

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****The Watched and the Watching: Surveillance Studies and Arab-American Lives in Aisha Gawad's *Between Two Moons***

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**Abstract**

Aisha Abdel Gawad's *Between Two Moons* presents a nuanced portrayal of Arab-American life in post-9/11 Brooklyn, emphasizing the pervasive effects of surveillance, social scrutiny, and Islamophobia on immigrant communities. This paper employs Surveillance Studies as a theoretical lens to explore how state and societal monitoring shape identity, behavior, and familial relations within the novel. By analyzing the experiences of the twin protagonists, Amira and Lina, alongside their incarcerated brother Sami, the study highlights how the omnipresence of observation—both overt and subtle—affects everyday life, negotiations of faith, and adolescent agency. Furthermore, the paper examines the intersection of race, religion, and gender, showing how surveillance disproportionately targets Muslim communities while simultaneously producing internalized self-monitoring and adaptive behaviors. Through a close reading of Gawad's narrative, this study contributes to broader discussions in literary studies, diaspora studies, and critical security studies, demonstrating how contemporary Arab-American fiction illuminates the lived realities of surveillance and its impact on marginalized populations.

**Keywords:** Arab-American literature, Surveillance studies, Islamophobia, Post-9/11 diaspora, self-monitoring

**Introduction**

Aisha Abdel Gawad is an Egyptian-American writer and educator whose literary work centers on the experiences of Arab and Muslim communities in the United States, particularly in post-9/11 contexts. Raised in Brooklyn, New York, Gawad's narratives often explore themes of identity, faith, family, and the immigrant experience. Her debut novel, *Between Two Moons* (2023), has garnered critical acclaim and several prestigious awards, including the American Book Award, the New York Society Library's Hornblower Award, and a Booklist Best Book of 2023 designation. The novel was also longlisted for the Carol Shields Prize for Fiction, the New American Voices Award, and the Brooklyn Public Library Prize, and was a finalist for the Gotham Book Prize and the Maya Angelou Book Award.

*Between Two Moons* is a poignant exploration of the lives of twin sisters, Amira and Lina, and their family during the holy month of Ramadan in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. The narrative delves into their experiences as they navigate the complexities of faith, identity, and belonging in a post-9/11 world. Gawad describes the novel as "a love letter to Arab and Muslim communities," aiming to provide a nuanced portrayal of their lives and challenges. The novel's acclaim underscores its significance in contemporary literature, offering a window

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into the Muslim-American experience through the eyes of young protagonists grappling with personal and societal expectations.

**Theoretical Framework: Surveillance Studies**

This study employs Surveillance Studies as its theoretical framework to analyze the pervasive effects of surveillance on Arab-American lives as depicted in Gawad's novel. Surveillance Studies examines the ways in which surveillance practices influence individuals and societies, focusing on issues of power, control, and resistance. Key proponents of this field include Michel Foucault, whose concept of the *Panopticon* illustrates how surveillance operates as a mechanism of social control, leading individuals to regulate their own behavior due to the possibility of being observed. David Lyon expanded on Foucault's ideas, emphasizing the role of surveillance in the digital age and its implications for privacy and identity. Kirstie Ball, Kevin D. Haggerty, and David Lyon introduced the concept of the "surveillant assemblage," describing how various surveillance technologies and practices converge to create complex systems of monitoring and control.

The relevance of Surveillance Studies to this study lies in its ability to illuminate how surveillance practices intersect with issues of race, religion, and gender in the context of Arab-American communities. In *Between Two Moons*, Gawad portrays characters who experience both overt and subtle forms of surveillance, from governmental scrutiny to community expectations. These experiences shape their identities and interactions, reflecting broader societal dynamics.

**The Architecture of Surveillance in Bay Ridge**

Gawad opens her novel with a vivid scene that establishes the pervasive nature of surveillance in the Arab-American community. The twins wake to find "the police raiding Abu Jamal's café" with "A dozen men, dressed more like construction workers than cops, loaded boxes of Nescafé instant coffee and Lipton tea into vans" (Gawad 1). This opening scene immediately establishes the atmosphere of surveillance and suspicion that permeates the community, where even the most mundane Arab businesses become subjects of investigation.

