



**International Journal of English Literature and  
Literary Theories**

**International Peer Reviewed and Refereed English Journal**

**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND LITERARY THEORIES (IJELLT)**

ISSN: 3107-6505

Vol.:2: Issue: 1:2026.

(International Peer Reviewed and refereed English Journal)

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**Literary Theories**

### **Feminist Surveillance and the Policing of Women's Everyday Life: Visibility, Fear, and Social Control in Indian Narratives**

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**Abstract:** The current paper explores the concept of surveillance, focusing on feminist narratives within the context of Indian society, where it is an integral aspect of daily patriarchal observance, restricting, managing, and even controlling a woman's mobility, sexuality, and voice by promoting visibility, fear, and communal disapproval. The research aims to create a reflective correlation that a woman's life is often determined by means of not only being coerced but also by being constantly surveilled within a domestic space, neighbourhood, institution, and even a digital world, thereby reinforcing a feminist view of a disciplining world, feminist geographical theories, and feminist narrative ethical frameworks that aim to interpret an integral concept of feminized surveilling, where a woman's physicality is transacted into a communal discourse of legibility, thereby offering a distinctively different perspective within the context of discipline, where a woman's surveilling of herself becomes an integral aspect of being disciplined, i.e., anticipating shame, actively becoming a means of generating compliance itself rather than an isolated, independent subjectivity, thereby accepting, becoming a means of being surveilled, where a woman's resistance, within an ensemble of narratives derived from an Indian context, becomes a means of invisibility, retreating, and thereby becoming illegible. Theorising surveillance as a structural condition rather than an isolated event, this article expands Indian feminist literary discourse beyond crisis-based models of violence and foregrounds everyday policing as a form of political violence. Ultimately, the paper contends that feminist agency in these narratives emerges through negotiating visibility, refusing moral capture, and reclaiming the right to occupy space without being continuously watched, interpreted, and disciplined.

**Keywords:** Feminist surveillance, Gendered policing, Visibility, Respectability, Social control, Feminist geography, Indian women's writing.

## Introduction

"In terms of gender, oppression is often thought of in terms of acts of violence, assault, restriction, forced marriage, discrimination, and so forth. However, feminist stories in India always reveal the presence of patriarchal oppression in terms of looking, commenting, monitoring, and understanding women's bodily presence in public space as surveillance. The 'gaze' cannot simply denote visual perception. It always carries a social judgment. It is not as if women are being observed; women are being judged." In the Indian socio-cultural fabric, there are several networks in the exercise of surveillance. They are familial observation, neighbourly gossip, public observation, and institutionalised discipline. Thus, women in the movement of space render it intelligible. If she is moving alone, she is not merely walking. In the Indian context, she is interpreted. There is the problem of the potential damage to reputation as a form of discipline.

This paper posits that the function of surveillance in stories of feminism within India is that of a gendered apparatus of social control by which compliance is ensured, but by means of fear, and by means of visibility – that is, by hiding in plain sight, i.e., managing risk by being exemplary non-actors, by becoming subjects of one's own internalized forms of surveillance, we understand that patriarchy is not simply a force of brutal violence, but it is, rather, a force by which we begin to expect such violence, such shame, upon ourselves.

Space or the interface of its intersection with matters of surveillance frequently dominates the central theme in women's writing in India. Spaces within the home of women are not merely sanctuaries but sites of regulation under the scanning eye of power. Public space is not an unregulated zone; it is a space with morals where women are brought under the reading eye. Digital space becomes an even higher zone of regulation with its permanent tracing of the visible women. Thus, theorizing patriarchal technologies of surveillance, this research extends traditional forms of an event-based violence model of Indian feminist literary discourse by asserting that, unlike other forms of oppression, in the case of the feminine, surveillance is itself a violence that is not limited by its effect, but is constitutive in the formation of her subjectivity through her fear of being surveilled, her limitations, as well as her being constantly subjected to moral overtones of evaluation, where resistance is a reappropriation of her right to live without being surveilled.

