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THE POLITICS OF WATCHING: ARAB-AMERICAN LIFE IN AISHA GAWAD'S BETWEEN TWO MOONS

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ABSTRACT

Aisha Abdel Gawad's Between Two Moons offers a layered representation of Arab-American existence in post-9/11 Brooklyn, foregrounding the profound influence of surveillance, public scrutiny, and Islamophobia on immigrant lives. This essay adopts the framework of Surveillance Studies to investigate the ways in which state and community monitoring shape subjectivity, social conduct, and family dynamics in the novel. Focusing on the twin sisters Amira and Lina, as well as their imprisoned brother Sami, the discussion reveals how visible and invisible forms of observation permeate daily experiences, religious negotiations, and the assertion of adolescent independence. The analysis also underscores the entanglement of race, religion, and gender, demonstrating how Muslim communities are rendered hyper-visible to surveillance while simultaneously internalizing mechanisms of self-policing and behavioral adjustment. By closely engaging with Gawad's text, the paper situates her narrative within broader debates in literary criticism, diaspora studies, and critical security studies, showing how contemporary Arab-American literature illuminates the everyday consequences of surveillance on marginalized groups.

KEYWORDS: Surveillance Studies, Islamophobia, Social scrutiny, Identity formation, Adolescent agency

INTRODUCTION

Aisha Abdel Gawad, an Egyptian-American novelist and educator, has established herself as a significant voice in contemporary American literature through her focus on Arab and Muslim experiences, especially within the fraught atmosphere of post-9/11 America. Growing up in Brooklyn, New York, she developed a perspective that informs her writing, where questions of identity, faith, cultural heritage, and the challenges of immigrant life recur as central themes. Her debut novel, *Between Two Moons* (2023), has received widespread recognition, earning the American Book Award, the New York Society Library's Hornblower Award, and a place on *Booklist*'s "Best Books of 2023." It was further distinguished as a finalist for the Gotham Book Prize and the Maya Angelou Book Award, while also being longlisted for the Carol Shields Prize for Fiction, the New American Voices Award, and the Brooklyn Public Library Prize.

Set during the month of Ramadan in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn—a neighborhood with a vibrant Arab-American community—*Between Two Moons* offers an intimate portrait of twin sisters,

Amira and Lina, as well as their family, whose lives unfold amid the cultural and political tensions of a post-9/11 landscape. Through their struggles with faith, identity, and belonging, Gawad captures the layered negotiations young Muslim Americans face as they balance personal aspirations with familial expectations and societal scrutiny. She has described the novel as "a love letter to Arab and Muslim communities," reflecting her intent to counter reductive or stereotypical portrayals by presenting a deeply nuanced and empathetic vision of Muslim-American life. The novel's critical acclaim underscores both its literary achievement and its cultural importance, as it amplifies marginalized voices and illuminates the everyday realities of communities often rendered invisible or misrepresented in mainstream discourse.

Beyond its immediate narrative, *Between Two Moons* resonates within broader conversations in Arab-American and diasporic literature, situating Gawad among writers such as Laila Lalami, Mohsin Hamid, and Hisham Matar, who foreground the complexities of Muslim and immigrant identities in Western contexts. What distinguishes Gawad's work is her focus on adolescence and the intimate domestic sphere, where the pressures of surveillance, Islamophobia, and cultural negotiation intersect with the universal struggles of growing up. By centering the perspectives of young protagonists navigating both familial obligations and systemic prejudice, Gawad challenges readers to confront the subtle yet pervasive ways in which national security discourses and racialized scrutiny shape ordinary lives. Her narrative strategy not only humanizes the experiences of Arab and Muslim Americans but also contributes to the ongoing diversification of American literature, ensuring that stories of marginalized communities are recognized as integral to the national cultural fabric.