The father's reaction to the raid reveals the complex dynamics of surveillance within immigrant communities. When Baba observes the raid, his response oscillates between schadenfreude and anxiety: "Wake up, ya binti," he says to Amira, "Shoofi! They arrest that stupid Libyan" (Gawad 1). Yet when Amira suggests they are "sniffing for bombs or drugs," Baba "blinked rapidly three times, like he does when he can't hear" and "took a step back from the fire escape" (Gawad 2). This moment captures how surveillance creates a paradoxical response within communities—the desire to distance oneself from the targeted individual while simultaneously recognizing one's own vulnerability.

The novel demonstrates how surveillance operates not merely as isolated incidents but as part of a systematic apparatus. The embedded NYPD Intelligence Division Demographics Progress Report that appears later in the novel reveals the methodical nature of post-9/11 surveillance. The report's objective is explicitly stated: to "identify and document places where people of ancestries of interest congregate" (Gawad 139). This clinical language—"ancestries of interest" and "locations of concern"—transforms human communities into data points and potential threats.

**Institutional Surveillance and Its Manifestations**

The novel presents multiple layers of institutional surveillance that reflect real-world post-9/11 security measures. The NYPD report embedded in the text reveals the extent to which law enforcement agencies monitor Muslim communities, documenting everything from business owners to religious practices. The report notes specific details about the Islamic Center of Bay Ridge, observing that "a picture of Al-Aqsa—

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a mosque in Jerusalem—hangs in the lobby" and categorizing it as displaying "Political and inflammatory rhetoric" (Gawad 143). This example illustrates how cultural and religious symbols are reinterpreted through a security lens, transforming expressions of faith and heritage into markers of potential extremism.

The surveillance methodology described in the fictional report demonstrates the comprehensive nature of community monitoring. The document outlines specific "Debriefing Questions" designed to map social networks and identify potential threats, including inquiries about where individuals would "get his hair cut," "eat his meals," and "hang out with friends" (Gawad 145). These questions reveal how surveillance penetrates the most intimate aspects of daily life, transforming routine activities into data points for security analysis.

Gawad also depicts the psychological impact of such comprehensive surveillance on community members. When Abu Jamal is arrested, the community's response at the Arab Center reflects the broader anxiety that permeates Arab-American life: "The caseworkers were making calls, but all they could find out was that he was being held in an undisclosed location, on various undisclosed charges" (Gawad 8). This scene demonstrates how surveillance creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear, where community members can disappear without explanation or due process.

**The Panopticon Effect: Internalized Surveillance and Self-Monitoring**

Foucault's concept of the Panopticon—where the possibility of being watched leads to self-regulation—is vividly illustrated throughout Gawad's novel. The characters constantly modify their behavior based on the assumption that they are being observed. This internalized surveillance manifests most clearly in the protagonist's acute awareness of being watched and the subsequent behavioral modifications.

Amira's awareness of surveillance extends to digital monitoring, reflecting contemporary concerns about online surveillance of Muslim communities. When discussing online activities with Sami, she warns: "Because they'll see it and get suspicious...The police...They watch what Muslims do online" (Gawad 98). This exchange demonstrates how surveillance creates a chilling effect on even private activities, as individuals self-censor based on the assumption of constant monitoring.

The pervasive nature of this self-surveillance is captured in Amira's reflection on physical observation: "I felt eyes all over me. I looked upward and around...There was a camera, one of the black eyes, affixed to the streetlamp in front of me" (Gawad 308). The metaphor of "black eyes" for surveillance cameras recurs throughout the novel, emphasizing the omnipresent nature of observation and its psychological impact on individuals.

The novel also explores how surveillance awareness affects religious practice and community participation. Characters become hypervigilant about their appearance and behavior in public spaces, particularly around religious institutions. This self-monitoring extends to the family's discussions about Sami's imprisonment and eventual release, where they must constantly consider how their conversations and behaviors might be interpreted by outside observers.

**Digital Surveillance and the Collapse of Private Space**

Gawad explores how digital surveillance collapses the boundary between public and private spaces, making even intimate moments subject to observation and judgment. The novel depicts how online activities become sites of potential surveillance, with characters constantly aware that their digital footprints might be monitored. Sami's awareness of online surveillance leads him to warn Amira: "They already know everything about you, Amira...Bad or good—doesn't matter. They already know everything about you" (Gawad 99).

This collapse of privacy is particularly evident in the novel's treatment of social media and digital

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communication. When Lina's intimate photographs are distributed online without her consent, the violation represents not just personal betrayal but also the vulnerability of Muslim women to both surveillance and exploitation. The incident demonstrates how digital platforms can become spaces where surveillance and misogyny intersect, creating multiple layers of vulnerability for Muslim women.

