

[Open Peer Review on Qeios](#)

Foucauldian Resistance in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*

Paramaguru Raj¹, P. Tamilselvi¹

¹ Government Arts College For Men

Funding: No specific funding was received for this work.

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Abstract

The paper titled “Resistance in *The Circle*: A Foucauldian Perspective” is analysing the work of dystopian fiction from the perspective of Foucauldian resistance. The paper is structured in a way to depict how power politics is constructed through technical knowledge and how the concept of resistance is crept into existence due to digitized dominance. Later, this study depicts how power sustains its position amidst much resistance by nipping the inimical/resistive ideology in the bud itself by manipulating sophisticated technology. Besides, it exposes that multiple points of resistance are not united together to form a single force. This inherent weakness of the resistive forces serves as a cause for notwithstanding the power politics of the company. In addition to this, how the company shatters political power through strategic resistance and exploits the situation in a skillful manner to hold power.

S.Paramagururaj^a, and Dr.P.Tamilselvi^a

^aAssistant Professor, Department of English, Government Arts College For Men, Nandanam, Chennai - 35, India

Keywords: Foucault, resistance, ideology, power, Circle.

RESISTANCE IN *THE CIRCLE*: A FOUCAULDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

Foucault, the French philosopher, is deeply attracted by the concept of power and shares much of his view on this power in his book *The History of Sexuality Volume 1* (Foucault, 1991). Whenever he describes power, he can't help but describe the resistance due to its unavoidable influence over power. The concept of resistance, present in Foucault's writing, is not defined in a clear-cut manner, hence it gets defined in various manners by various interpreters. But on the whole, all the interpreters zero in on the point that the resistance gives way to power and that without resistance there is no power. “Power and resistance are interconnected, and the oppressive power system catalyzes resistance” (Sharmin Rim, Rafia

2023). The resistance is explicit through multiple points and serves as an impediment to power. Analyzing power from the perspective of discourse, the dominant discourse that influences the larger part of society occupies the centre. The remaining discourses maintain a repulsive relationship with the dominant discourse. As the edge is created for the dominant discourse, it gains dominance over other discourses. This dominance creates disequilibrium between these two types of discourses. As a result, power politics is set in motion. And generally, the centre always controls the periphery. As there is always a perpetual battle for power between the centre and the periphery, at any time there may be a shifting of power. It means that the peripheral discourses, with their more pronounced voices, can take over the central position at any time.

"There is no total network of resistance, only a total network of power, which supervenes on power" (Kelly, P. 111)

These resistive discourses, having a considerable effect upon the people, sporadically create ideological conflicts in the mindset of society against the ruling ideology (discourse). This is how the tussle between the centre and periphery sets in motion. Foucault holds a view that all these multiple points of resistance never converge on a single point to serve as a great force. Due to this inherent weakness, power is more pronounced than resistance. At the same time, the functionality of power is not absolute with respect to influencing individuals holistically. It means that power is controlling but not having absolute control. The reason behind the lagging is that resistance has control over some entities in society. Moreover, Foucault conceives that "resistance is an endemic fact in the world of power relations. Yet, for the reader's tastes, he didn't give the right answers about who or what resists power, and why" (Faubian P.20).

Foucault implies through his writings that resistance is present everywhere power is exercised. Though this resistance is easily colonized by power, it is not doomed to continuous defeat. Hence it poses a severe threat to power relations. Both power and resistance are in sync with sociality. The respective forms of this relationship may undergo a change without affecting the presence of resistance. As humans are part of society, he/she can't be considered outside of the social network, so everyone in society gets dragged into the power network.

"Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault P.95)

Dave Eggers, a distinguished American novelist, received global attention after winning the Pulitzer Prize for his literary production. His writing deals with themes ranging from present-day problems such as migration, globalization, capitalism, the internet, and its merits\demerits. His writing also studs with ideas related to posthumanism. *The Circle*, the dystopian novel, highlights how the centralization of power can be attained through technology and finely defines how those in power subordinate people and turn them into subjects. Dystopian fiction is fiction where the plot construction is woven around the themes of totalitarianism, dictatorship, and inequality. It mirrors how people are forced to live in a non-egalitarian society where the state machinery is run on oppressive measures.

