

## Phallogentric Gaze and the Repressive Regime

Abeer Mohammed Shahid<sup>1</sup>, H. M. Abir Anik<sup>2,\*</sup>

### Abstract

*The phallogentric social surveillance, in its perpetuity, possesses the power to cause man's repression as it works as a disciplinary, repressive force and tries to (re)locate it as a part of patriarchy's 'repressive regime' that reinforces the stereotypical notions of masculinity. In this light, the paper describes how discursive masculinities force 'men' to 'perform' roles that sometimes appear repressive. The purpose of this paper is to investigate and analyze the far-reaching effects of discursive masculinity in men's social life and identify and analyze the social-psychological aspects of domination and repression that men face in their everyday life which are often undervalued in this political playground of patriarchal societies. In order to achieve its purpose, this paper at first views certain aspects of masculinity as 'repressive' which hardly goes acknowledged if not totally disavowed. Following that, the paper goes on to identify a major dominant mediatory factor which is identified as patriarchy's 'repressive regime' through which various versions of masculinity is formed by (re)creating, promoting, contextualizing, modifying and 'mainstreamizing' versions of masculinity that represses 'man' by alluding and analyzing media and literature.*

**Keywords:** Surveillance, Media, Masculinity, Repression, Patriarchy

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'man' has always been associated with oppression of the 'other' genders – especially with the domination of women and perhaps more importantly, the social-political construct named 'patriarchy' has also been associated with man over the years. However, in reality, it is not always the 'man' that causes all the oppressions, regardless of how much strongly most feminists voice against this notion. Although in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially during the early 1990s period, a radical field of study, more appropriately a sub-discipline of Gender Studies, called Masculinity Studies came forward with this type of notion that regarded that it is not only women who go through oppression, but men also go through such kind of oppressions in their living experiences as well. Now, despite the fact that most of the

<sup>1</sup>BA (Hons.), Department of English, Jahangirnagar University.

<sup>2</sup> Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Gono Bishwabidyalay, Savar, Dhaka-1344.

\*Corresponding Author: email: [abiranik@gmail.com](mailto:abiranik@gmail.com), Phone: +8801935030001.



This section identifies how continuous ‘phallogentric gaze and surveillance’ can cause man’s repression as it works as a disciplinary, repressive force and therefore tries to (re)locate it as a part of patriarchy’s ‘repressive regime’ that continuously reinforces the stereotypical notions of masculinity and therefore, ultimately leads to strengthen man’s repressed condition despite the idea that such ‘phallogentric’ notion is supposed to empower man’s condition.

Such kind of phallogentric surveillance also has paradoxical effects on the male agent who carries out this surveillance – it empowers the agent while it compromises his true individuality as he, by carrying out this kind of surveillance, already subscribes to this ideology where he privileges men over women and therefore, ‘endow’ himself with socially constructed masculine responsibilities.

The ‘phallogentric gaze and surveillance’, in its perpetuity, can cause man’s repression as it works as a disciplinary, repressive force and therefore tries to (re)locate it as a part of patriarchy’s ‘repressive regime’ that continuously reinforces the stereotypical notions of masculinity and therefore, ultimately leads to strengthen man’s repressed condition despite the idea that such ‘phallogentric’ notion is supposed to empower man’s condition.

### **Phallogentric Gaze and Surveillance in Western Films and Media**

This section delves into the analysis of phallogentric gaze and surveillance as depicted in some notable films, media and literature in the west. In *Screening the Mafia: Masculinity, Ethnicity and Mobsters from The Godfather to The Sopranos* by George S. Larke-Walsh (2010), it has been pointed out that masculinity is a major factor that is represented in this film. In the same paper, Larke-Walsh argued that American white male identity was intricately linked with the ‘gangster myth’ – as he would put it. The ‘gangster myth’ is an ideal field for exploring masculinity fantasies – therefore, it makes *The Godfather* a well researchable film as far as searching for masculinity representations is concerned. Moreover, being considered one of the best films ever made which has also been hugely popular with spectators all over the world, this Coppola film can be said to have much effect on shaping the consciousness of many people – especially regarding stereotyping certain forms of masculinity such as hegemonic/dominant masculinity. Therefore, it is important to identify and briefly analyze what aspects of this film reinforce certain forms of masculinity.