This research situates its analysis within the field of Surveillance Studies in order to interrogate the pervasive presence of surveillance in Aisha Abdel Gawad's *Between Two Moons*. As an interdisciplinary field, Surveillance Studies investigates how mechanisms of observation whether institutional, technological, or social—affect individuals, communities, and structures of power. Central to this discourse is Michel Foucault's theorization of the Panopticon, which demonstrates how the mere possibility of being watched produces internalized discipline, compelling subjects to regulate their own actions even in the absence of direct observation (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*). Extending Foucault's insights to contemporary contexts, David Lyon underscores the intensified reach of surveillance in the digital and post-9/11 eras, particularly its implications for questions of privacy, identity, and citizenship (Lyon, *Surveillance Studies: An Overview*). Building on this trajectory, scholars such as Kirstie Ball, Kevin D. Haggerty, and Lyon articulate the notion of the "surveillant assemblage," a network of interlocking technologies and practices that collectively construct individuals as visible, traceable, and governable subjects (Haggerty and Ericson, "The Surveillant Assemblage").

The Spatial Politics of Surveillance in Bay Ridge

Aisha Abdel Gawad opens *Between Two Moons* with a striking scene that foregrounds the omnipresence of surveillance in Arab-American life. The twins awake to witness "the police raiding Abu Jamal's café" as "a dozen men, dressed more like construction workers than cops, loaded boxes of Nescafé instant coffee and Lipton tea into vans" (Gawad 1). The imagery here is deliberately jarring: ordinary commodities become suspicious, and a neighborhood café is transformed into a site of criminal investigation. By staging surveillance at the level of the mundane, Gawad establishes an atmosphere of suspicion that saturates the Bay Ridge community, where no space whether domestic or commercial remains exempt from scrutiny. As Simone Browne observes, surveillance "is productive of norms around who is constructed as the dangerous other, who is made visible, and how" (Browne 9). The raid exemplifies this logic, where consumer goods and community spaces are re-coded as dangerous signs.

The father's response to the raid reveals the ambivalent psychology of surveillance within immigrant communities. Baba's reaction oscillates between mockery and unease: "Wake up, ya binti," he tells Amira, "Shoofi! They arrest that stupid Libyan" (Gawad 1). His words suggest a desire to distance himself from the targeted man, affirming his family's innocence by designating

Abu Jamal as "other." Yet the moment Amira speculates that the police are "sniffing for bombs or drugs," Baba retreats into silence, "blinking rapidly three times, like he does when he can't hear," before stepping back from the fire escape (Gawad 2). This hesitation underscores a paradox: while surveillance encourages individuals to disavow those under suspicion, it simultaneously reminds them of their own precarity, cultivating a perpetual fear that they, too, may become subjects of investigation. As David Lyon explains, surveillance often produces "compliance through uncertainty," instilling both conformity and fear within targeted populations (Lyon 56).

Gawad further demonstrates that surveillance in Bay Ridge is not random but systematic, embedded in bureaucratic structures that meticulously target Arab and Muslim communities. Midway through the novel, she incorporates a fictionalized NYPD Intelligence Division Demographics Progress Report, a device that underscores how state power reduces human communities to statistics and categories of suspicion. The report explicitly seeks to "identify and document places where people of ancestries of interest congregate" (Gawad 139). Phrases such as "ancestries of interest" and "locations of concern" exemplify the cold, bureaucratic language through which surveillance recasts cultural presence as potential threat. Evelyn Alsultany has argued that Arab and Muslim Americans are often "burdened with hypervisibility as potential terrorists" (Alsultany 21), a dynamic that the fictional report renders starkly clear.

This apparatus extends to the monitoring of religious institutions, with the report noting details about the Islamic Center of Bay Ridge. It records the presence of "a picture of Al-Aqsa—a mosque in Jerusalem—hangs in the lobby" and concludes that the site exhibits "Political and inflammatory rhetoric" (Gawad 143). In this instance, a sacred image is stripped of its devotional significance and reframed through a security lens as evidence of radicalism. Such distortions highlight how Arab and Muslim communities are subjected to hermeneutics of suspicion, where symbols of faith and heritage are read as codes of subversion. As Moustafa Bayoumi remarks, Muslim Americans "live under a presumption of guilt until proven innocent," their cultural symbols reframed as security threats (Bayoumi 15).