The novel shows how digital surveillance creates new forms of self-censorship. Characters become conscious of their online presence and modify their behavior accordingly. This digital self-monitoring becomes another layer of the surveillance apparatus, where individuals police their own digital expressions to avoid attracting unwanted attention.

**Surveillance and Identity Formation**

One of the novel's most significant contributions to surveillance studies is its exploration of how surveillance shapes identity formation, particularly for young Arab-Americans. The twin protagonists develop different strategies for navigating the surveillance environment, illustrating how surveillance pressure can produce divergent responses even within the same family.

Amira's response to surveillance is characterized by hypervigilance and attempts at invisibility. She becomes acutely aware of how her actions might be interpreted and develops strategies to minimize her visibility: "I wanted to run away from all the eyes, to turn back into the safety of our dark stairwell and into our apartment" (Gawad 308). Her desire to become invisible represents one common response to surveillance pressure—the attempt to escape notice by minimizing one's presence in public spaces.

The novel also explores how surveillance affects religious identity and practice. Amira's internal conflict about wearing hijab while also wearing shorts reflects the multiple surveillance systems she navigates: "Which are you?" her mother asks, "gesturing to my covered hair and my bare legs" (Gawad 149). This question encapsulates the complex identity negotiations required when living under multiple forms of observation and judgment.

Lina's response to surveillance pressure manifests differently, through performative visibility and risk-taking behavior. Her pursuit of modeling and nightclub culture can be read as an attempt to assert agency and control her own image, rather than allowing surveillance to define her identity. However, the novel shows how this strategy also creates vulnerabilities, as her attempt to control her own representation ultimately fails when her intimate photographs are distributed without consent.

**The Intersectionality of Surveillance**

Gawad's novel demonstrates how surveillance operates at the intersection of multiple identity categories—race, religion, gender, and class. The experiences of the female protagonists illustrate how Muslim women face both religious surveillance from within their communities and racialized surveillance from state institutions. This intersectional surveillance creates particular challenges for young Muslim women trying to develop their own identities and agency.

The class dimensions of surveillance are evident in the novel's portrayal of the working-class Arab-American community in Bay Ridge. The NYPD surveillance report focuses heavily on small businesses, community centers, and other spaces associated with working-class immigrant life. The detailed cataloging of establishments like "Tunis Tea Room" and "Holy Land Books" suggests that surveillance is not equally distributed across all economic classes but concentrates on spaces associated with immigrant and working-class communities.

The novel also explores how surveillance affects family dynamics and intergenerational relationships. Parents who themselves live under surveillance must navigate the challenge of protecting their children while

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also preparing them for a world where they will be constantly observed and potentially suspected. This creates complex family dynamics where love, protection, and surveillance become intertwined.

**Community Surveillance and Social Control**

Beyond state surveillance, Gawad explores how communities develop their own surveillance systems as a response to external pressure. The novel shows how the Arab-American community in Bay Ridge engages in its own forms of monitoring and social control, partly as a protective mechanism against outside scrutiny. Community members become aware that their actions reflect on the entire community and modify their behavior accordingly.

This community surveillance is evident in how characters discuss and judge each other's behavior. When community members speculate about Abu Jamal's arrest, their conversations reveal how the community polices itself: "I heard they shipped his ass straight to Guantanamo," one character speculates, while another suggests "embezzlement and tax evasion" (Gawad 7). These conversations show how community members internalize surveillance narratives and apply them to their own neighbors.

However, the novel also depicts how community surveillance can become a form of protection and resistance. When Sami is arrested, the community mobilizes collectively, chanting "Feyn al-walad? Where is the boy?" (Gawad 312). This collective response illustrates how surveillance can also operate as a form of community defense, where the act of watching becomes a way of protecting vulnerable community members from state violence.

**Resistance and Agency Within Surveillance Systems**

Despite the pervasive nature of surveillance in the novel, Gawad also depicts various forms of resistance and agency. Characters find ways to maintain their humanity and dignity even within heavily monitored environments. The relationship between Sami and Imam Tariq represents one form of connection that develops despite the suspicious circumstances of their meeting and the constraints of the surveillance environment.

Religious practice itself becomes a form of resistance in the novel. Despite the surveillance of mosques and religious activities, characters continue to practice their faith and maintain their cultural traditions. The holy month of Ramadan, which frames the novel's narrative, represents a form of temporal resistance—a time when the community comes together despite external pressures and maintains its spiritual and cultural practices.