## Review of Literature

The feminist perspective has always highlighted that power does not necessarily operate in terms of force but also discipline. The perspectives on women's spaces have emphasised that women's bodies operate under public surveillance and domestic lockdown. The feminist geography has concentrated on how space does not operate in terms of neutrality but is created by power, which often enhances who belongs to certain places and under what terms. The mobility of women has often been controlled by considering their presence in terms of danger. Feminist studies in the Indian context have looked at "respectability politics,' the politics of silence,' and the 'oppression at home' as a form of patriarchal control. Gender studies in urban settings have also looked at how the nature of public space influences women. Communication studies have looked at how the 'gaze' in public space influences gender.

Theoretical understandings of surveillance, especially those touching on surveillance related to discipline, reveal the self-regulatory consequences of surveillance. Individuals behave as if they were being monitored despite the absence of a monitor. According to feminist researchers, women still live under surveillance since femininity is a form of moral evidence; women's bodies become socially accountable. However, much Indian literary criticism still treats surveillance as a background condition rather than a central structure. Women's fear is often interpreted as psychological rather than political. Gossip and observation are treated as cultural details rather than disciplinary technologies. Further, scholarship may focus on overt violence but underestimate the extent to which everyday monitoring produces compliance.

This paper addresses these gaps by foregrounding feminist surveillance as a central analytic category. It reads surveillance as patriarchal technology that controls women through visibility, shame, and anticipatory discipline. Moreover, in this context, it incorporates digital surveillance as a contemporary extension of social policing. By interpreting the self-monitoring of women as structurally produced, the paper extends Indian feminist literary discourse beyond crisis-based models and underlines everyday watching as political violence.

## Theoretical Framework

The present study is informed by feminist theories of discipline, feminist geography, and feminist narrative ethics to understand the role of surveillance as a tool of gendered power relations. Theories of discipline point to modernity as a system in which power rules by monitoring and normalising, producing individuals who can discipline themselves. Where surveillance is patriarchal, women act as if they were being monitored, even when they are not in someone's company. Feminist geography would help us to consider the ways in which space is constructed by considerations of gender. Women's space within the public domain is constructed by the discourses of morality that construct the visible space as dangerous for women to be in. Space within the home becomes political, wherein the home itself becomes subject to study, containment, and regulation. Feminist geography would remind us that women's mobility is always the subject of ethical policing.

Feminist Narrative Ethics enables a description of the strategies of women under surveillance without moral judgment. Thus, the retreat, secrecy, or invisibility of the woman become weaknesses. Narrative Ethics takes into consideration restricted forms of agency. Thus, the approaches of the woman in managing risks can be considered a survival strategy. The awareness of intersectionality guides this framework as well. Surveillance is not straightforward, as caste, class, and community shape surveillance, disciplining women in different ways. For instance, middle-class women could be subject to extreme respectability surveillance, while marginalised women could be subject to sexual risk and surveillance suspicion. Thus, surveillance has different strata.

These frameworks offer tools for an understanding of Indian feminist narrative, one where "surveillance" is understood as "everyday violence" that develops upon the female subject's sensibility. Resistance for feminists is dependent on balancing "being seen" or "being spoken about" and "resisting visibility" or "resisting being spoken about." "Surveillance" takes on preeminence for feminist theory since, within it, "the extent to which patriarchy informs" is understood.

### **Domestic Surveillance: The Home as Site of Watching and Regulation**

The home is imagined as private and safe, yet Indian feminist narratives expose it as a site of surveillance. Women are watched by family members, in-laws, husbands, even children, through expectations of obedience, purity, and service. Domestic surveillance is not always explicit, operating through routine monitoring: where women go, what they wear, whom they speak to, and how they behave. This watching creates self-regulation. Women learn to anticipate judgment and adjust their behaviour accordingly. They suppress speech, moderate emotions, avoid confrontation to preserve domestic stability. Surveillance becomes an emotional discipline. Women's interior lives are policed because their roles entail constant performance of respectability.

