

# Panopticon/Synopticon of Silence: Surveillance in/of Domestic Space in *The House of Bernarda Alba*

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## Abstract

The paper attempts to study the domestic space as represented in *The House of Bernarda Alba* using emerging scholarship on gendered spaces and the post-revolutionary emergence of models of masculinity in Spain. It aims to study the deflection mechanism from the normative understanding of 'home' emanating from the imposition of normative and institutionally ratified identities and behaviour. It studies the inherent violence and silencing tendency of this mechanism while accounting for the balance of acquiescence and resistance practiced by the members. Furthermore, it studies the resemblance of this contested domestic space to Betham's Panopticon and the panoptic surveillance society as formulated by Foucault. While understanding the role of institutional infiltration of domestic space the paper argues that the elements of drama anticipate the conservatism and seamless surveillance of Sección Femenina of the Franco regime. Inclusive of the panopticism's power dynamics the rural drama created by Lorca also resembles Mathiesen's synopticon or 'viewer society'. Finally, this paper posits the role of silence as a coercive tool in surveillance.

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Home as a space is normatively autonomous, a harbor for an individual's dynamic identity. The inadvertent over-sympathetic inception and assimilation of tyrannical institutional narratives owing to their moral and ethical appeals lead to the establishment of analogous tyrannies at home outlawing and post scripting unconventional behaviors and ostracizing non-normative identities of the family members. *The House of Bernarda Alba* (henceforth THOBA) written during the emerging Spanish Civil War is a "photographic documentary" (1998, 3) that assimilates the popular sentiments in the representation of domestic space.

Both CEDA and pro-revolutionary rebels exploited the space of war, encoded male, to determine gender identities and masculinity. Valorizing warfare conservative ideology, like in Mauricio Karl, as Brian D. Bunk informs, "refers to the soldiers as "grandsons of the Cid" and true "sons of Castile"... ." (2007, 92) borrowing medieval imagery while simultaneously presenting the leftists as "pseudo-men" (2007, 93). The exclusion of men from the stage of THOBA and segregation of them by Bernarda in the courtyard during her husband's funeral seeks to represent this division.

Previous studies borrow Adela's prison imagery (Lorca, 1998, 114), Brian Morris, for example, compares Bernarda's house to Wilfred Scawen Blunt's "austere abode",

invoking the prison imagery. However, they do not conceptualize the space as a prison apart from the prison-like entrapment of the characters. In 2004 study, Juan M. Godoy claims that Lorca creates the “spectacle of the closet” (103) by using the ‘Albertine Strategy’ to articulate his heterosexual desire and Adela becomes a conduit in which he is “reinscribing his desire” (111) but fails to acknowledge the exploitative role of encoded gender norms particularly during and post-October revolution of 1934.

Bentham’s Panopticon as located by Foucault as a model of disciplinary institutions in society resembles this house where members are coercively ensconced. Foucault writes that the dialogue between the Panopticon and its “function” is based on “making power relations function in a function, and of making a function through these power relations” (1977, 206-207). Bernarda’s house in practicing the inter-generational relations (in the case of the daughters), inter-class relations (in the case of Poncia and the servant), and hegemonic normality (in the case of Maria Josefa) effectuate the Francoist and Falangist ideology that systematically runs through the normative and conservative social and familial relations and individual identity.

The ramifications deflect from the institutionally ratified ones in Bernarda’s house through individual struggles and motivations particularly those of Adela and Maria Josefa. The struggle stays taut by an equal resistance offered by the house. While doing so, the house hinders the cultivation of non-normative individual identity and uses the political and cultural nexus to entrap the members in normative identities and ironically negating the normative conceptualizations of home.

Peter Somerville explicates the concept of home using social phenomenology, combining sociology and ‘heterophenomenology’ and identifies three essential aspects: privacy, identity, and familiarity, which syncretically formulate the meaning of home and correspondingly influence spatial, psychological, and sociological predisposition. Bernarda’s house crumbles at each dimension to nurture a positive experience instead it disrupts and negates or negatively defines the experience of home for the members.

Somerville maintains that the “increased privatization of the home is . . . associated with the growing publicization of domestic life” (1997, 233). In Bernarda’s house, the Falangist ideologies of oppression seem to keep the house under surveillance. Bernarda receives the information of Pep’s visitations and the duration of his stay at her daughters’ window through Poncia whom her sons in turn inform. This is how the outside space is constantly gatekeeping the private domestic space, violating privacy and publicizing the private.

When Poncia tries to instigate Bernarda against Martirio’s licentious feelings towards Pep Bernarda says, “There is nothing happening here. . . And if one day it were to happen, be sure it wouldn’t go beyond these walls” (1998, 78). Bernarda’s preoccupation with privatization and the outside perception of the inside events dominates her self-identity. Her first dialogue in the play, during her husband’s funeral, is “Silence” (1998, 13). What Mathiesen does with Foucault’s conceptualization of Bentham’s Panopticon arguing for a Synopticon society owing to the emergence of media houses is of relevance here. Synopticism according to Mathiesen is when “a large number focuses on something in common which is condensed” (1997, 219) but is inclusive of the power dynamics of few seeing many panoptic societies. Following the trail, the publicization of the drama of domestic space in THOBA significantly dominated by outside observers hold a dual surveillance system where silence works as censor.

