
Invisible Chains: A Foucauldian Reading of Jeffrey Archer's *A Prison Diary*

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Abstract: Jeffrey Archer's *Prison Diary* explores life behind bars, providing a raw account of personal experience by capturing the psychological, emotional, and social struggles faced by the inmates. This paper explores Jeffrey Archer's *A Prison Diary* through the lens of Michel Foucault's theory of the Panopticon, which analyses how a model of constant surveillance works as a power that influences the inmates' behaviour. This paper brings into the limelight how institutional power controls the prisoners' behaviour through psychological pressure. Archer reflects on the prisoners' conditioned behaviour of watching their own selves during the absence of supervision in order to meet the invisible expectations of the system. The real-life prison experience of Archer reflects Foucault's idea of the Panopticon. This paper analyses the prison operating systems of internalised control, providing a deeper understanding of punishment, power, and human resilience.

Keywords: Panopticon, Surveillance, Institutional Power, Internalised Control, Prison Psychology.

Introduction: Celebrated British author and politician Jeffrey Archer was convicted of perjury in the year 2001. His imprisonment led to the creation of *A Prison Diary* (2002), an output of his imprisonment—a candid and detailed account of his experience behind bars. The readers experience a deeply personal narrative that captures the dark realities of prison life. Unlike his fictional works, this diary explores not only the physical but also the emotional and psychological toll of incarceration. Archer's observations reflect the underlying systems of discipline and control that govern life inside the prison.

Archer's diary widely portrays the power dynamics which align closely with Michel Foucault's concept of the Panopticon. The Panopticon is, in fact, an architectural design modelled by Jeremy Bentham. The Panopticon is a prison in a circular shape and contains a watchtower situated in its very centre, from which the inmates are constantly observed. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault reinterprets this structure in the context of invisible chains through governance and supervision. This same phenomenon in the prison is

reimagined and aligned as a symbol of modern disciplinary society. Constant surveillance habitually conditions the individual to self-monitor their actions in society. Through this governance, an individual becomes both the subject and also the object of control in society.

This paper explores Jeffrey Archer's *A Prison Diary* (2002) through the lens of Foucault's Panopticism, explaining the operation of the mechanisms of power and surveillance within the prison system. The study focuses on how the government enforces the power of control over society by conditioning the psychology of individuals through institutions. The control shifts from physical enforcement to psychological self-regulation, echoing Foucault's theory. Through this approach, the paper aims to unpack the deeper themes of surveillance, discipline, and human adaptability reflected in Archer's real-life experiences.

Theoretical Framework – Foucault's Panopticism: It is essential to understand the operation of institutional power in order to comprehend the psychological and disciplinary life inside prison. Michel Foucault is an influential figure in this regard, and his text *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* presents a deep analysis of contemporary punishment systems. Foucault's idea of discipline and punish moves beyond the traditional idea of punishment as an act of violence. Foucault moves deeper into the concept, exploring how control is maintained through surveillance.

Foucault reimagines and reinterprets the Panopticon designed by the 18th-century philosopher Jeremy Bentham. The Panopticon is a model prison structure specially designed for surveillance. This architectural design contains a central watchtower surrounded by a circular building of cells. The observer can potentially see every prisoner in the cell, whereas the prisoners are not aware of being watched at every moment. Foucault argues that although surveillance could not be constant, its impact is the alteration of the prisoner's behaviour—an act of self-monitoring is achieved effortlessly.

The Panopticon imagined by Foucault functions as more than a building. It becomes a medium of psychological control. The prisoners, conditioned by living under surveillance, begin to live a life of self-monitoring. The power of control brilliantly shifts from external enforcement to internal regulation. Prisoners are conditioned in such a way that they behave as if the eyes of authority are always upon them. Foucault calls this a state of "permanent visibility," where individuals internalise the gaze of authority and discipline themselves accordingly. Here, the Panopticon becomes more than a building—it becomes a mechanism of psychological control.

This concept is central to how many modern institutions operate. Prisons today may not follow Bentham's circular design, but the principles of surveillance, documentation, control over space and time, and enforced routine remain strong. Even technologies like

CCTV cameras and regular headcounts reflect the same logic. It has a structure where the people inside behave as though they are always under watch. Inmates begin to conform, not because of direct force, but because of the mental pressure that comes from the possibility of being seen and judged at any time.