The Progress Report also illustrates the granular invasiveness of surveillance. Its "Debriefing Questions" seek to chart every detail of a subject's life: where one gets a haircut, eats meals, or socializes with friends (Gawad 145). In reducing ordinary activities to data points, surveillance colonizes the most intimate dimensions of daily existence, rendering the community both knowable and controllable through an elaborate architecture of observation. Foucault's analysis of panopticism is particularly relevant here: surveillance does not merely watch but "produces subjects by rendering their lives perpetually visible and recordable" (Foucault 201).

Finally, Gawad underscores the psychic toll such practices exact on the community. When Abu Jamal disappears into detention, uncertainty spreads like contagion: "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 lack of transparency epitomizes the climate of fear and mistrust that surveillance engenders. People vanish without clear charges or due process, reinforcing the sense that Arab-American life is perpetually vulnerable to arbitrary state power. Nadine Naber contends that Arab Americans inhabit a "suspended state of belonging" in which citizenship offers little protection against racialized criminalization (Naber 42). Gawad dramatizes this condition, showing how surveillance enacts both material and psychological displacement, creating confusion, alienation, and anxiety that reverberate throughout immigrant communities.

Digital Surveillance and the Erosion of Private Space

Foucault's notion of the Panopticon where the very possibility of being observed induces self-discipline—is powerfully dramatized in Aisha Abdel Gawad's *Between Two Moons*. The novel illustrates how surveillance is not limited to external monitoring but is internalized by characters who alter their actions under the assumption that they are always visible. This psychological dimension of surveillance is most evident in the ways Amira and her family regulate their daily lives, embodying the Foucauldian idea that control becomes most effective when it is self-imposed. As Michel Foucault himself observes, the Panopticon works not by force but by

producing "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201).

Amira's vigilance extends beyond physical spaces into the digital realm, reflecting contemporary anxieties about the online surveillance of Muslim communities in post-9/11 America. When she cautions her brother Sami against online activities, she warns, "Because they'll see it and get suspicious…The police…They watch what Muslims do online" (Gawad 98). Here, the chilling effect of digital surveillance becomes evident: individuals censor themselves not because they are explicitly targeted in the moment, but because of the awareness that their virtual traces may already be subject to scrutiny. As Zuboff explains in her critique of the digital economy, surveillance capitalism depends on "anticipatory conformity," where subjects adapt their behavior in anticipation of being monitored (Zuboff 2019, 327).

This sense of hyper-visibility is echoed in Amira's physical experiences of surveillance in the neighborhood. Reflecting on her own unease, she observes: "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). By describing cameras as "black eyes," Gawad underscores the intrusive and dehumanizing quality of constant observation. The recurring metaphor reinforces the novel's panoptic atmosphere, where surveillance is both omnipresent and psychologically oppressive. As Simone Browne argues in *Dark Matters*, surveillance "produces a racializing visibility" that marks certain bodies as inherently suspect (Browne 7).

The novel also demonstrates how this awareness permeates religious life and communal participation. Families and individuals alike become cautious about how they appear in public near mosques or community centers, recognizing that religious symbols or practices may be misinterpreted as signs of extremism. Even within the private sphere, discussions about Sami's imprisonment and potential release are shaped by the fear of external interpretation. Surveillance thus extends into intimate spaces, structuring both conversation and behavior under the shadow of suspicion. Naber emphasizes that Arab Americans often inhabit a "politics of visibility" where their very presence in public life is coded through suspicion (Naber 43).

