

(The young man enters, his clothes divided into two vertical sections. One section represents a man with half a mustache and a pant-suit. The other represents a woman in heavy make-up, long hair and a décolleté dress. He keeps moving back and forth.)

Young man: Kiss me. I'm afraid someone will walk by. Think of something else How about a sea-trip?

(The young man's monologue continues and is accompanied by a gradual fade out of lights, which ends in a total blackout.)

In both acts, the couple are oppressed, stripped of their right to privacy and pressured to be obedient. Their fatal error is that they always try to work within the norms and rules imposed on them by the centers of power. The development at the end of the play goes against the notion of masculine hegemony, as the young woman defies both: the abusive patriarchy symbolized by the character of the Boatman, and the subordinated masculinity represented by the character of her fiancé. While she ends tragically, she exercises her right to choose by taking agency of her body and using the only freedom allowed her, through death.

Throughout the play, hegemonic patriarchy as represented by the policeman and the Boatman, and subordinated patriarchy represented in the young man, is portrayed as corrupt, degenerate and in an on-going process of disintegrating altogether. According to Homi Bhabha, generations of patriarchs mirror and mimic each other cyclically, therefore it is no wonder that the world that Mahran constructs in *The Boatman* is one that suffers from the absence of healthy leadership and father figures. Bhabha describes patriarchy sarcastically as:

““He,” the ubiquitous male member, is the masculinist signature writ large—the pronoun of the invisible man; the subject of the surveillant, sexual order; the object of humanity personified.”

Likewise, as the older generation is portrayed as corrupt and dying, and the younger generation of men conveyed as inept and pathetic, women (and the rest of the disempowered masses) are left to fend for themselves against the overwhelming chaos. This aspect of the text justifies Mahran's blatantly absurdist approach in the plot and characters, whereby he draws a morbid picture of a world gone astray as meaninglessness prevails in the absence of a fair social and economic order.

Furthermore, the suicide of the young woman, who represents strength and integrity, embodies the notion of hopelessness and ultimate oppression. Both the bodies of the young woman and young man are virtually mutilated by the end of the play and mocked in the epilogue. The female body which represents reproduction is sacrificed for the State policy to curb the growth of population furthered by the emasculation of the young man as he appears as asexual and in a state of madness in the epilogue. This meaning is also expressed by Foucault:

“All of this belongs to the pathway leading to the desire of one's own body, by way of the insistent, persistent, meticulous work of power on the bodies of children or soldiers, the healthy bodies . . . Power, after investing itself in the body, finds itself exposed to a counter-attack in that same body. Do you recall the panic of the institutions of the social body, the doctors and politicians, at the idea of non-legalized cohabitation (*l'union libre*) or free abortion?”

The power of institutions is in fact the whole point of the epilogue. After affirming the power of society, state and patriarchy over the body of the young and healthy, Mahran stresses the abuse that institutions carry out on the bodies of the masses under the banner of implementing policies.

With the death of hope (the young woman) and the deformation of the living (the young man), the ending of the play gives no hope for a better future for the rest of the population. The only woman figure in the epilogue is one that is co-opted by the state to propagate its agenda and is presented as robot-like, promoting and celebrating a birth control campaign. A man and a baby suckling on a ball of yarn represent infertility, as now the family unit lacks the nurturing mother figure, thus a baby (played by a man) continues to call on its absent mother. The male protagonist appears once again as neither man nor woman and in hallucinatory state.

In conclusion, Sameh Mahran draws a morbid picture of a society inducing surveillance on its members and itself in order to appease the powers that be. Mahran's views of social surveillance and the control of populations are eerily similar to Foucault's opinions and research regarding, ". . . the discovery of population as an object of scientific investigation; [as] people begin to inquire into birth rates, death rates, and changes in population and to say for the first time that it is impossible to govern a state without knowing its population . . . [which is] the problems of political control of population." Clearly, Mahran investigates through his play this same notion, as he focuses on the continuous practice of power over the bodies of the younger generation which results in stifling their hopes for marriage, freedom and happiness. This hopeless state is presented in the story of a young couple in love but deprived of celebrating their feelings for one another because of harsh economic conditions and strict social rules. Society, religion, patriarchy and state force them to lose their innocence as they lose faith in all of them. After all the only action in the play is their attempt to spend an evening alone in the middle of sea and away from society's constant gaze. Their foiled plan ends tragically as both society and patriarchy fail them on all levels.

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