What makes Foucault's theory so influential is that it highlights how power functions not just from the outside but also from within. Individuals internalise the expectations of the system and regulate themselves accordingly. In the case of Jeffrey Archer's *A Prison Diary*, Foucault's ideas become deeply relevant. Archer's experience as an inmate in the prison vividly depicts the omnipresent but unseen gaze of authority that impacts the prisoner's behaviour, thoughts, feelings, and their own self.

Archer's Prison and the Invisible Eye: Jeffrey Archer's famous work *A Prison Diary* offers readers a raw and authentic account of everyday life within the British prison. In contrast to media's dramatic portrayal of prison life, Archer provides a more sober and realistic account of life behind the bars. Systematic and invisible methods of control have a powerful influence on the inmate's behaviour. Archer meticulously offers a detailed portrayal of prison existence. He reflects on a system in which power is exercised through psychological regulation instead of physical force, which Foucault calls "disciplinary power." Archer's account focuses on the more subtle and structured forms of control that shape every moment of an inmate's life.

Right from the very beginning of his sentence, Archer is confronted by the rigid structure of the prison. Archer quickly realises that every moment of the day is strictly controlled—from the early morning roll calls to structured meals, assigned work duties, brief exercise breaks, and lights out at a fixed hour. Life inside the prison runs on a strict schedule, leaving hardly any space for personal choice. Even small changes or delays are not welcomed and can lead to warnings or punishment. The structured cycle of repetitive tasks makes it hard for inmates to make any personal preference. Though breaking small rules doesn't always lead to severe punishments, the system conditions the prisoners to obey the rules over time.

As an aspect of art, keen observations Archer had gone through within the prison. He makes access to different spaces like the library, dining hall, or recreational areas, which are strictly regulated. Inmates must follow specific routes where they have assigned time limits and wait for approval before accessing or leaving any place. The penal complex has strict regulations of movement, which reinforces to the inmates that they have no control over their basic freedom. The body holds the authority to define the individual, where the individual has no option over their actions. Archer repeatedly highlights how the constant fear of authority profoundly conditions the inmates' actions even though there is no direct display of violence. Archer recounts a moment when a fellow inmate abruptly stops in the middle of a conversation as a guard passes. This action is not due to any warning but out of

conditioned caution. This automatic self-discipline reflects the essence of Foucault's Panopticon, where the internalised threat of surveillance leads prisoners to monitor their own behaviour.

This growing awareness of being watched affects Archer also. He begins to choose his words, tone, and body language in response to the codes of conduct in order to escape unnecessary scrutiny. The sense of constant observation haunts him even in the solitude of his cell. Archer feels a lingering sense of surveillance enforced through staff, security cameras, and unspoken rules upheld by the fellow inmates. In one passage, he notes, "You begin to act differently, not because someone tells you to, but because you feel like someone is always watching" (Archer, 2002). This sentiment perfectly expresses the transition from external to internal surveillance, where prisoners become their own wardens.

Archer's account describes the operation of power through invisibility, where the prison guards don't need to shout, punish, or physically dominate. Instead, they rely on the ever-present sense of control embedded in the daily routine and uncertainty. This type of control is more insidious, as it creates an enduring impact on the prisoner's mentality. Moreover, over time, every moment without supervision feels like it is part of a larger system of surveillance.

Here, in Foucault's theory, Archer's experiences have proven that modern incarceration is less about direct punishment and more about instilling a psychological outline in which inmates are habituated to monitor themselves. The prison becomes a space where restraint is not just obligatory but captivated, reshaping not only outward behaviour but also inner thought patterns. In this way, *A Prison Diary* (2002) provides a severely human testimony to the quiet, hidden mechanisms through which authority operates in the modern prison system.

Psychological Impact and Internalised Surveillance: The major consequence of incarceration, as revealed in Jeffrey Archer's *A Prison Diary*, is the leisurely but solid transformation of the inmate's internal humanity. Beyond the visible constraints of walls, daily routines, and surveillance lies a more insidious form of control—how inmates see themselves, relate to others, and manage their own thoughts. Under the constant pressure of being watched—or even just the possibility of being watched—prisoners begin to internalise authority. They become self-conscious even in their most private moments. This phenomenon, deeply connected to Michel Foucault's idea of Panopticism, reshapes not only external behaviour but the very architecture of the mentality.