Moreover, Gawad shows how digital surveillance destabilizes the traditional boundaries between public and private life. Sami's reminder to his sister "They already know everything about you, Amira…Bad or good—doesn't matter. They already know everything about you" (Gawad 99)—captures the sense of inevitability surrounding state monitoring. Online presence becomes a site of vulnerability where every click, post, or message can be weaponized against individuals or communities. Lyon has noted that digital surveillance enables "social sorting," a process by which personal data becomes the basis for risk categorization and profiling (Lyon 63). Gawad dramatizes how this sorting transforms everyday acts of communication into potential liabilities.

This collapse of privacy is rendered most poignantly through Lina's experience when her private photographs are leaked online without her consent. The violation is not only personal but emblematic of the precarious position of Muslim women, who find themselves subject to multiple intersecting forms of control: digital exploitation, patriarchal judgment, and systemic surveillance. As Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai argue, Muslim women's bodies are "sites where security discourses are inscribed," making them doubly vulnerable to both gendered and racialized forms of surveillance (Puar and Rai 125). Gawad's novel underscores how surveillance is not neutral but deeply gendered, amplifying the risks faced by women within already marginalized communities.

Finally, the novel captures how digital technologies create new regimes of self-policing. The characters become acutely aware of their online identities, moderating what they post, whom they interact with, and how they present themselves in digital spaces. In doing so, they participate in their own regulation, a dynamic that reflects what David Lyon terms the "social sorting" of surveillance in the digital age. Gawad's narrative thus reveals how the panoptic gaze mutates in the twenty-first century: it is no longer confined to watchtowers and cameras but embedded in everyday technologies, transforming individuals into both the subjects and agents of their own surveillance.

Surveillance, Subjectivity, and the Construction of Identity

One of the most compelling interventions that Aisha Abdel Gawad's *Between Two Moons* makes in the field of surveillance studies is its sustained exploration of how surveillance shapes the processes of identity formation, particularly for second-generation Arab-American youth. The novel underscores that surveillance does not produce a uniform response; rather, it generates multiple, sometimes contradictory, strategies for negotiating visibility and belonging, even within the same family. The twin protagonists, Amira and Lina, serve as mirrors for these divergent modes of adaptation, dramatizing the psychological and social consequences of living under constant observation. As Stuart Hall has argued, identity is not fixed but is "formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed" (Hall 225). Gawad's twins demonstrate how surveillance constitutes one of the most powerful modes of such representation.

Amira embodies a response characterized by hypervigilance and a desire for invisibility. She internalizes the suspicion directed at her community and becomes acutely self-conscious of how her every gesture might be misinterpreted. In one moment of acute anxiety, she confesses: "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 instinct to retreat illustrates a common survival strategy among marginalized groups under surveillance: to reduce visibility as a means of reducing risk. Yet this invisibility comes at the cost of self-expression and public agency, narrowing the possibilities for identity performance. David Lyon emphasizes this paradox, noting that "surveillance operates through the creation of categories that limit identity choices while demanding conformity" (Lyon 97).

The pressures of surveillance extend into the domain of religious identity. Amira's ambivalence about wearing the hijab while also dressing in shorts exposes the competing regimes of scrutiny she must navigate. Her mother's probing question "Which are you?" she asks, gesturing to Amira's covered hair and bare legs (Gawad 149)—captures the complex negotiations required when individuals inhabit overlapping systems of observation: the expectations of family and religious community on the one hand, and the racialized gaze of the broader society on the other. Jasbir Puar notes that Muslim women's bodies have become "critical sites through which national belonging and suspicion are adjudicated" (Puar 190). Gawad's depiction of Amira dramatizes this dynamic, showing how surveillance infiltrates even intimate family dialogues.