Domestic surveillance also controls sexuality. There is suspicion regarding the friendship of women, mobility, and even telephone calls. The patriarchal authority effectively regards the female bodies as collective property that needs to be kept under continuous observation to prevent transgression. All this intensifies moral policing, and the home becomes an institutional space where gender norms are upheld. In various Indian feminist stories, we have seen how the home surveillance is justified as "care." Families articulate how they surveil women out of "care." Feminist articulations clarify how "care" is the same as "control." Surveillance leads to women being restricted. The control is given the mask of women being loved. Surveillance leads to women being drained. They are not ever really alone. This is because even in loneliness, women are surveilled. The home becomes an articulation of control as opposed to women being 'free.'

Hence, feminist literature challenges the public/private distinction by highlighting home surveillance. Therefore, violence is not only at the textual surface but also within a family. Finally, feminist discourse begins with literature that shows how homes are sites or institutions of surveillance. Therefore, home surveillance is a tool to maintain patriarchy where women are dominated or coerced into conformity by surveillance. This does not leave space for resistance because it continually challenges; however, it remains moral or normalised. Hence, it portrays itself as violent by identifying it.

### **Public Surveillance: Streets, Neighborhoods, and the Moral Gaze**

Movements of women through public space are often directed through surveillance. Streets, markets, offices, and neighborhoods become moral fields in which women are interpreted. Public surveillance operates through gaze, comments, harassment, and gossip. Women aren't merely visible; their visibility is read as a moral statement. A woman outside at night may be judged. A woman walking alone may be questioned. Public space becomes a place where women must justify their presence. Neighborhoods amplify this policing. Community observation becomes a surveillance network. Gossip is used as a disciplinary tool, with reputational risk produced. Women learn that visibility invites judgment, and judgment can become social punishment. This creates spatial restriction: women constrict their movements to avoid surveillance. Other areas of life that are implicated are clothing, as well as forms of speech. In terms of clothing, females have to be mindful of how they look or dress. There are concerns that they may be misconstrued, and respectability operates as a survival strategy, whereby females are compelled to be "safe," "proper," or "decent." There are, however, observations of how such statements.

According to Indian feminist narratives, there is a focus on how surveillance instills fear: "Fear becomes daily habit.... Women calculate risks: routes, timings, companions.... This becomes a life structure.... And surveillance becomes slow violence: it doesn't stop people moving but locks up freedoms 'elsewhere'." Public surveillance is gender-oriented as well. Men dominate the space publicly without needing justification for morality, but women need an explanation or justification for their place in public space. The female figure becomes public property and subject to interpretation by everyone in society. Such inequality shows that space in society cannot be seen as public in an objective sense but rather through the lens of patriarchy. Feminist discourse emerges when narratives expose public surveillance as political control. They challenge the assumption that women's fear is natural and show it as produced. The street becomes a site where patriarchy governs through watching. Resistance may appear through occupying space, speaking back, or refusing shame. Yet even small movements become feminist acts under surveillance regimes.

### **Reputational Violence: Shame, Honour, and the Economy of Social Judgment**

Surveillance generates reputational violence, the latter meaning violence created by shame or social judgment. In cultures of 'honour', reputation is not an individual trait but a social one, meaning that the woman's actions are the actions of the family's honour. Hence, surveillance acts to preserve reputation by policing the woman's conduct. This means that if the woman breaks the rules, or indeed is thought to be breaking the rules, she is ostracised, vilified, and subjected to shame. The strength of reputational violence lies partly in its capacity as a powerful form of violence that may not even demand any sort of bodily action. Gossip may alienate women. There is also the issue of 'moral labelling' as in 'characterless,' 'shameless,' 'modern' acts of punishment, even discipline, as they may discipline the decisions being made by them.