*The Godfather* provides some very strong representation of the ‘goodness’ of some very strong men and some very strong representation of a few ‘weak’ man – as far as traditional, hegemonic masculinity is concerned and this is where this film plays a ‘hegemonic’ role that to the spectators as far as portraying and celebrating a single brand of masculinity is concerned. But the film is also important to understand how man’s repression is caused inside the film as well. Therefore, this film also provides some actual representations of how an individual can be manipulated by his phallogocentric social peers and his ‘internalized’ patriarchal ideology, and in the end, voluntarily performs a specific role of masculinity. A character analysis of three male Corleones (Vito, Michael and Fredo) will be very helpful in this matter.

Don Vito Corleone, or ‘the godfather’ is a patriarchal figure who not only maintains powers and control but also knows how to handle critical situations ‘technically’. He is not an all-out gangster who acts out on force; he is different from the common gangsters in the matter that he uses his ‘intellect’ as much as he uses his ‘force’. Having mentioned that, it does not in any how indicate that he does not possess traditional qualities of masculinity. He has an impressive personality, integrity as well as power, brevity and also, manipulation skill that takes him off the police radar.

Vito’s youngest son Michael, who in the end replaces him as the ‘godfather’, is at the same time has similarities and dissimilarities with his father. Michael is skillful, intelligent but he has an implicit personality that somehow degraded his status as the godfather’s son because it degraded his status as a ‘man’ in the eyes of his community. Furthermore, he always tried to avoid his family business, joined army and returned home after his service, but he never forgets his family. Therefore, when it is the crisis time in his family, he comes back and takes charge. The curious thing is, Michael is able to take charge of the Corleone family only after he changes his personality. He becomes serious, depressed and calculating. He further shows dominant aspects of masculinity as he assumes authoritative role as ‘the godfather’ which becomes evident in the way he keeps his wife away from his business matters –therefore, subscribes to the hegemonic masculinity which is highly phallogocentric.

The character of Fredo is portrayed as straightforward ‘weak’ and incompetent. He fails to take adequate actions when his father is shot, cries like a ‘woman’ and is never taken seriously by almost any other characters in the film. As the second son, he was supposed to take charge of the Corleone family – after Sonny and Vito’s fall – but it was never the case. Throughout the

film, Fredo's character is represented as despicable, forgetful and utterly useless. He is also, very strongly portrayed as 'feminine' and that is also portrayed as 'bad'. It can be interpreted from the perspective that, the character of Fredo is only treated badly in the film because he does not subscribe to the traditional, hegemonic representation of masculinity. Therefore, *The Godfather* can be seen as a film that reinforces phallogocentric notions of how a man should be.

But the most obvious representation of man with power that can be identified as 'phallogocentric' takes place in the films that are either the history/war films or pure action/science fiction flicks. Moreover, the history genre films are all the more dangerous because they celebrate and propagate certain aspects of masculinity that have the power to 'brainwash' the viewers with repressive ideology that seems very fascinating and glorifying at first. Think about Mel Gibson's Oscar-winning film *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995), Wolfgang Petersen's historical film *Troy* (Petersen, 2004) or James Cameron's *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984) and their preoccupation with phallogocentric representation of man.

However, some genres portray and celebrate a certain idea of masculinity in a subtler way than the rest due to the features of their respective genres – such as social dramas. Therefore, in the following paragraph a film will be analyzed briefly in order to see how the politics of masculinity representation goes inside the films. The film is Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012).

In *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, the focus is not only performativity and their impacts in the characters' social and personal (psychological) lives but also how they negotiate with social expectations and situations that demand them to act out of their true characters. Three types of performances are addressed – one openly homosexual, one secretly homosexual and also the performance of the protagonist in coping up with his childhood sexual harassment. This film also focuses on how the protagonist, against all odds, triumphs over the things which have been holding him back for a very long time. It is the representation of the protagonist Charlie that becomes most interesting, despite being a heterosexual boy. Charlie is portrayed as a traumatized boy who tries to cope with his childhood sexual harassment by using defense mechanism unconsciously that is characterized by his black-outs when something happens that his consciousness is not ready to face.