By contrast, Lina responds to surveillance through performative visibility and risk-taking. Her embrace of modeling and nightlife culture represents a bid to seize agency over her own image rather than allowing external gazes to define her. Yet this strategy is equally fraught. When her intimate photographs are circulated online without consent, Lina's attempt to control her self-representation collapses into exploitation, underscoring how women's bodies—particularly Muslim women's—remain sites of vulnerability in both physical and digital spaces. Roksana Badruddoja argues that Muslim women often become "hypervisible objects of scrutiny whose bodies are simultaneously fetishized and policed" (Badruddoja 74). Lina's trajectory reveals this bind: visibility offers empowerment but also heightens exposure to violation.

The novel further foregrounds the intersectional nature of surveillance. The twin sisters' experiences reveal how Arab-American Muslim women are doubly targeted: by racialized state apparatuses that cast suspicion on their communities, and by communal or familial expectations that enforce moral and religious codes. Surveillance here functions simultaneously as racial profiling, gender regulation, and cultural policing. Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality is vividly enacted in these characters' lives, showing how overlapping systems of oppression converge to produce unique challenges for identity development and agency (Crenshaw 1244).

Class dynamics add yet another layer to this picture. Gawad's incorporation of the NYPD surveillance report highlights how working-class immigrant spaces in Bay Ridge—cafés, bookstores, and community centers—become prime sites of monitoring. Establishments like "Tunis Tea Room" and "Holy Land Books" are cataloged not as spaces of cultural and social life

but as "locations of concern," revealing how surveillance disproportionately targets working-class immigrant geographies (Gawad 139). Louise Amoore observes that surveillance infrastructures often "map inequality onto particular spaces, translating classed and racialized communities into risk categories" (Amoore 25). This classed distribution of scrutiny suggests that wealthier or more assimilated Arab-Americans may escape the intensity of state observation that saturates working-class neighborhoods.

Finally, the novel underscores the profound effect of surveillance on family relationships and intergenerational dynamics. Parents, already accustomed to the pressures of being watched, attempt to shield their children while simultaneously instilling caution, knowing that surveillance will inevitably structure their children's futures. Baba's own ambivalence—mocking a neighbor's arrest yet recoiling at its implications—captures this paradox. Love and protection, in such contexts, cannot be disentangled from the imperative to prepare children for a lifetime of suspicion. As Evelyn Alsultany notes, post-9/11 Arab-American families must navigate a "double consciousness of care," simultaneously nurturing and preparing for state scrutiny (Alsultany 49). Family intimacy thus becomes bound up with the logic of surveillance, illustrating how deeply it infiltrates not only public life but also the most private bonds of care and belonging.

Surveillance and the Construction of Normalcy

Gawad's *Between Two Moons* powerfully illustrates the psychological and emotional toll of living under constant surveillance, where the omnipresent gaze produces a state of chronic anxiety, paranoia, and hypervigilance. The novel depicts what can be termed *surveillance trauma*—a condition in which the anticipation of being monitored or misjudged erodes mental health and destabilizes one's sense of security. As Didier Bigo argues, the security state produces "ban-opticon" effects, wherein exclusion and inclusion are managed through the constant anticipation of threat (Bigo 46). This trauma is not tied only to direct encounters with state power but becomes embedded in everyday life, shaping how individuals think, feel, and move through their communities.

The most explicit expression of this trauma emerges in the family's response to Sami's incarceration and return. Prison functions as the most extreme form of surveillance, in which every aspect of daily existence is regulated, controlled, and documented. Sami's eventual release does not mark freedom but instead reveals how surveillance continues to shadow him outside of prison walls. His family, already anxious about their own visibility, must recalibrate their lives around the unspoken possibility that Sami remains under watch. As Loïc Wacquant observes, incarceration does not end at the prison gate but "spills over into family life, work, and community standing," extending penal surveillance into everyday existence (Wacquant 117). Thus, incarceration becomes not a closed chapter but a lingering structure of observation, extending surveillance into the domestic sphere.