Indian feminist discourses have depicted the concept of reputation as an economic system, wherein "women pay with their silence, their sacrifice, their restricted movement." There is an imbalance in this system, such that "the man's conduct is rarely seen as harming his family's honour." Women have "the weight of moral legitimacy." Labour of Respectability. Reputational violence also has connections with caste. Women's sexuality is an arena where caste is highly involved in policing it. Incitement of women can sometimes reinforce caste boundaries. This form of violence is hard to resist as it is moral. The family says they are restricting women for tradition, dignity, and safety. Feminist Ethics unmask this situation as coercion. Honour is neither a value nor a concept; rather, it becomes women themselves as moral assets.

Reputational violence is a significant force in the formation of the subjectivity of women. Women live under the shadow of anticipatory shame, a sense of wrong interpretation being imposed upon them, of being seen wrong by others. Their subjectivity is constituted by an anxiety of being surveyed constantly; feminist narratives shatter this by emphasising how reputation has functioned as a patriarchal tool. Feminist narratives illustrate that feelings of shame were not naturally elicited feelings but were socially conditioned. By labelling violence in reputation, feminist narratives stretch their scope past physicality to encompass social judgments as a political force. Honour is defined by surveillance technologies, counter-hegemonic action starting with shyness itself.

### **Digital Surveillance and Modern Patriarchy: Visibility as Permanent Risk**

Digital culture intensifies surveillance by making visibility permanent. Women's phones, social media profiles, messages, and photos become sites of monitoring. Digital surveillance operates through family control, partner control, and community scrutiny. Women's online presence becomes moral evidence screenshots become reputational weapons. Visibility becomes a trace that can be replayed. Indian feminist narratives increasingly engage this modern dimension, where patriarchy expands into digital space. Women may appear more mobile, but digital visibility creates new vulnerabilities. Even private communication can be surveilled. Women's autonomy becomes conditional on technological control. Digital surveillance also intensifies moral policing. Online harassment, public shaming, and misogynistic trolling become tools to discipline women into silence. Women's opinions, images, and relationships can be publicly attacked. Fear extends beyond physical space into virtual space.

This creates new forms of self-regulation. Women curate identity, avoid posting, restrict interactions, and silence themselves to reduce risk. Thus, digital space becomes a continuation of patriarchal monitoring rather than an escape. Yet digital space can also enable feminist resistance through community-building and speaking back. However, even feminist visibility becomes dangerous under patriarchal surveillance. Women who speak may face backlash. Digital surveillance, therefore, produces a paradox: increased visibility can mean increased danger. Women gain platforms, but platforms expose them. Feminist discourse must account for this complexity. Visibility is not pure empowerment; it is risk. Indian feminist writing and feminist theory thus treat digital surveillance as an extension of older honour politics. The medium changes, but the moral economy persists. Patriarchy adapts by converting digital traces into a control mechanism. Feminist agency in such contexts emerges through strategic visibility, knowing when to be seen, when to withdraw, and when to refuse legibility. Digital surveillance reveals that modernity does not erase patriarchy; it often intensifies its reach.

### **Feminist Resistance: Strategic Invisibility, Refusal of Legibility, and Spatial Claiming**

Resistance under surveillance often doesn't take the form of heroic rebellion. Feminist stories show images of women negotiating visibility, at times refusing to be seen, insisting on presence. Invisibility might become a strategic resistance. In retreating from social scrutiny, women can safeguard autonomy. In this respect, the retreat can be a form of feminist refusal: a refusal to perform respectability, a refusal to offer life for public interpretation. Refusal of legibility is necessary. Patriarchal surveillance is premised upon reading women morally, that is, determining whether they are good or bad. Feminist refusal works when it remains illegible, incomprehensible. Women refuse confession, refusals of explanation and justification of their presence. Ethical opacity resists interpretive violence.