The paper intends to approach the novel *The Circle* from the perspective of Foucauldian resistance and maintains the

interpretation relevant to that background. As the novel itself is dystopian in nature, it could provide a larger room for power politics and the inherent element of resistance. The sophisticated digitized microcosm of *The Circle*, through technical knowledge, tries to accumulate absolute power gradually. Hasanain Riyadh Abdulzahra in his paper titled "Foucauldian Surveillance in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*" presents implicitly the idea of resistance through the character of Annie when she spearheads the project named "Past Perfect" (Eggers, p. 217). It aims at filling the gap in personal as well as the general history of individual members of the team. Abdul Zahra says in his research paper quotes *The Circle* which portrays the excavated truth about the past in a dismayed manner.

"The program unveils the hidden information concerning her parents. They saw a drowned man shouted for help and they did not save him. Then, Anne feels angry, and it almost impossible for her to consider her father and mother as parents. Annie's view point proposes that it is hard to see the dignity and beauty of other people by attacking with information about them" (Zahara, P.11)

The extract above depicts the mental turmoil experienced by Annie, which prepares her to quit the project forthwith and makes her bedridden under the coma stage at the end of the novel.

Resistance in *The Circle*

The Circle, the world-renowned company run by three great stalwarts with distinguished mindsets, makes it an incompetent one. Among the three, Tyler Alexander Gospodinov, considered to be the Circle's wonder boy, endowed with digital knowledge, establishes the company in his twenties. Tom Stendon, the world-striding CEO, excels in his modus operandi by removing hurdles against the company and assuring its smooth functioning. Eamon Bailey, the wise man, naturally blessed with the attitude of encouraging the employees to venture into strange assignments, in such tasks, he used to take decisions through plebiscites conducted online. The company aspires to be more powerful by venturing to introduce different types of apps, by which it casts a spell upon the customers by providing the best services. At the same time, it extracts all the personal information of the customers. The user-friendly app Tru-You (Eggers 2013 P.11) influences the people in such a manner that the Circle's products are supreme and itself genuine. But the real intention of the Circle is revealed later, through which it is understood implicitly that the Circle aims at acquiring power in the name of transparency. This idea is promoted by Eamon Bailey, lovingly identified as 'uncle' by circlers, who perpetually insists that the idea of transparency brings down the corruption rate and the crime rates. The person who wants to be transparent should wear the camera and mike around his/her chest so that whatever happens to the wearer is minutely recorded and telecast on the Circle website, so that viewers around the world could access their activities round the clock. But the wearer has some liberation from using it not in the bathroom. Since the wearer is under close watch, the constant feeling of observance prevents the wearer from engaging in any kind of illegal activities. Attracted by this concept, Stewart, the sixty-year-old, bald-headed circler, willingly goes transparent. The heroine of the novel, Mae Holland, follows his footsteps and turns out to be transparent. At the beginning, it all goes well, and the reputation of the company grows, by which it gains power over the people, but this receives resistance when Tom Stendon announces that

"There's another area of public life where we want and expect transparency, and that's democracy." (Eggers P.110).

This statement targeting the political sphere receives immediate resistance from the politician named Williamson. But Stendon removes the political hurdle by hacking her email and publishing her corrupt activities anonymously. Stendon says,

"Williamson. You didn't hear? She got busted for all kinds of weird stuff. She's under investigation for a half dozen things, all kinds of ethical violations. They found everything on her computer, a hundred weird searches, downloads- some very creepy stuff," and the political sphere is not at all transparent as there is no apt technology" (Eggers, P.111)

Thus, Stendon muzzles the resistance in a dexterous manner by utilizing digital technology. This depicts a power tussle between the two spheres, respectively the private and political. As the political sphere runs the entire administration of the country, it develops the feeling that it has an edge over all other spheres because all comes under its administration. So when there is a threat in the form of transparency, it creates a ripple in the political sphere, and so, Williamson, a people's representative, vibrates a resistance by criticizing the transparency. The resistance registered by Williamson becomes null and void due to the public trust for Congress being just eleven percent in the plebiscite conducted recently on political transparency. Hence the public support on one side and technological supremacy on the other side take over the political resistance easily. This happening is based on Foucault's view that mighty discourse (power) would weaken the weaker discourse (resistance). It endorses the Foucauldian view that knowledge constructs power. In Circle, the technical knowledge contributes power to the administrators. This is how they easily shatter the political resistance.