In order to put this matter into a clearer perspective, allow us to digress and venture into a similar case scenario that unfolded with the protagonist Pecola Breedlove in a greatly acclaimed

work of literature – Tony Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*, the only difference being that the gender roles were revised. The story explores, among other things, how Pecola suffered from child sexual abuse and dealt with its aftermath. Now, if Charlie’s position is compared to Pecola from *The Bluest Eye*, both can be seen as the recipients of child sexual abuse. However, whereas Pecola’s eventual death may refer to such a child’s inability to survive through such tumultuous sexual trauma, Charlie’s eventual triumph against all odds give a distinctive impression that a ‘real man’ can survive anything. Yes, Charlie can be characterized as a society’s definition of a ‘real man’ because he eventually takes charge, accepts his responsibilities and overcomes the bad things. While in his implicit, un-manly behaviors were condemned as he was bullied by a ‘girl’ previously, Charlie’s new found ‘man’ version overcomes all these and gets the respect that he ‘deserves’. This is where it also becomes problematic: why would just because he acts like a ‘man’, he would deserve respect? This is where the dominant masculinity representation lies in this film. But that is not all, as the representations of the homosexuals high-school boys in the film are quite intriguing as well. Among the two homosexual representations, one is Patrick – who is homosexual but does not hide it and the other one is Brad, his ‘boyfriend’- who does it secretly. While Patrick plays the drag queen in the theater in the film and is not ashamed of what he is, Brad, on the other hand, always stays in fear of others’ finding out about him. Brad is beaten severely by his father once he finds out about him and Patrick, which leads him to denial of their homosexual relationship in public. What is interesting here is that the film, with its punishment of Brad by his father, shows that homosexuality is bad. But on the other hand, when Charlie beats up Brad’s friends for his (Brad’s) mistreatment of Patrick, the film also provides a message that contradicts the earlier message of homosexuality being bad. But the instrument or method that Charlie uses to set things in ‘order’, which is aggression and violence, is something that again reinforces the value of dominant masculinity. If it is viewed from Foucault’s sense of punishment, Charlie’s violence serves as a ‘non-lethal’ and ‘non-barbaric’ way to ‘discipline’ the chaos and therefore, bring ‘order’ (Foucault, p.104). In this way, the film, while advocating the positives of homosexuality by negating the validity of homophobia, it is also reinforcing the discursive masculinity by passively emphasizing man’s dominant form.

Now, after having disclosed how different types of masculinity representations are taking place in mainstream media, it becomes quite evident how, following Foucault’s discursive formation and Adorno and Horkheimer’s ‘the culture industry’, such representations are creating

discursive masculinity through their collective representations of man as ‘dominant’ that are at the same time motivating and manipulating men to regard such highlighted and celebrated male roles as fascinating, enticing and all in all – as ‘natural’ and therefore try to ‘perform’ their roles which is hindering their true individuality. Freud’s concept of ‘identification’ and ‘object-cathexis’ may be used here as well – but from a heterosexual perspective. The men who tend to identify with the hero figure, under this hegemonic representation of man would try to emulate the characteristics of the male protagonist/hero – therefore, would end up practicing the traits of dominant masculinity. On the other hand, when the women would see the hero figures are being celebrated in the media, they would want to ‘have them’, and because the hero figures are not available in real life, they would motivate their heterosexual partners to be ‘dominant’. At the same time, it is possible that in order to improve their social status as ‘men’, the heterosexual men would also want to ‘be’ the hero figure and would be motivated to perform such traits. Moreover, as such performance would create pressure and masculine stress among the men concerned, they would eventually end up creating their ‘repressed’ condition.

### Exploring the Repressive Factors

This section discusses how ‘phallogocentric gaze and surveillance’, working as an individual repressive factor, can regulate man’s individuality and therefore, causes repression. In order to accomplish it, it uses Foucault’s concept of ‘panopticon’, as propagated in his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* and relates this concept to society’s continuous emphasis on creating man as ‘powerful’ and ‘dominant’. But why ‘panopticon’ is necessary to interpret it? It is because no matter how much patriarchal a society is, it always happens that a man must go through a series of modifications from his external peers or what can also be called, his social surroundings. No matter how much ‘masculine’ a man acts, it always stays a possibility that his sense of self is modified by his peers. This is where the term ‘panopticon’ becomes crucial.

The reasons that phallogocentric gaze and surveillance operate within a patriarchal society is because phallogocentrism has its roots in patriarchy’s ideology that have always propagated that men are better than women and in this process, while it was very successful in maintaining power in their (men in power) hands, but it also created a heavy bag of responsibility in the process. Although patriarchal ideology has been identified as its root, but this idea has been

further propagated and fuelled by Freudian psychoanalysis where Freud propagated the phallus/lack dimension in relation to man/woman psychological condition or way of thinking (Kleiner, p.637). However, when this phallogocentric notion of male superiority is imparted to the people of societies with various patriarchal discursive practices, it takes little time to form a kind of social surveillance that shares stark similarity with Foucault's notion of 'panopticon' – especially when it comes to the matter of mediating and achieving the 'desired' behavior from the people who stay under this kind of surveillance. The irony strikes when this type of 'phallogocentric gaze and surveillance', which propagates man's superiority and man's power, represses 'man' at the same time.