At the same time, there is also a way in which feminist resistance involves a kind of spatial claiming, women occupying space despite surveillance. The acts of walking alone, travelling, studying, working, and speaking publicly become feminist because these acts challenge the patriarchal ownership of space. Resistance is, however, risky and unevenly possible, shaped by class and safety.

Feminist stories may illustrate, for instance, ways in which resistance is strategic rather than total. This is, women may comply in some situations and resist in other situations. This is not a weakness; it is resistance in risk. Feminist narrative ethics prioritise limited agency; resistance is not measured just by rebellion. Therefore, feminist resistance to surveillance is characterised by invisibility, which is visibility, non-watchability, and being present, such as speech, which is a boundary. This shows that feminist agency is not one thing; it is adaptive. By portraying these kinds of resistances, narratives of Indian feminism extend feminist discourse past fantasies of liberation. The struggle, in fact, is about existing and not being implicated in it. The act of resisting is to perpetually negotiate one's visibility, to stake one's claim on space, to reject being ashamed, to claim that women exist and aren't public property to interpret.

### **Feminist Agency Without Triumph: Living Under Watchfulness as Ethical Endurance**

Surveillance is rarely "concluded." Resistance from women is futile, but the act of watching continues: "through families, communities, and social institutions." But triumphant stories remain rare literary choices for feminist fiction. No freedom from watching is automatic. Autonomy is found, ironically, not so much in freedom from watching but rather "as endurance under watching." There is also an ethical complexity in terms of sheer durability: as she navigates, she must always be calculating risk, managing visibility, and guarding against threats to reputation, and that's exhausting in itself, although survival in that fashion can be understood as feminist because, in so refusing to be defined or limited in terms of that system, it's political. "Hence, the importance of the feminism of realism: the women will not necessarily be freed." Yet in the concept of feminist agency, women are still constrained, but this also means they are resisting being totally controlled because they are refusing a path, a truth, a boundary, etc., even if in a limited way."

Feminist narrative ethics also cautions us not to judge women in relation to compliance. There is survival in compliance. Not all women can afford rebellious action. The agency has to be understood structurally. The result is that feminist agency without triumph becomes a central concept. Women are subject to state surveillance, and their lives are lived with a sense of fear and control. However, they also manage some space for themselves. The resistance may be incomplete and costly. Hence, Indian feminism supports women's liberty with affirmations that women's liberty cannot ever only mean heroic escape. In fact, liberty may mean inner opposition, strategic engagement, and continued presence. Living under watchful eyes means living out ethical endurance. The expansion of women's feminist discourses can come from appreciating that endurance is active opposition, the "sustained refusal to vanish, to insist on one's continued presence."

