



Trauma, Identity, and Agency in Jenni Fagan's *The Panopticon* (2012): A Study of Marginalized Youth in Contemporary Literature

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Abstract

This article examines how Jenni Fagan's *The Panopticon* portrays the traumatic experiences of marginalized youth subjected to institutional surveillance and social exclusion. Drawing on trauma theory, Foucauldian panopticism, and resilience studies, it analyzes the ways trauma fragments identity while institutional labeling reinforces marginalization and stigma. Through the character of Anais Hendricks, the study highlights the psychological effects of abuse, abandonment, and disciplinary control within the care system. It further demonstrates how storytelling, imagination, memory, and social bonds function as survival mechanisms and forms of resistance. Ultimately, the article argues that despite oppression and fragmentation, marginalized youth can negotiate agency and reconstruct identity through resilience and creative self-definition.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Trauma, Marginalization, Identity Construction, Surveillance, Agency, Resilience

1. Introduction

Contemporary literature serves as a mirror of society. As such, it takes a critical look at societal changes and issues such as social inequality, marginalized youth, and the trauma experienced by young offenders. By exploring the lived experiences of this highly vulnerable segment of society, contemporary literature lays

bare the close relationship between trauma, marginalization, social exclusion, and the quest for identity. As Oanh points out, “*Looking deeply into trauma discourse, one can clearly see traces of marginalization of non-centered values that are subject to violent repression*” (2021: 105) [1].

It is within this literary framework that Jenni Fagan’s *The Panopticon* is situated. In this novel, the author retraces the life of Anais Hendrick, a teenager placed in a juvenile care institution known as the Panopticon. Through her story, Fagan displays the effects of trauma, particularly the psychological impact of abandonment, abuse, violence, and institutional control of marginalized young offenders. According to Young, “*Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life*” (1990: 53) [2]. Duchak further explains that “*Marginalization combines social exclusion and discrimination*” (2014: 72) [3]. Jenni Fagan’s debut novel, therefore, engages with psychological trauma and social marginalization by foregrounding the repercussions of traumatic experiences upon the human mind.

The word “*trauma*” originates from the Greek word “*Traumatikos*” through the Latin ‘*trauma*’, meaning a serious bodily wound. In contemporary usage, trauma refers to emotional or psychological injury caused by great distressing experiences. Abubakar explains that “*Trauma has more psychological effects than physical*” and may “*lead to a mental and even physical breakdown if not taken care of*” (2017: 1) [4]. Consequently, Contemporary literature has increasingly focused on trauma narratives in order to expose the psychological damage suffered by neglected and wounded individuals. Asati and Tiwari maintain that:

In written works, literature trauma explores psychological or emotional distress, often portraying characters’ traumatic experiences or examining how these themes affect readers. This approach facilitates engagement with the complex and often painful aspects of human existence, which can serve as a cathartic experience for both writers and readers, offering a safe space to process and understand difficult emotions (2025: 37) [5].

Building on the theoretical perspectives drawn from trauma studies, Foucauldian theories of surveillance, and discussions of agency, this article examines how *The Panopticon* portrays the experiences of marginalized youth confronted with institutional violence and social trauma. More specifically, it analyses how trauma, surveillance, stigmatization, and marginalization shape identity formation while simultaneously generating forms of resistance and agency. This article argues that institutional marginalization and trauma do not merely fragment identity; they also create conditions through which marginalized youth negotiate alternative forms of agency and self-definition. The methodological framework combines close textual and thematic analysis with theoretical insights from trauma studies, Foucauldian theories of surveillance, and resilience theory.

The close-reading method focuses on passages that explicitly portray institutional surveillance, traumatic memory, stigmatization, and coping strategies, as

these constitute the novel's main thematic concerns. The selected textual excerpts are not intended to provide an exhaustive reading of the novel but rather to illustrate representative moments in which the interaction between institutional power, psychological trauma, identity formation, and resilience is most clearly articulated. Each section of the article examines carefully chosen narrative episodes, dialogues, and descriptive passages that exemplify a specific analytical claim. Quotations are therefore selected according to their thematic relevance and interpretive significance, allowing the analysis to demonstrate how Fagan's narrative techniques, including first-person narration, fragmented chronology, interior monologue, and symbolic imagery, construct the lived experience of marginalized youth while supporting the article's broader theoretical argument.