Somerville points out the interlinking dialectical relationship between individual identity and national identity in Modern Europe. “Individualism,” he writes, is “underpinned by the rule of law” and by extension it links to “nation-based states” (1997, 235). According to this equation, the home is proportional to the homeland, and nationalist feelings were essentially patriarchal. The qualifiers of “legal” identities are determined by patriarchy as well. Bernarda’s symbolic cane serves as a phallogocentric qualifier and her tyrannous control over the household signs her subscription to the position of a stalwart patriarchal gatekeeper of “piety.” Diversion from recommended modes of identification makes an individual an “outlaw.” Perhaps the most explicit outlaws of the play are Adela and Maria Josefa.

Adela breaks Bernarda's cane and Maria Josefa in her mad ramblings breaks Bernarda's silence, she exclaims "I won't be quiet!" (1998, 45).

Finally, familiarity is described as "indissoluble unity of domestication. . . and socialization" (1997, 237). An individual's disbalance in either domesticating the house or socializing within the house alienates them from the 'home.' Bernarda fails to domesticate the house and other characters fail to "accommodate" themselves to this tyrannical house. Bernarda's house, thus, fails to adhere to normative understanding of home. What follows shall argue that this normative understanding of the domesticated space of home is linked closely with violence.

Conceptualizing the inherent tyrannies embedded in the structure and experience of 'Home' Mary Douglas argues, borrowing Susanne Langer's concept of architecture as a "virtual ethnic domain," that "Even its most altruistic and successful versions exert a tyrannous control over mind and body." (1991, 303) The space of a home is an 'autonomous' domain but the ideologies and preferences curbing this space are not entirely individualistic and are shrouded by the spatiotemporal location of society it inhabits. That is to say that the autonomy of the domestic space is tempered by external influences, as societal factors shape the ideologies and preferences constraining the home. Not just that, the home for the regulation of the "commons dilemma" or maintenance of a common reservoir of resources or the "distributional problem," as

Douglas posits, "make(s) every member a watchdog on the public behalf" (1991, 299).

In Bernarda's house, this system of everyman as a watchdog works quite efficiently. After the mourning ritual when Bernarda asks for Angustius, Adela informs her that she had seen her "peeping through the crack in the main door" (1998, 24-5). In Act Two, Poncia warns Adela "I keep watch!" (1998, 59), and Martirio's telling of Adela's affair with Pep in Act Three hands her down to malignant fate. It resembles Douglas's contributive solution to the problem of equal distribution. But the resource here replaces punishment and confinement. Bernarda's house's tyranny, rather than fostering collective good, serves the purpose of sustaining distributive

surveillance, exemplifying a complex interplay of power dynamics within the domestic realm.

Bernarda declares to the inhabitants to imagine the conditions of the mourning period like a claustrophobic experience of sealing away the doors and the windows so that not even the "wind from the street" will enter the house (1998, 21). The confining tendency of this construct resonates with Bentham's Panopticon. In Letter VI of the Panopticon Writings,

Bentham writes, that the effectiveness of the architecture is enhanced by the provision of the

"Omnipresence of the inspector. . . combined with the extreme facility of his real presence." (Bozovic, 1995, 45) Foucault maintains that this assuages the "automatic functioning of power" by making it "visible and unverifiable" (1977, 201). It is interesting and relevant to note that this tendency of seamless surveillance portrayed in the play shall become a social reality in post-war Spain specifically witnessed in the activities of *Sección Femenina* which under the garb of "social services" was more concerned "with surveillance and 'moral' disciplining of Republican families" (Graham, 2005, 76).

The daughters and the servants in THOBA synchronize to maintain every other member of the house under Bernarda's control and effectuate the surveillance. They are not solely driven by retribution but also by personal motivations. For in the instance where Adela and Martirio both are equally interested in Pep and it is Martirio's jealousy that leads to bitterness. Adela aware of this instigates and fumes this bitterness and declares that Pep and her are mutually in love to which Martirio exclaims "Put a knife in me if you like, but don't say that again!" (1998, 111). Since, unlike Bentham's gatekeepers who are objectively following a systematic surveillance job, where they are under surveillance too, the personal motivations involved here complicate the surveillance process. The unpredictability of personal motivations assigns unverifiability to the disciplinary process, for example, Poncia threatens but never actually reports Adela's transgressions.

While describing the role of the Police within the panoptic system of society Foucault writes that "It had to be like a faceless gaze. . . thousands of eyes posted everywhere" (1977, 214). In the drama's opening scene, we witness Poncia cursing Bernarda

and, among other things, wishing to put a “real hot nail in her eyes” (1998, 8). The faculty of sight transcends its function in the drama and becomes a muted symbol of surveillance which characters from the beginning try to resist through violent images. This rebellious violence further disturbs the assumed peace in domestic spaces. Bernarda continuously asserts her dictatorial control with statements like “I was born with my eyes open” (1998, 82) which is why the sight of Poncia’s imaginative rebellion is against the all-seeing “eye”.