The whole episode of conflict between Stenton and the politician can be interpreted on the line of strategic resistance. Kelly observes that "if resistance is strategic, however, in what respect is it not power?" (Kelly P. 111). It affirms Foucault's statement that counter power is that which escapes power. Here Stenton's move to thwart the political power is highly strategic; in this sense, it can be equated with counter power or strategic resistance. This resistance itself is an exercise of power, and it was that exercised by Stenton.

Resistance from individuals

Foucault claims that individuals opted to oppose and challenge oppression rather than to simply acquiesce, thus he enforces a view that individuals are not passive recipients or inert onlookers. This Foucauldian notion is explicitly revealed through some of the characters who developed an ideological war with the Circle. As power is exercised prevalently, so the resistance also. Hence, even at the lower level, the resistance is built up against the power.

In *The Circle*, the resistance comes from ordinary individuals as well. Mercer, the ex-lover of Mae Holland, nurtures the

aversion to the Circle's transparency policy from the beginning. He records his resistance in various ways against transparency. As an expert in making chandeliers out of antlers, he is not happy with the uploading of chandeliers' images to social media without his permission by Mae. But she does it with the intention of creating a good market for his products. It hurts him a lot as he develops an antagonistic perception against the capitalist policy followed by the Circle. Mercer has an opposite ideological stand to the Circle because he is completely of the view that the company is profit-oriented and soon it will eliminate all kinds of retail traders. In addition to this, he observes that the ending of retail trading will establish a monopoly in all businesses by the Circle, which will have a detrimental effect on the entire society. So he says,

"The tools you guys create actually manufacture unnaturally extreme social needs. No one needs the level of contact you are purveying. It improves nothing. It's not nourishing" (Eggers, P. 71).

Mercer is a person holding aloof from the digitized world as he is under the impression that the virtual sphere would kill privacy. He influences Mae's parents as well. Hence, her parents object to Mae's plan of installing cameras at home. The installation is an outcome of the company's new project named 'Surf Sight' (Eggers, P.32). It is a URL where viewers can have live visuals of any places studded with thumb-sized cameras. This radical project is designed to bring a revolution in society through transparency.

"Soul Search" is another project by which any person's whereabouts in the globe could be easily sensed with the help of technology. To make this project viable, already the cameras are set up in the air, and data collected from them is transferred to the network. As the network is already loaded with all people's profiles cum personal data, the accessibility of the whereabouts of any person through this technology is feasible. Mae uses the same technology to locate the absconded Mercer as he becomes reticent and dejected with the dominance of the digitized world. When Mae, along with her supporters, is about to catch him on camera, he is resistant to this activity, and in his attempt to escape from being captured, meets an untimely death by falling into the valley. Thus, he proves a big resistance to the consuming technology of the Circle. Even his argument with Mae regarding transparency explicitly exhibits his ideological resistance to this concept. He strongly believes that

"Something should be kept in darkness and something should be transparent, as the way the whole day is separated by dark and light. Did you ever think that perhaps our minds are delicately calibrated between the known and the unknown? That our souls need the mysteries of night and the clarity of day? You people are creating a world of ever-present daylight, and I think it will burn us all alive" (Eggers, P. 230).

Even Mercer believes that he would have supporters on his side as a resistive force to the transparency that keeps everyone under surveillance in the name of reducing illegal activities. He still holds out hope that people in the future, a new generation, would rise against all the ludicrous, oppressive, and outrageous circlers. Mercer develops much distress over the loss of personal freedom due to the advancement of transparency. He perceives that in the pretext of

transparency, the technological web clutches people within it and chokes their thinking mentally, and converts them into digital slaves.

Resistance from Circlers

The resistance reflects in the minds of some of the employees who are considered to be more valuable to the development of the company. Annie, one of the forty members of the gang of the Circle, serving as a privy to its most secret plans and data, begins to nurture the idea of resistance inwardly towards the dream project of Eamon Bailey's 'Past Perfect'. The aim of this project lies in filling the gap in the personal history of individuals in particular and the holistic history of every customer in general. Annie herself volunteers for this project, and as she finds a way to explore the genealogy of her parents, she is affected by the striking truth that her ancestors were once Irish enslavers. In due course of time, they enslaved the Africans also. The sharing of these exhumed past information backfires on her with the pungent criticism from her colleagues. Even though some of them used to call her 'Masha Annie,' some black employees in her team threatened her with forthwith resignation from the company. This creates much stress for her as she is projected as a descendant of stained lineages. Hence, she is, at one point of time, under heavy stress, sends out a strange zing out into the world. It runs like this ' I don't know if we should know everything' (Eggers P.233).