Although these theoretical perspectives originate from different disciplinary traditions, they operate in a complementary manner throughout this study. Taken together, these approaches establish a coherent analytical trajectory moving from the production of trauma through institutional and disciplinary power to the emergence of resilience, identity reconstruction, and self-definition. This interdisciplinary framework enables a comprehensive reading of *The Panopticon* by demonstrating that trauma, surveillance, and resilience are not isolated phenomena but interconnected processes that shape the lived experiences of marginalized youth within institutional care.

This work is organized into four main parts. The first part examines surveillance and institutional control within the panopticon system. The second analyzes trauma and the fragmentation of the self. The third explores stigma, labeling, and identity construction. The final part investigates survival mechanisms and coping strategies developed by marginalized youth.

2. The Architecture of Power: Surveillance and Institutional Control

Coined in the 1780s by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, the term "panopticism" or "panopticon" originally referred to a prison design intended to facilitate constant surveillance. Michel Foucault later popularized the concept in *Discipline and Punish*, first published in 1975, where he explored the relationship between surveillance, discipline, and power. In it, Foucault establishes a close connection between discipline and coercion, between discipline and the subjugation of man:

The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible (Foucault 1995: 170) [6].

A true archetype of discipline, the concept of panopticism has inspired many writers. Fagan fictionalizes this panoptic system through the institution of the Panopticon, a reformatory space where surveillance, coercion, and discipline dominate

the lives of marginalized youth. Panoptic architecture evokes the exaggerated image of a place that appears to the character as an immense and strange “Tower of Babel” with a central tower. It is an architecture that provides a panoramic view of the entire prison world, resembling a concentration camp, an open-air prison. From the opening pages of the novel, the reader is introduced to the oppressive architecture of the institution.

The Panopticon looms in a big crescent at the end of the log driveway. It’s four floors high, two turrets on either side, and a peak in the middle—that’ll be where the watchtower is... This whole building is in a big curve, like the shape of a C and along the curve on the top are six locked black doors. The two landings below have another six identical doors on each floor, but they’ve been painted white, and none of them are closed... Right in the middle of the C shape, as high as the top floor is the watchtower (Fagan 2013: 2, 7) [7].

In reality, this architectural form immediately aligns with the panoptic perspective of Bentham and Foucault, who view the prison as the primary means of reforming and disciplining citizens; an environment of constraint and a new form of social molding capable of enforcing the code of conduct dictated by a disciplinary archetype. Through her striking description of panoptic architecture, Fagan sketches the outline of a modern prison whose fortress-like, monumental scale suggests an enclosed space. Confinement signifies control over space and creates a contrast between natural and urban space. The panoptic architecture plays a crucial role in the narrative, as it evokes a prison and represents power. Anais immediately recognizes the prison-like nature of the institution when she remarks, “*It looks like a prison. It was one, once. And a nuthouse*” (Fagan: 5) [7]. The panoptic system thus put in place has a direct or indirect effect on the inmates, thereby imposing a certain discipline. Concentrating all young offenders in a single large building allows the institution to monitor everyone at once. Visibility becomes a mechanism of control. “*That surveillance window in the watchtower glitters in the dim. Dinnae look up. There could be anyone behind that glass. Five men in suits with no faces. All watching. They can watch*” (Fagan: 27) [7]. Control of space is primarily visual, preventing any form of concealment. In Foucault’s view, the main purpose of panopticism, especially in its architectural form, is:

...to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So, to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers (Foucault: 201) [6].

This notion of visibility, which can be perceived through the panoptic architecture, allows the institutional system to signal the end of the private sphere and, as

one staff member tells Anais, “*We like to keep doors open, to create a more trusting environment. There are no secrets here in the Panopticon*” (Fagan: 17) [7]. This absence of privacy intensifies the institution’s hold over the young offenders. “*They can see in, but they can see everything, whether you’re left, right or in the corner*” (Fagan: 56) [7]. Every nook and cranny of the space is dominated by the invisible power of the system. Bentham, moreover, posits the principle that power should be visible yet unverifiable. Visibility serves as a deterrent for young offenders, who must be unable to verify the existence of panoptic power “*It’s totally obvious that watchtower doesn’t even need staff in it, it just watches—all on its own*” (Fagan: 57) [7]. Consequently, the individual ultimately controls themselves, internalizes the watcher’s gaze, and thus becomes their own guardian. This theory, developed by Foucault and Bentham, finds its full relevance in the following passage:

There’s wire through the front windows but not the sides ones... It’s open-plan inside. Nowhere to hide... I suppose it was so each inmate could only see the watchtower, they couldn’t see their neighbours. Divide and conquer... There is a surveillance window going all the way around the top and you can’t see through the glass, but whoever, or whatever, is in there can see out. From the watchtower, it could see into every bedroom, every landing, every bathroom (Fagan: 6-7) [7].

Surveillance implies that the person conducting it can have a panoramic view from the tower, allowing them to observe every move without being seen by those under surveillance. “*They can see in everywhere, but nobody can see them. But they’re cleverer, they can see you anywhere you are*” (Fagan: 105) [7]. Foucault outlines not only the purpose of discipline but also its hold over the individual, who has no choice but to submit to it. According to him, the success of such an approach rests on a combination of several tools, such as hierarchical surveillance, normalizing sanctions, and examination. “*The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible*” (Foucault: 170-171) [6].

Separating young offenders so that they do not see one another allows the system to prevent clandestine meetings and gatherings that could lead to rebellion or a protest movement. This aligns with Foucault’s assertion that disciplinary power abolishes the collective crowd and replaces it with isolated individuals: “*The crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities*” (Foucault: 201) [6]. The mass effect can seriously undermine discipline and control, and isolating individuals ensures order. And as he pinpoints, “*Discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and instruments of its exercise*” (Foucault: 170) [6]. The

Panopticon thus functions not only as a place of physical surveillance but also as a mechanism of psychological domination. Anais describes the institution as “*social-workized*” and “*depressing as fuck*” (Fagan: 8) [7], emphasizing the emotional and mental burden imposed by institutional control. It is a place that, while eliminating any sense of privacy, instills a certain sense of anxiety in the young people and increases their stress and distress, knowing that they are constantly being watched.

Surveillance and control enable the panoptic system to scrutinize the depths of an individual’s privacy and exert control over their private life. Privacy is an essential element in a person’s life, yet it becomes vulnerable within the panoptic space where transparency is cultivated. Visibility is both a means of control and deterrence that lays bare the individual’s private sphere while stripping them of all humanity. The institution’s invasive surveillance eventually produces paranoia and psychological instability. Anais imagines that the authorities wish to penetrate her thoughts. “*They would inject me in the head with a big needle full of shit that makes your skull see-through. Then they would put me in a box. So, they could read them. Forced telepathy—it’s the last step for total mind control*” (Fagan: 59) [7].

The narrative frequently conveys feelings of anxiety, hypervigilance, and persecution among the young offenders living within the Panopticon. Rather than inviting clinical diagnosis, these reactions are represented as understandable responses to an environment characterized by constant surveillance, institutional control, and uncertainty. Then there is the added problem of the unexpected disappearance of some young offenders whose fate is unknown. “*People in care are always disappearing. Nobody finds out where they go*” (107) [7]. This further intensifies anxiety, with a clear psychological impact on the young offenders who fear for their lives. All things considered, one can say that the panoptic space is a space where increased surveillance and control are exercised through a system and techniques that impose discipline on young offenders.

3. Trauma and the Fragmented Self

Trauma theorists and literary scholars have strived to explore the traumatic experiences and the interrelation of words and wounds, the relation between psychic wounds and signification, from an interdisciplinary approach to trauma: “*the texts of psychoanalysis, of literature, and of literary theory—both speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic experience*” (Caruth 1996: 4) [8]. It is within the same line of reasoning that Schönfelder asserts that “*Literary texts and their fictional worlds allow for nuanced engagements with the subject of trauma, which is often personalized and contextualized, fictionalized and historicized, as well as psychologized and metaphorized at the same time*” (2013: 29) [9].