Equally significant is the intergenerational transmission of surveillance anxiety. Parents, having endured years of racialized scrutiny, pass down strategies of caution to their children, shaping how the younger generation perceives itself within American society. What emerges is a legacy of fear and vigilance, inherited as much as learned, which underscores how surveillance inflicts damage that ripples across time. Nadine Naber points out that Arab-American families, particularly post-9/11, "live in the shadow of suspicion that reshapes cultural transmission itself" (Naber 58). The novel demonstrates that surveillance does not end with its immediate targets but perpetuates trauma across generational lines, embedding itself in collective memory and identity.

Alongside this trauma, Gawad traces the burden of performing normalcy. Characters are compelled to regulate their behavior in order to appear respectable, assimilated, and above suspicion. Such performances demand constant self-scrutiny: every gesture, expression, or decision must be evaluated for how it might be perceived by outsiders. This performance of normalcy is not voluntary but survival-driven, a strategy of self-preservation in an environment where deviation from prescribed norms may invite suspicion or sanction. As Evelyn Alsultany observes, Arab and Muslim Americans are often forced into the role of "good" or "bad" minorities,

pressured to embody a respectability politics that reaffirms their loyalty to the state (Alsultany 33).

Religious life becomes one of the most fraught arenas for such performances. Characters are acutely aware that authentic religious practices may be misread as signs of radicalization. The act of wearing hijab, praying in public, or participating in mosque activities carries with it the double burden of devotion and self-consciousness. Gawad dramatizes what W. E. B. Du Bois famously termed *double consciousness*: the experience of simultaneously inhabiting one's identity while also seeing oneself through the eyes of a hostile or suspicious observer (Du Bois 5). This double consciousness is sharpened under surveillance, where misinterpretation carries not only social but also legal and political consequences.

This pressure extends beyond religion into economic, social, and even recreational domains. From where individuals shop and eat to whom they associate with in public, everyday actions are refracted through the lens of surveillance. Consumer choices, leisure activities, and casual social interactions become data points that may be interpreted as markers of identity and potential risk. David Lyon notes that such "data doubles" create a reality in which one's life is endlessly scrutinized and classified, shaping future treatment and opportunity (Lyon 112). The novel thus exposes how the demand to perform normalcy infiltrates the most ordinary aspects of daily life, making self-monitoring an unavoidable condition of existence in a surveilled community.

CONCLUSION

Aisha Abdel Gawad's *Between Two Moons* offers a profoundly nuanced examination of how surveillance infiltrates and structures the everyday lives of Arab-American communities in the post-9/11 era. By tracing the experiences of twin sisters Amira and Lina alongside their family, the novel reveals the multiple and overlapping layers of surveillance—state-driven, community-based, and self-imposed—that define the social realities of Muslim Americans today. Simone Browne reminds us that surveillance "is not an innovation of the post-9/11 era but a practice that is historically and racially saturated" (Browne 9). Gawad situates Arab-American experience firmly within this longer genealogy of racialized observation.

What makes the novel particularly significant for surveillance studies is its demonstration that surveillance is not merely a mechanism of external control but also a force that reshapes subjectivity, kinship, and communal belonging. Gawad illustrates how surveillance fosters what may be termed a *surveillance subjectivity*—a mode of existence in which awareness of being watched becomes central to one's sense of self. This dynamic is captured not only through the twins' contrasting responses to scrutiny but also through the family's ongoing negotiation of visibility, faith, and safety. As David Lyon observes, "surveillance today is not only about watching but about shaping the ways in which people conduct their everyday lives" (Lyon 65).

Ultimately, *Between Two Moons* illuminates the profound human costs of surveillance while also testifying to the resilience of those who endure it. It challenges readers to confront the ways in which security discourses distort democracy and belonging in contemporary America, and it insists that the lived experiences of marginalized communities be placed at the center of these conversations. By making the invisible visible, Gawad not only critiques the pervasive reach of surveillance but also affirms the humanity, complexity, and endurance of Arab-American life in the shadow of suspicion.

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