In order to exemplify how it compromises man's individuality, the present section analyzes some aspects of 'phallogocentric gaze and surveillance' that take place in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (in relation to the characters Chacko and Velutha) and tries to re-think how much manipulative and disciplinary power phallogocentric surveillance possess and how it forces people to choose outburst.

In Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the power of phallogocentric surveillance can be identified in the ways the dominant characters or the characters that are in power such as Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and even Vellya Pappen act and regulate the behavior of the people who are under their surveillances (Crosby, para.2). In the novel, Mammachi's son Chacko and the Untouchable father Vellya Pappen's son Velutha – both go through surveillance and all of their behaviors are controlled in this process which ultimately lead them to break through this system in one way or another.

Lois Tyson argues that patriarchal ideology often creates a stereotype for men, as their societal definition of 'man' depends on how they hold "feminine qualities in contempt" (p.88). So, as every patriarchal society is obviously influenced with its ideology that suits the context, it is understandable that in such societies, being a 'man' depends on denying everything that is 'girly'. Tyson exemplifies this matter in the following way:

Men, even little boys, who cry are called "sissies". Sissy sounds very much like sister, and it means "cowardly" or "feminine", two words that, in this context, are synonymous. Clearly one of the most devastating verbal attacks to which a man can be subjected is to be compared to a woman.



Thus, being a “real” man in patriarchal culture requires that one hold feminine qualities in contempt.... This phenomenon implies that whenever patriarchy wants to undermine a behavior, it portrays that behavior as feminine. (p.88)

This is where ‘phallogocentric gaze and surveillance’ comes into play. This repressive factor often takes the form of advice, suggestion or recommendation and even punishment from an individual’s peers. From early boyhood, a boy is always tugged into a certain way and that way is the way to become a ‘man’ – which is the society’s accepted form of masculinity. On his way of growing up, a boy is often forced to adopt certain dominant aspects of masculinity which is ‘spoon-fed’ to him by his social peers – starting from his family, relatives, friends, acquaintances etc.

For example, Bell Hooks, in her essay “Understanding Patriarchy” argues how both boys and girls are “experientially schooled in the art of patriarchy” at home, as she retells her traumatic event of the beating she received by the hands of her father which forced her to learn patriarchal social system (p.2). She further recollects that how her brother was passive, and she was active naturally – and she then goes on to describe how her brother was directed toward the patriarchal way of being a ‘man’, when he started to learn from his father that what he was ‘supposed’ to do which becomes clear when Hooks recalls her brother saying “girls did not play with marbles” and that it was a game that boys are supposed to play (p.2). What is also important here is hooks’ observation that even her mother was also content with the system as she had clearly ‘internalized’ man’s dominant form (p.2). This is one of the examples how patriarchal ideologies work through continuous phallogocentric gaze and surveillance.

The importance of phallogocentric gaze and surveillance on man’s repression can be exemplified using Foucault’s concept of ‘panopticon’. Foucault describes a panopticon’s effect as a method to “induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” that also works even when the actual visibility is not in function (Discipline and Punish, p.201). Similarly, the power of phallogocentric gaze and surveillance works even without continuous monitoring of the individuals in a patriarchal society. Sometimes when something does not happen as planned, it is the panoptic agents who take punitive measures to discipline individuals. In the case of molding boys’ individuality into conforming to the codes of discursive masculinity, the same thing happens as well.

For this matter, Bell Hooks provides further argument and exemplifies how boys are turned into men by using punitive measures, as she sees that as a process to “indoctrinate boys into the rules of patriarchy, we force them to feel pain and to deny their feelings” (p.2). This is where phallogocentric gaze and surveillance regulates man’s identity from an early age that also teaches him to repress his individuality.