It turns out that the difficulty of reconciling the traumatic memory with the traumatized person’s own memory is explored by theorists of trauma literature and is particularly evident in contemporary literature. In her breakthrough work

Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History (1996), Cathy Caruth, from a Lacanian perspective, shows that trauma is an experience that often exceeds the individual's capacity to fully understand or represent it. She argues that trauma involves “*the inability fully to witness the event as it occurs, or the inability to witness the event fully only at the cost of witnessing oneself*” (4) [8].

Similarly, Judith Herman explains in her work *Trauma and Recovery: the aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror* (1992) [10] that traumatic experiences often produce fragmentation and dissociation. The person then splits into two distinct personalities or “dual personality”, making the expression of the traumatic experience arduous. Yang similarly notes that “*in trauma literature, the protagonist who is deeply traumatized has a split dual personality and is in a fragmented and broken world*” (2023: 6) [11]. In other words, the traumatic memory, which acts as a splintered psyche, disrupts its self-identity, “*a damaging split in self-identity*” (Hartman 2003: 265) [12]; “*something falls into the psyche, or causes it to split*” (Hartman 1995: 537) [13]. This is what Otto Rank names a “double” to mean the splintered psyche (1971: 30) [14], a “dissociation” to use Janet’s term, or “*an effect of traumatic dissociation*” (Hartman 1995: 545) [13]. This is precisely the meaning that can be given to the following remarks by Yang, who states that:

The narrative structure of trauma literature follows the process of experiencing, recalling, and recovering from trauma. When the distressing, traumatic memory cannot be reconciled with normal memory, the traumatized individual fragments into a dual self in a bifurcated world, making articulating the traumatic experience exceedingly difficult (Yang 2023: 2) [11].

Disruption, fragmentation, dissociation, and repetitive troping could be recognized as techniques used to convey the meaning of trauma fiction. Jensen considers it as “*the altered relationship to meaning and body and therefore to the experience of life itself*” (2019: 20) [15]. Thus, the fragmentation of the self in *The Panopticon* represents the identity fragmentation produced by the traumatic and traumatizing experiences of Anais Hendricks, the main character, and it can, therefore, be understood as a psychological and narrative consequence of trauma. According to Herman,

The traumatized person may experience intense emotion but without a clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion. Traumatic symptoms have a tendency to become disconnected from their source and to take on a life of their own. This kind of fragmentation, whereby trauma tears apart a complex system of self-protection that normally functions in an integrated fashion, is central to the historic observations on post-traumatic stress disorder (Herman 1992: 17-18) [10].

Trauma goes along with failure of memory as traumatic event or episode does not take place immediately after it has occurred, hence the notion of “belatedness” developed by Freud and taken up by Caruth. For Freud, there is a chronological

gap, or more precisely, an “incubus period” or a period of “latency” between the traumatic event and the appearance of its symptoms. According to Anne Whitehead, “*although the event returns in a vivid and precise form in the traumatic nightmare or flashback, it is simultaneously accompanied by amnesia*” (2004: 140) [16]. In *The Panopticon*, the causes or sources of trauma are multiple and deeply affect the protagonist’s identity construction, and Anais suffers from psychological fragmentation as a cipher trauma disrupts linear temporality and identity.

Having grown up in foster care, Anais is described as having suffered abuse throughout her childhood, which shaped and defined this period of her life and left an indelible mark on her. These significant, though mostly traumatic events, transformed her life, making her a particularly vulnerable person living permanently in a state of stress and existential anxiety with her past resurfacing and taking root in her present. As pointed out, “*Trauma is fundamentally an experience that raptures violently the social, psychological, and individual lives of the people*” (Khan *et al.* 2021: 146) [17]. Anais traumatic childhood profoundly shaped her identity: “*I got taken in when I was born, moved through twenty-four placements until I was seven, got adopted, left there when I was eleven, moved another twenty-seven times in the last four years*” (Fagan: 49) [7]. She grew up without parental care, suffering from emotional deprivation, which reflected her biological parents’ abandonment of her in favor of a system that ultimately wore her down physically, emotionally, and psychologically.