The idea of resistance crept into the mind of Mae Holland when she herself was caught red-handed for stealing the boat on the beach. It was sensed with the lollipop-sized camera placed on the beach by one of Eamon Bailey's friends, so the police arrested her. The intrusion of the owner of the boat house at the right time prevented this incident from being published in the newspaper. At that time, she felt happy over the absence of a surveillance system. When the news reaches Bailey, she is inquired about it by Bailey. Then she realizes the installation of a surveillance camera on the beach. This puts her into an embarrassing situation. And as a newbie at the Circle, she at the beginning of her career avoids the social gatherings conducted by the Circle and keeps herself aloof from the unwanted social media activities, though the work nature of the Circle demands it from its employees. It all exposes her willingness to have privacy. Privacy itself is a sign of resistance to transparency.

The project named Luv Luv, which is an improvised dating website where people can find their partners, is launched amidst Circlers in a grand manner. It is in the open forum where the unexpected revelation of Mae Holland as his lady love by Francis Garaventa puts her in an embarrassing situation as she agitates over revealing her personal relationship. These unexpected incidents in Mae's life project her as a person against the transparency of Eamon Bailey, at the beginning. All these activities give a hint that something should not be disclosed publicly, as she strongly holds a view that personal information should be kept secret. This maintenance of secrecy is in stark contrast to the idea of transparency. Hence it can be interpreted that being willing to keep a secret itself is a sign of resistance.

Though she later receives global attention through her vibrant social media activities such as adopting complete transparency, the vote on her smartness receives 368 negative feedback from her fellow circlers. This startles her because she is in a firm belief that every circler has a positive perception towards her way of doing things. As she proves

herself as a workaholic and integrates herself with the company and projects herself as a mouthpiece of the Circle, she develops a strong perception that every Circler loves her. But this online voting disproves that, even though she receives abundant support from her fellow colleagues. All these indicate how minutely the concept of resistance creeps into the employees' minds against the Circle's policies. People around the world believe that the Circle provides a better platform to prove their abilities, skills, and intelligence, but very few can sense that the growing dominance of the Circle could be a threat to society as a whole. The vote Mae Holland receives is just a replica of that resistive tendency. It means that resistance is present among the Circlers. As the Circlers hold their position in equality with others, it can be interpreted that resistance is at work in a parallel manner.

Resistance due to Ideological Lesion at the Top Level

Even the idea of resistance is experienced and exercised among peers also due to the change in perception. The concept of resistance not only affects the employees alone, it spreads out to affect the employers too. The vibrant trios named Tyler Alexander Gopodinov, Eamon Bailey, and Tom Stendon, who established and administrate the company, get themselves polarized into two groups due to ideological conflict over the concept of transparency, with Tom Stendon and Bailey on one side and Tyler Alexander Gopodinov on the other side. Tyler is the one who launched the company with the Tru-You application, the unified operating system, which receives global attention by having a lot of customers with their true identity. As he is socially conscious, he is averse to the popularity of the company with monopoly power. The other two aspire to revolutionize the world by making all global activities done via the Circle, whether it is a renewal of a licence or casting an online vote for electing a president. Doing every activity through the Circle is a big threat to global society. This is sensed by Tyler. Hence, considering global safety, he himself sees a big resistance to this attempt. To carry out his plan, he directly requests Mae Holland to act against that.

The company utilizes Mae Holland's popularity as a driving force to influence the people with their projects such as "See You," "Soul Search," and "Demoxie" around the globe. This is how they want to connect everything in the world to complete the Circle. The logo of the company, completing the circle or closing the circle, is a symbolic representation of controlling the entire global activity of people by the company alone. The symbol Eggers uses on the cover page, 'C' (Eggers, 2013), reflects the idea that the circle is incomplete. The gap in the 'C' is immediately filled the moment the company controls all global activities. Thus, the gap in the 'C' is filled and transformed into 'O'/circle. The Circle, with its technical know-how, knows very well how to manipulate world activity. Even its primary intention lies in regulating global activity through their digitized platform alone. As a result, the company launches a lot of projects which are highly competitive so that other companies cannot compete with the Circle. At the outset, the company wants to bring the entire company under its surveillance by installing a lot of cameras within it. It assures transparency at the micro level. Later, this concept is extended to cover the entire globe through the installation of lollipop-sized cameras in and around the world to bring it under its watch. For this sole purpose, the company promotes the project called "See Change." People accessing this through websites can look at the complete activity of the globe. This serves as a platform to intervene in national and global politics. It is due to the installation of new cameras that a number of politicians from the U.S. volunteer to go