Throughout the diary, Archer gradually becomes more aware of how he is perceived and how he must carefully manage his actions and even his expressions. Simple gestures like smiling at another prisoner or showing frustration can carry unintended consequences. He begins to reflect on his tone of voice, the way he phrases requests, and how long he makes eye contact with others. Even without direct confrontation, the ambient presence of authority

shapes how he navigates each relation. This sensitive self-awareness is not unique to Archer; rather, it mirrors Foucault's notion that, over time, the prisoner internalises the role of the observer and becomes their own jailer.

This internal shadowing takes an arousing impact. Archer documents moments of anxiety and emotional fatigue that stem not from external punishment but from the persistent need to self-regulate. He writes about feeling on edge, especially during inspections or unexpected interactions with authorities. The pressure to always appear composed and cooperative leaves little room for dependable emotion. He suppresses anger and sadness—even the joy of learning—opting instead to perform a version of himself that aligns with institutional expectations.

Inmates are not only instructed when to eat or sleep but also how to behave and act in response. Over time, this loss of personal agency begins to soak into their sense of identity. Archer remarks that many inmates develop a sense of learned helplessness—a psychological state in which they no longer feel in control of their own lives. This is deeply unsettling, especially for someone like Archer, who was once in a position of public authority and autonomy. The contrast between his previous and current reality intensifies the psychological burden. As self-surveillance deepens, feelings of paranoia and guilt begin to surface. Archer, over and over again, questions whether a casual remark or innocent error might be misunderstood or reported. He starts to distrust the motives of others and becomes wary of trusting anyone fully. This stable mental vigilance is draining, and it reinforces the idea that the prison's most authoritative weapon is not its bars, but the psychological atmosphere of uncertainty and surveillance.

Foucault states that the Panopticon is successful because it creates “a consciousness of permanent visibility.” In this sense, the prisoner is no longer simply restricted by space but by an internalised gaze. Archer's experience chains this claim. He doesn't need to be reprimanded to feel the burden of control. Instead, the structure of the prison encourages him to discipline himself just as effectively as any external guard could. In due course, *A Prison Diary* (2002) sheds light on the less visible, but far more pervasive, aspects of incarceration. It is not purely the loss of freedom that defines the prison experience—it is the erosion of the self under the pressure of regular self-monitoring. Through Archer's candid reflections, we see the human mind adapting to survive even under the most psychologically restricted surroundings. His journey through the prison underscores Foucault's belief that modern power operates not only through brute force, but also through the subtle art of making individuals watch themselves.

Conclusion: Michel Foucault's concepts of Panopticism effectively illustrate how modern structures enforce discipline through internal shadowing; however, it would be naive to view inmates solely as passive subjects of control. Foucault himself acknowledges that wherever there is power, there is also the potential for resistance. In *A Prison Diary*, Jeffrey Archer's experience is not only a record of submission to the incarceration system but also a testament

to the resilience of the human spirit—the ability to adapt and reclaim fragments of autonomy in the face of psychological confinement. He finds subtle but significant ways to resist the internalised mechanisms of power. One of his most important acts of resistance is the very process of writing the diary itself. By documenting his experiences, he transforms himself from a silent observer into an active one. The act of writing allows him to retain a sense of uniqueness beyond the prisoner figure he has been reduced to. It becomes a personal and intellectual liberty where he exercises freedom of thought to reflect and critique—a stark contrast to the passivity the prison environment seeks to enforce.

In the diary, moments of mental confrontation also emerge through acts of emotional assertion. Archer engages in a strong sense of humour and expresses kindness toward fellow inmates. He creates bonds with others, building real friendships that offer mutual support and dignity in an isolating space. These connections serve as small acts of rebellion against the system's intent to dehumanise and isolate individuals. This is constantly negotiated. Archer's entire journey exemplifies this. While he is shaped by the disciplinary structures around him, he also pushes back through a narrative of empathy and reflection. His confrontation might not overturn the system, but it reclaims personal power and highlights the enduring capacity for growth, even in the most restrictive environments.

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