Highlighting the close relationship between dreams and trauma, Hartman asserts that “*In literature especially, shock and dreaminess collude. Where there is dream there is (was) trauma*” (546) [13]. Trauma repeatedly resurfaces through flashbacks and nightmares. Reflecting on traumatic effects, Herman explains that “*the traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep*” (19) [10]. Indeed, it is through the lens of nightmares, analepsis, or flashbacks that Fagan subtly addresses the trauma suffered by young offenders, children in difficult situations, those in foster care, and orphans. Fagan illustrates this process through Anais’s memories of abuse and rape: “*The nightmare happens in the daytime. It happens in the night. It happens in the shrinking place or especially the fallen place*” (Fagan: 61) [7]. Anais memories emerge in fragments, demonstrating the disruption of linear temporality characteristic of trauma narratives. The novel also exposes the violence experienced by children in care, “*Or not knowing anything about someone other than their do raped them, or their uncle abused them, or their brother’s been fucking them up the arse since they were three*” (Fagan: 62) [7]. This causes them to lose their dignity, their sense of humanity, their reason for living, and their happiness.

From a Jungian perspective, dreams manifest in multiple forms, among which traumatic dreams frequently appear as nightmares marked by intense somatic and emotional responses. These dreams represent the psyche’s attempt to process unresolved traumatic experiences and often cause the sleeper to awaken abruptly.

They typically emerge in the aftermath of traumatic events such as accidents, injuries, or physical and sexual abuse, and are commonly observed in individuals diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. In some instances, dreams serve as a medium through which the unconscious releases repressed memories, emotions, and desires into conscious awareness (Sané, 2026: 41) [18].

Additionally, practices, which consist of humiliating, belittling, and rendering vulnerable through intimidation, only serve to expose the social and institutional violence of the system against young offenders. “*She stops in front of me, runs her finger under my bra, then she pulls my knickers out and takes a long look tae see what’s down there. She lets the elastic snap back... Truth of it is I m mental, or I m gonnæ be mental... I m mental in the head*” (Fagan: 95, 97) [7]. These traumatic experiences produce emotional instability and psychological fragmentation, and Anais herself recognizes in the above-excerpt her deteriorating mental state.

Like the other young offenders at the Panopticon, Anais is subjected to harassment, a form of psychological torture that affects her mental health. One can also sense the impact of the interview room, an inner turmoil experienced by the person being interviewed, “*I cannae breathe... I ve gone psycho, just like bio mum? Clinical psychosis. Schizoid visions. Permanent insanity or suicide? What do you do? Stay permanently crazy or just fucking jump?*” (Fagan: 93) [7].

Within the novel, schizophrenia functions less as a confirmed medical diagnosis than as an institutional and narrative discourse through which Anais’s psychological distress is interpreted. The text portrays her as experiencing hallucination-like perceptions, intrusive thoughts, fragmented memories, and moments in which reality and imagination become difficult to distinguish. Rather than diagnosing the protagonist, Fagan foregrounds the psychological consequences of trauma while exposing the tendency of institutional authorities to medicalize behaviors that emerge from prolonged abuse, neglect, and marginalization.

Anais’s psychological condition is represented through the institutional language of psychiatric assessment. The reference to “borderline personality” reflects the diagnostic label proposed by social workers rather than an objective confirmation by the narrative. Fagan thereby illustrates how institutional discourse categorizes vulnerable young people, often reducing complex traumatic experiences to clinical terminology. “*Anti psychotics. Post traumatic stress disorder. Flowcharts. Borderline personality... We think you have a borderline personality, Anais. It’s better than no personality*” (Fagan: 85) [7]. The social worker interprets Anais’s behavior through psychiatric terminology, while Anais herself simply acknowledges her traumatic condition by stating, “*I m traumatized*” (86). Importantly, the novel does not confirm a specific psychiatric diagnosis. Instead, it highlights the contrast between institutional labeling and the protagonist’s own understanding of her suffering, emphasizing trauma rather than clinical categorization. That’s why there are gaps in her narration, which is not linear: “*I keep remembering bits of that day but not all of it*” (Fagan: 131) [7].

Consistent with unreliable first-person narration, her version of events is un-

certain, exacerbated by ketamine-induced memory loss, while other drug use leads to continual flights of fancy, and she constantly speculates whether she has schizophrenia, inherited perhaps from her mother (McCulloch 2015: 124) [19]. Trauma, therefore, destabilizes Anais's sense of self and contributes to the novel's deliberately unreliable narrative voice, in which hallucination-like experiences, imagination, memory, and reality frequently overlap, leaving the reader uncertain about the boundaries between subjective perception and objective events. "*I hear other people's thoughts when I'm tripping, ay. I dinnae really know if its thoughts actually, maybe it's just voices... I get voices in my head that urnay mine, and I see faces no one else sees, so I mustn't be totally mental in the head yet*" (Fagan: 24) [7].