The novel shows how resistance to surveillance often takes subtle forms. Characters develop ways of communicating and maintaining relationships that exist outside official scrutiny. These forms of everyday resistance demonstrate that surveillance systems, while powerful, are not totalizing in their effects and that human agency persists even under conditions of intense monitoring.

**The Trauma of Surveillance**

Gawad effectively portrays the psychological and emotional trauma created by constant surveillance. Characters develop anxiety, paranoia, and hypervigilance as responses to the surveillance environment. The persistent awareness of being watched creates what might be called "surveillance trauma"—a condition where the anticipation of observation and judgment affects mental health and well-being.

The trauma of surveillance is particularly evident in the family's response to Sami's imprisonment and eventual release. The novel shows how incarceration becomes a form of ultimate surveillance, where every aspect of life is monitored and controlled. When Sami returns home, the family must readjust to his presence while also managing their awareness that his activities may continue to be monitored.

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The intergenerational transmission of surveillance anxiety is another important aspect of the novel's exploration of trauma. Parents' experiences with surveillance affect their children's understanding of their place in American society. This transmission of fear and vigilance across generations demonstrates how surveillance systems create lasting damage that extends beyond their immediate targets.

**Surveillance and the Performance of Normalcy**

The novel explores how surveillance creates pressure to perform normalcy and respectability. Characters become acutely aware of how their behavior might be interpreted and work to present themselves as non-threatening and assimilated. This performance of normalcy requires constant vigilance and self-monitoring, as individuals must constantly evaluate whether their actions might be perceived as suspicious. The pressure to appear "normal" is particularly evident in religious contexts, where characters must navigate between authentic religious expression and the awareness that their practices are being observed and potentially misinterpreted. The novel shows how this creates a double consciousness, where individuals must simultaneously be themselves and be aware of how they are perceived by potentially hostile observers. This performance of normalcy also extends to economic and social behaviors. Characters are aware that their consumer choices, social associations, and even leisure activities might be interpreted through a security lens. This creates a pervasive self-consciousness that affects even the most mundane aspects of daily life.

**Conclusion**

Aisha Abdel Gawad's *Between Two Moons* provides a nuanced and powerful exploration of how surveillance systems shape the lives of Arab-American communities in the post-9/11 era. Through the experiences of the twin protagonists and their family, the novel illuminates the multiple layers of surveillance—state, community, and self-imposed—that define contemporary Muslim-American existence. The novel's contribution to surveillance studies lies in its detailed portrayal of how surveillance operates not just as a system of control but as a force that shapes identity formation, family relationships, and community dynamics. Gawad shows how surveillance creates what might be called a "surveillance subjectivity"—a way of being in the world that is fundamentally defined by the awareness of being watched.

The embedded NYPD surveillance report within the novel serves as a particularly powerful literary device, demonstrating the systematic and comprehensive nature of post-9/11 surveillance targeting Muslim communities. By including this fictional document, Gawad makes visible the bureaucratic apparatus that transforms human communities into data points and potential threats. The novel's exploration of resistance and agency within surveillance systems offers hope while acknowledging the very real constraints that surveillance places on individual and community life. Characters find ways to maintain their humanity, their relationships, and their cultural practices despite the pervasive monitoring they experience.

*Between Two Moons* ultimately demonstrates that surveillance is not merely a security practice but a form of social control that shapes how marginalized communities understand themselves and their place in American society. The novel's literary achievement lies in its ability to make the abstract concepts of surveillance studies concrete and emotionally resonant, showing how theoretical frameworks translate into lived experience.

Through its detailed portrayal of Arab-American life under surveillance, the novel contributes to broader discussions about security, democracy, and belonging in contemporary America. It challenges readers to consider the human costs of surveillance systems while also celebrating the resilience and agency of communities targeted by such systems.

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Ultimately, *Between Two Moons* succeeds in making the invisible visible—revealing the pervasive nature of surveillance systems while also celebrating the humanity and resilience of those who live within them. The novel's achievement lies in its ability to transform surveillance from an abstract concept into a lived reality, showing how systems of watching and being watched shape every aspect of contemporary Arab-American life.

The novel's focus on young protagonists is particularly significant, as it shows how surveillance shapes the coming-of-age experience for Muslim-American youth. The different responses of the twin sisters to surveillance pressure illustrate the range of strategies available to young people navigating these systems, while also showing the constraints that surveillance places on identity formation and self-expression.

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