But Poncia simply does not rebel against this faculty she internalizes it and reiterates it while threatening Adela when she claims that her limbs and head are “all but eyes.” Magdalena who is most settled in her subservient role in the house offers a more insightful utilization of the faculty of vision for surveillance when she says “Even our eyes are not our own” (1998, 64). The private eye of an individual enrolled in private watchkeeping and moral policing is utilized for purposes that serve the hegemony of the politicized public sphere.

Joshua M. Price while criticizes the “persuasive” and “authoritative” discourse generated by Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* which while characterizing home as a safe place undermines the “multivocality” by subscribing to the normative ideas that are gender-biased. This idea of home is “imposed on women undialogically” (Price, 2002, 55) to ensure a seamless process of homemaking and “silent”, for prompt facilitation of the master. “If a woman desires the safety of home and accepts her role as a producer of it, then being battered confronts her fiercely, blatantly with failure” (Price, 2002, 40), maintains M. Price. The servant’s silence over being consistently raped by the dead patriarch is the silence of self-blame and self-censure. This can also be argued for the daughters’ silent bearing of the battering. Seemingly benign circumscription of the home as a haven has fraught and oppressive consequences for women.

The common denominator in Somerville, Douglas, and M. Price is that they question the normative understanding of home and dissect it to establish domestic space as a dynamic space, with social idiosyncrasies, that domestic space inherently contains some kind of violence, and that the autonomy of the domestic space is not free

from the ideologies of the world that pour into the porous walls of the house however “thick” they may be. Heterotopias exist within a culture, as Foucault writes, but it is “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (*Of Other Spaces*, 24). The panopticons embedded in THOBA is then, owing to its virtual nature, a Foucauldian ‘heterotopia.’ Since it represents the home as “counter-site.”

Doreen Massey argues that the gender hegemonic ideology views space by placing it dichotomously to time as a passive “stasis.” In doing so, time is encoded as masculine and space as feminine. This logic further caters to the orthodox gendering of spaces. While Massey posits that the “construction of specificity through interrelations” (1994, 7) of the space to that which is posed as “beyond” will structure a dynamic outlook and by revealing the “joint control of spatiality and identity” (1994, 179) can articulate how spatial location is fundamental to gender struggles.

The *Sección Femenina* of the Franco regime infiltrated the Spanish domestic spaces with its conservative construction of gender ideology and it did so by emphasizing the division of spheres, importance of domestic duties and even establishing schools for domestic chores training (called *Escuelas de hogar*). It also functioned with its polemical as a synopticon. Paula A. De La Cruz-Fernandez in her study of the role of sewing in Spanish society during civil war mentions that “needle. . . became women’s weapon, women’s exclusive tool to participate in Spanish society’s conflicts and crossroads” (2014, 270) but it did so without uprooting them from the domestic space. They could participate in war but by sewing army uniforms, as Fernandez informs.

In Bernarda’s house women are engaged in and are instructed to engage in sewing. Fernandez while briefly mentioning the play writes that embroidering the wedding bedsheets is the only “connection between private and public world” for the daughters because through that they are participating in the verified institution of marriage. Sewing is part of their schooling which ensures their alliance with traditional Catholic piety that Falangist fostered. Magdalena mentions that her grandmother embroidered “the black man fighting the lion” (1998, 33). The image can be interpreted

as symbolic resistance emanating from and within the confines of the “state-sponsored domesticity” (Cruz-Fernandez, 2014, 273).

The regulation of sexual behavior is one of the primary aims of this segregation. Two locuses of resistance that come against this are through Maria Josefa and Adela. Maria who is kept “locked” inside her room and is represented as a mad old woman “decked out with flowers in her hair and at her bosom” (1998, 44) wanting to “get married on the seashore” (1998, 45) represents an ironic image of fertility and sexuality because of her dormant body. Adela too wears a green dress calling upon the attention of the hens in the stable yard (1998, 33). She is in fact seeking visibility in the outside male space. Bringing together the segregated gendered spaces through sexual union with Pep in the stable yard later. Adela’s suicide is followed by Bernarda’s insistence of silence and declaration of her virgin death.

Stephen Roberts in Lorca’s biography describes the incident where he was “called a *maricón* (queer) in front of his family” (2020, 198) by the Franco search team. It is well-established that the state had grudges against Lorca’s homosexuality but limiting the oppression portrayed in the play to closeted homosexual desire is redundant. Moreover, it places Lorca’s sympathies with the Left which is contested because as Roberts mentions how Lorca would “salute some people. . . using the stiff-arm Fascist (and Falangist) salute, and others. . . raising a clenched fist in the Communist (and Popular Front) style” (2020, 200). The prison capturing Lorca was branded Falangist, approved by his assassination, but the iron bars perhaps were collected by the conservatism in the Spanish society of 1930s, which cannot be branded to one political party. THOBA is a drama ardently voicing the appeal of individual liberation against the coercive silencing practiced by various institutions under which transgressions result in death.

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