The fragmented structure of *The Panopticon* should therefore be understood not as a direct manifestation of Anais's psychological disorder but as a literary representation of traumatic consciousness. While hallucinations, dissociation, and memory disturbances constitute symptoms experienced by Anais as a traumatized individual, fragmentation, temporal gaps, and disrupted chronology belong to Fagan's narrative strategies. Nevertheless, these two dimensions interact closely: the formal fragmentation of the novel enables the reader to experience, at a structural level, the instability, discontinuity, and belatedness that characterize Anais's traumatic memory.

4. Stigma, Labeling, and Identity Construction

Anais's identity is shaped not only by trauma but also by processes of stigmatization and labeling. In his work entitled *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), Erving Goffman sees stigma as having an "extensive discrediting effect" that reduces a whole and usual person to a "tainted" and "discounted" one to the eyes of others (1963: 3) [20]. Goffman identifies three types of stigma, among which are the abominations of the body or the various physical deformities, blemishes of individual character, and tribal stigma of race, nation, and relation (4). According to him, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption, we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences such as those of social class (5) [19].

In *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1963), Howard S. Becker demonstrates the ambivalence of the concept of "deviance", which, according to him, can apply to those who create the rules as well as to those who break them, revealing the inherent infallibility of the labeling process, which is, at best, subjective. He posits that social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of

rules and sanctions to an “offender” (Becker 1963: 9) [21]. He shows that deviance is, in reality, created by society. From this perspective, Anais’s movement through care systems and encounters with punitive institutions illustrates how institutional actors assign deviant identities that shape her social reality.

In *The Panopticon*, young offenders admitted to this reformatory institution are represented as being stigmatized, labeled, and stereotyped as a blight, criminals, repeat offenders who must be gotten rid of. Moreover, they are portrayed as problem children. Anais herself accumulates numerous accusations: “*threatening a staff member with a metal pole, theft and willful destruction of school property, illegal possession of prescription drugs, possession of marijuana and the six-month saga of police vandalism you waged against Lothian and Borders Police*” (Fagan: 146) [7].

These labels, which reduce her identity to criminality, function as social markers of categories of deviance. “*It is my belief that you cannot stop yourself, Miss Hendricks. Everything in your record tells me that you will keep offending*” (151) [7]. Fagan denounces a system that punishes rather than rehabilitates. Anais herself recognizes the brutality of institutional authority: “*Authority figures are broken, and they’re always bullies as well... they are smart and relentless and wholly fucking brutal*” (87, 210) [7].

Young offenders sent from this institution are represented as being stigmatized through institutional labels and social perceptions. In this regard, Anais points out that “*It’s because if you’re permanently tripping, you’re legally classified as insane. In the states, even if you only take acid like ten times or something, they still reckon you’re certifiable*” (Fagan: 11) [7]. This attitude, which is much more akin to a value judgment, hastens their confinement in mental institutions, as the institutional discourse identifies them as “repeat offenders”, “offenders at risk”, “suspected offenders”. They are perceived not only as guilty but, above all, emotionally and psychologically unstable, and the only way to deal with them is to institutionalize them rather than protect and preserve them. Anais also senses this condemnation; upon coming across a newspaper article in which it is written “*No one could prevent the murder of a child*” (158) [7], she reacts strongly, denouncing society’s fatalistic attitude, “*How can someone do that, ay? Seriously. How not? How can you not stop it? If you take a kid who is in danger out of a place where it’s gonnae be tortured tae death—well, that kid would not be murdered then*” (156) [7].