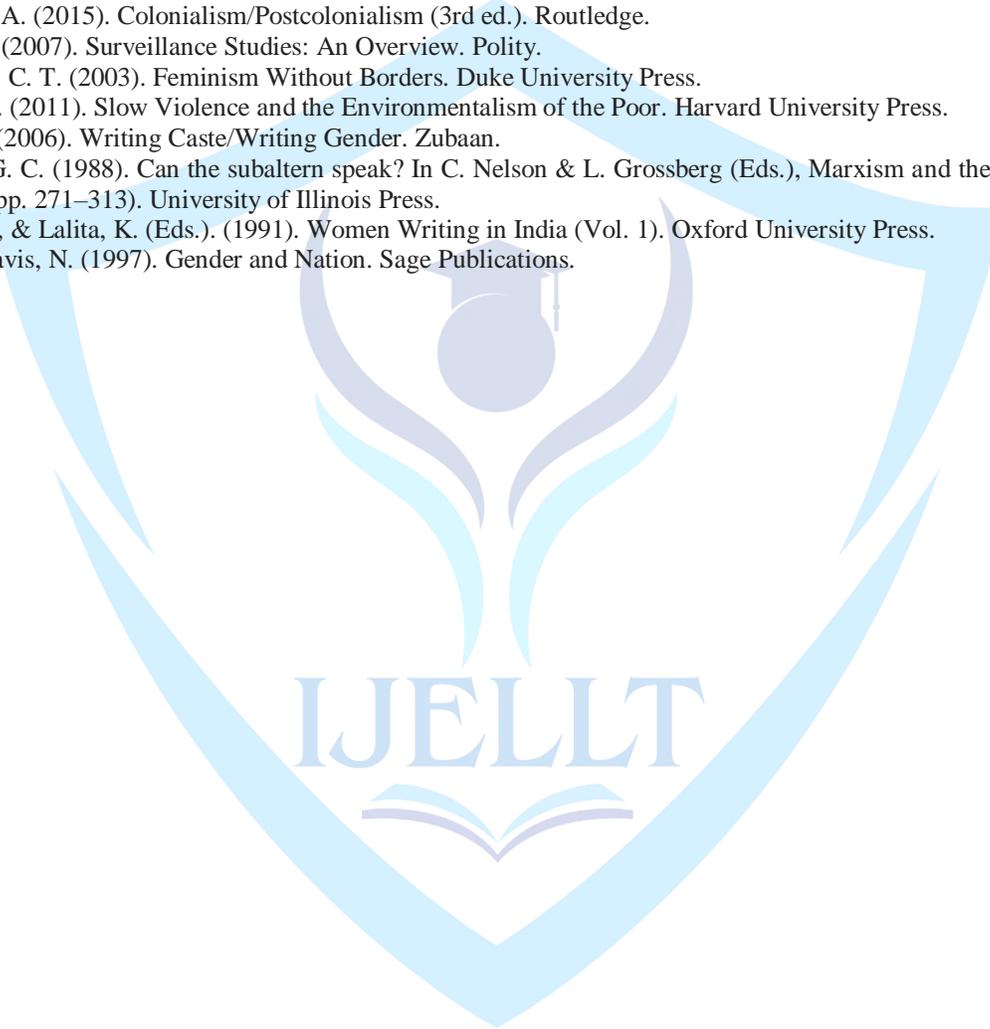
## Conclusion

This study submits feminist accounts of how surveillance acts as an everyday patriarchal technology to surveil and control women through visibility, fear, and morality judgement; its permeability through households, outside environments, and on-line environments to convert women's bodies into a reading and justifying entity to explain and justify their existence; preferring to control through observation and embarrassment anticipation as opposed to coercion; and creating a woman subjectifies by looking and surveillance itself as self-regulation. The paper drew on discipline theories from feminism, feminist geography, and feminist ethics of narrative to demonstrate how surveillance translates to violence characterized by restriction of movement, discipline of sexuality, silencing of voices, creation of reputations via honour politics. Digital cultures heighten this disciplining via making visibility permanent.

The paper has also emphasized that feminist resistance, subjected to such forms of surveillance, "is forged rather than heroic," involving "a strategic negotiation rather than a heroic rebellion." Women resist "by strategic invisibilities, a lack of legibility, and a strategic spatiality." Hence, feminist agency is "partial, unfinished, and allied to feminist realism." There is no guarantee of "liberation," but "survival is its own kind of politics." The significance of this study, therefore, lies in its contribution to a widened Indian feminist literary theory on crisis-models of violence against women through its emphasis on daily policing as a process of oppression. The investigation affirms feminist literature's commitment to the idea that to live freely as a woman, a woman needs to be free from surveillance and not just from violence and harm. In feminist stories, it is a matter of a woman's right to occupy space, home, street, and digital life without being policed and subject to surveillance and watchfulness; it is a matter, therefore, of feminist resistant practice as a woman's refusal to live as a spectacle and as a subject to surveillance and subjectivity despite daily intentions to make her solely visible and accountable as a woman on display and under constant scrutiny and watchfulness.

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