## Conclusion

To summarize, this piece addresses the issue of man’s repression and how this repression is caused by patriarchal discourses that are circulated, mediated and promoted through patriarchy’s ‘repressive regime’. To accomplish this task, the paper first identifies a major dominant mediatory factor that is repressive and then the identified factor is included within the suggested ‘repressive regime’ from where it represses men both collectively and individually. In this light, the paper argues that within a patriarchal society, men are not ‘repressive’ or ‘oppressive’ – rather they are ‘repressed’ by patriarchal ideology that propagates discursive masculinity.

## References

- Adorno, T. and Horkheimer, M. (1999). *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception. The Cultural Studies Reader (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*. Ed. During, S. London: Routledge.
- Bordo, S. (2006). *Beauty (Re)Discovers the Male Body*. In Robert Keith Miller (Eds) *Motives for Writing*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Burns, J. and Oliver, G. *The Five Myths of Masculinity*. *CBN.com*. Retrieved on April 25, 2013, from: [http://www.cbn.com/family/familyadvice/burns\\_masculinity.aspx](http://www.cbn.com/family/familyadvice/burns_masculinity.aspx).
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Taylor and Francis Group: United Kingdom.
- Cameron, J. (Director). John Daly (Producer). Schwarzenegger, A. (Actor). (1984). *The Terminator*. Hollywood. CA: Hemdale Film.
- Chbosky. S. (Director & Producer). (2012). *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* [Film]. USA: Summit Entertainment.
- Coppola. F. F. (Director). (1972). *The Godfather* [Film]. USA: Paramount Pictures.
- Donaldson, Mike. (1993). *What is Hegemonic Masculinity?. Theory and Society*, Vol.22, No.5, Special Issue: Masculinities. Retrieved on April 24, 2013, from: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1149&context=artspapers>.
- During, S. (2005). *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Taylor & Francis e-Library.

Galiley Proof

- Editors. (2009). Phallogocentrism / Phallogocentrism / Logocentrism. *The Literary Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from: <http://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=858>, accessed 10 April 2013.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and Punish*. (A. Sheridan, Trans.) New York: Vintage Books
- Freud, S. New Introductory Lectures. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. (J. Strachey, Trans.). London: Hogarth.
- Gibson, M. (Director & Producer). McEveety, S. & Davey, B. (Producers). (1995). *Braveheart*. Hollywood, CA: Paramount.
- Hickey, A. M. (2001). Understanding Men: Gender Sociology and the New International Research on Masculinities. *Social Thoughts & Research*, Vol. 24 (12), p. 33 – 35.
- Hooks, B. (2004), Understanding Patriarchy, *Louisville Anarchist Federation Federation*. Retrieved from <http://imagineborders.org/pdf/zines/UnderstandingPatriarchy.pdf>.
- Kleiner, S. (2009). Phallogocentrism. J. O'Brien (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of gender and society*. (pp. 637-639). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: 10.4135/9781412964517.n325.
- Larke-Walsh, G. S. (2010). *Screening the mafia: masculinity, ethnicity and mobsters from The godfather to The Sopranos*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co.
- Morrison, T. (1999). *The Bluest Eye*. London: Vintage
- Mulvey, L. (2004). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Film Theory and Criticism*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Mashall Cohen. Oxford: Oxford U P.
- Nixon, S. (1997). Exhibiting Masculinity. *Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*. Stuart Hall. London: Sage Publication. P. 291-336.
- Pellissier, H. (2012). Andrej Pejic - Androgynous Model - heralding a post-gender future?. *Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies*. Retrieved on April 25, 2013 from: <http://ieet.org/index.php/IEET/more/pellissier20121220>.
- Petersan, W. (Director). (2004). Colin Wilson (Producer). Bloom, O. (Actor). *Troy* [Film]. CA: Warner Bros.
- Pinkus, J. (1996). Foucault. Retrieved on April 10, 2013 from: <http://www.massey.ac.nz/~alock/theory/foucault.htm>.
- Pleck, J. Understanding Patriarchy and Men's Power. *National Organization for Men Against Sexism*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nomas.org/node/176>.
- Rine, A. (2011). Phallus/Phallogocentrism. Michael Ryan (Ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*. DOI 10.1111/b.9781405183123.2011.x.
- Roy, A. (2002). *The God of Small Things*. India: Penguin Books
- Tyson, L. (2006). Feminist Criticism. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide, (2nd edition)*. New York: Routledge .
- Vincent, B. L. (Eds) (2002). *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, (2nd edition)*. London and New York: W W Norton & Company. p. 1615 – 1647.
- Walby, S. (1990). *Theorizing patriarchy*. Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, MA, USA: B. Blackwell.