As a narrator, Anais reflects on and questions the meaning of responsibility, but above all, the message or signal sent to murderers: “*what kind of message is that to send out to baby murderers? What kind of apology, or acknowledgement of responsibility, is that?*” (158) [7]. Through Anais’s reflections on institutional failure and child protection, Fagan critiques specific social and institutional attitudes toward vulnerable young people, particularly the tendency to respond to childhood trauma through surveillance, punishment, and exclusion rather than care and rehabilitation. The novel does not present society as a homogeneous en-

tity but foregrounds the failures of particular systems: social services, policing, and psychiatric institutions that shape the experiences of marginalized youth. According to McCulloch, “*Being in care signifies to a child that they are outside of normative society and childhood, and their life will continue on a downward spiral*” (2015: 123) [19]. Young offenders are denied the possibility of reintegration and are instead pushed toward prison or psychiatric institutions. “*We’re just in training for the proper jail. Nobody talks about it, but it’s a statistical fact... some go to the nuthouse. Some just disappear*” (Fagan: 5) [7]. That is the reason why they consider themselves “lifers”. They are clearly marginalized and excluded from society, and in this sense, Young equates marginalization with a form of oppression. “*Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life*” (1990: 53) [2].

Speaking about the process of marginalization and its causes among young people, Duchak states that “*Special place among these problems takes the process of marginalization of young people, which is caused by deformation of state and public institutions, destruction of social, cultural, ideological and political bases of life, loss of value orientations*” (2014: 70) [3]. In this passage, Duchak identifies the distortion of the state and public institutions as causes of youth marginalization, while highlighting their exclusion and the impact this can have on young people. According to him, “*social exclusion produces negative consequences and long-term damage to the living conditions, social and economic participation, health status, and emotional life of young people*” (70) [3]. Duchak displays the primarily psychological impact of social exclusion, which is multidimensional on young people, as well as its long-term detrimental effects on their living conditions in particular. Fagan demonstrates through literature how society marginalized those young offenders who do not fit imagined mental or physical norms; those who are invisible and silenced. According to Yahya Daldoul, “*the inability of these characters to overcome their overwhelming past makes them emblematic of the inherent vulnerability of the human being*” (2021: 8-9) [22].

Highlighting the potential consequences of belonging to a marginalized group and the way it can shape the individual’s identity, Duchak opines that “*Being a part of a marginalized group also brings the risk of some more psychological-ideological threats. The first is the definition of one’s identity by others: the ideological definition of one’s marginalized identity in the interest of the dominant group in society*” (75) [3]. Precisely because of this form of marginalization and the trauma she suffered, Anais embarks on an identity quest, an identity formation to break free from the stigmatization and the identity that was imposed on her by the system. Moreover, Yang asserts that the deconstruction of identity allows trauma victims to rebuild a personal identity. “*The deconstruction of identity in literature often serves as an attempt to construct self-identity. Trauma victims, who have experienced traumatic events in their childhood, may feel isolated and depressed*” (2023: 4) [11]. Anais’s quest for identity merely stages the inherent conflict between personal identity and societal expectations.

The process of stigmatization deeply affects Anais's identity construction. Even her name becomes a symbol of institutional dehumanization. "7652.4—Section 48 was my first name. Seriously, they couldn't even give me a name until they'd filed me and discussed me and decided what I came under for sectioning. I hate the first name that they gave me after that one, I wouldn't even tell anyone it, ever" (Fagan: 104-105) [7]. The first name given to Anais refers to that of a prisoner, an anonymous person, and sufficiently demonstrates the fact that she is nobody in the eyes of the system. Reduced to a number, Anais feels stripped of individuality and humanity. Consequently, she embarks on a quest for identity reconstruction. "First, construct an identity, do it in order, don't fuck around. Start at a starting place, like being born. Not like the birth the social workers told me about" (25) [7]. Contrary to what she is led to believe, admit, and internalize, Anais firmly believes that in reality, she is no different from other well-born souls. "I am a love child, conceived during a ritualistic peyote shaman trip. I am the sole offspring of Timothy Leary's spirit guide (an Amazonian eagle woman) and a forest nymph" (35) [7]. Reflecting on the circumstances surrounding her birth, she lets the reader know that she is not an illegitimate child, but rather the true fruit of love. She imagines alternative narratives about her origins in order to resist institutional labeling.