transparent like Santos. Besides, the company indulges in some illegal projects such as Project 9. Even this project is not defined clearly, but it is rumored to involve the accessibility of massive amounts of data in human DNA. For storage purposes, a bus-sized red metallic box is kept in a secret place. Tom Stendon's idea of counting the Saharan sand by the Saharan project aims at fulfilling the company's idea that

"no earthly questions would remain unanswered" (Eggers, p.128).

The neighbor watch, Child Track project aims to reduce crime rates, and the Demoxie project intends to goad the disinterested people to vote to safeguard democracy. All these projects of the company enclose the globe under a single private digitized organization. And the 'Tru-Youth' project implants a chip in the hands of children at a tender age with the safety assurance that it won't be removed after they cross 18 years. These kinds of illegal activities arouse fear in the mind of Tyler Alexander Gospodinov; hence, he advises Mae about the consequences of the monopoly of the company in the near future. After complete conscience over the company's ultimate aim, he holds a view that if 90% of world searches go via the Circle, it would reach one hundred percent soon without competitors. The flow of information through this particular digitized platform has the power to control, manipulate, and ruin anything that it wants. Already, government representatives, in the name of transparency, are muzzled, so the kind of dark age should be prevented from being born. He directly requests Mae Holland to read out the written message against the completion of the Circle when she is with the maximum number of global online audiences, as she is already gone transparent. The written message runs like

"The Rights of Humans in a Digital Age, We must all have the right to anonymity. Not every human activity can be measured. The ceaseless pursuit of data to quantify the value of any endeavor is catastrophic to true understanding. The barrier between public and private must remain unbreachable. We must all have the right to disappear" (Eggers, P.259).

Conclusion

To conclude, the readers develop a conscious understanding of the demerits of the closing of the Circle with the complete accessibility of global data through the concept of resistance present in the minds of those who oppose it. Individuals like Mercer, Annie, Mae Holland's parents, and the great Tyler Alexander Gospodinov are all at one with each other and develop an antagonistic view against this monopolistic power. It purely models Foucault's resistance.

Though the resistance is at work in various ways through various members, all these antagonist forces are not trapped into a single point to serve as a great force against the powerful digital centre named Circle. This attitude of resisters endorses a view of Foucault that multiple points of resistance are not linked together. Either it is Mercer, Tyler, Mae's parents, or Annie, all these people's resistances are not synchronized together to form an enormous force. It may be due to the wreckage of the political sphere because in democracy the political sphere could create a space for connecting the counterideological force and finally transforming it into the dominant force. But Stenton's strategic resistance dissolves the

political system's attempt at holding resistive forces together. All other individuals' resistances, like Mercer's, Annie's, Tyler's, occur at different points in the horizontal and vertical relations of power. Hence the absence of a central point to hold the collective resistive forces on the one hand, and the enormous impetus given through strategic resistance by Stenton on the other hand, shatters all these resistances against *The Circle* motionless temporarily.

References

- Eggers, Dave. 2013, *The Circle*, Mcsweeney's books, San Francisco.
- Foucault, Michel. 1991, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books, New York.
- Foucault, Michel. 1991, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1: An Introduction*, Pantheon Books, New York.
- D. Faubian, James, 1994, Michel Foucault Power Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Penguin Books, Great Britain.
- Taylor, Dianna, 2011, Michel Foucault Key Concepts, Acumen, UK.
- Kelly, Mark G.E., 2009, The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault, Routledge, New York.
- Smart, Barry. 2002, *Michel Foucault*. Routledge, London.
- Zahra, Abdul H. R. et al, 2020, *FOUCAULDIAN SURVEILLANCE IN DAVE EGGERS' THE CIRCLE*
<https://archives.palarch.nl/index.php/jae/article/download/4625/4573/8854>
- <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372573121>