From that point on, she sets out to find her biological parents, her mother in particular, and asks herself a great many questions. She decides to conduct her own investigation to find her "I wonder what my mum, or dad, would look like. I've never even seen a photo of someone I'm related to. I don't know a name, there's just a great big void, black as night" (86) [7]. Her mother serves as a link to her traumatic past, which she could not leave behind, and the confusing present. Constructing the image of a mother is necessary, which helps to partly understand her traumatic experiences and her struggle for identity construction. Anais fully realizes that rediscovering her own identity is the only way to break free from the system's grip and thus survive in a system that oppresses her and excludes her from the society to which she once belonged. Anais's identity quest, therefore, represents a struggle against institutional marginalization and imposed deviant identities.

5. Survival Mechanisms

Trauma and Institutional marginalization do not merely fragment identity but also create conditions through which marginalized youth negotiate alternative forms of agency and self-definition. Indeed, despite the fragmentation, storytelling becomes a tool for identity reconstruction, and as Anais herself says, "First – construct an identity, do it in order, don't fuck around" (Fagan: 25) [7]. Pittin-Hedon observes that "In the mental Panopticon Anais is confined to, the only possibility for escape is magic. As a focaliser, but also, crucially, as a first-person narrator, she can ensure that she can ultimately take the initiative in the narrative and look for freedom in the shape of narrative freedom" (2019: 170) [23]. Survival mechanisms in *The Panopticon* articulate trauma, identity construction, and the

emergence of agency and this fact is evident from the following remarks by Asati and Tiwari, according to which “*The study of trauma narratives can elucidate patterns of resilience, coping strategies, and potential for post-traumatic growth*” (2025: 40) [5]. Anais’s survival strategies are dynamic as she negotiates her place within and against the institutional system. From that point on, she takes control of her destiny and decides to give meaning to her life. It is important to remember that her experience is deeply marked by trauma, which necessitates the development of internal coping mechanisms to preserve psychological coherence.

Coping strategies encompass a broad range of adaptive mechanisms individuals employ to manage stressors and adversities. Effective coping strategies are integral to resilience, as they facilitate the ability to bounce back from traumatic experiences (Kumari *et al.*, 2024: 226) [24]. The fragmentation, which results in the disruption of her identity, leads Anais to adopt and adapt herself to different strategies that enable her to keep an internal stability and creative immersion as one of the most revealing mechanisms. She constantly takes refuge in her imagination to construct alternative narratives that provide a temporary escape from her harsh reality. This imaginative capacity functions as a form of cognitive reframing that enables her to reinterpret her experiences and mitigate their emotional impact. As pointed out,

Cognitive factors play a crucial role in shaping an individual’s resilience following trauma. Resilient individuals often exhibit cognitive flexibility, which involves the ability to adaptively adjust one’s thoughts and perspectives in response to challenging situations... Individuals with greater cognitive flexibility demonstrate resilience by adapting their thoughts and behaviours in response to adversity. This adaptability allows them to reframe negative experiences, find meaning in adversity, and maintain a sense of optimism... Defined as the capacity to rebound from adversity, resilience represents a dynamic interplay of individual, social, and environmental factors that enable individuals to withstand and even thrive in the face of significant life challenges (Southwick *et al.*, 2014) [25].

Another not less important strategy is emotional compartmentalization, a psychological defense mechanism that separates conflicting emotions and traumatic memories. McWilliams defines compartmentalization as “*a defense mechanism that allows one to hold conflicting attitudes, ideas, or behavior without conscious feelings of confusion, guilt, shame, or anxiety*” (2011: 130) [26]. These psychological strategies enable Anais to preserve a degree of internal coherence despite overwhelming adversity. For her, “*Thoughts are not actions, though, thoughts dinnae mean anything—unless they do*” (Fagan: 60) [7]. McWilliams admits that “*When someone compartmentalizes, he or she holds two or more ideas, attitudes, or behaviors that are essentially and definitionally in conflict, without appreciating the contradiction*” (130) [26]. This aligns with resilience theory, which emphasizes the adaptive capacities individuals develop in response to adversity. As revealed

in the following excerpt,

The importance of resilience in the context of trauma and PTSD cannot be overstated. When individuals encounter traumatic events, such as natural disasters, combat experiences, or interpersonal violence, they often confront a cascade of psychological, emotional, and physiological challenges (Kumari *et al.*, 2024: 225) [24].

In this sense, Anais's internal coping mechanisms illustrate that survival begins with the preservation of psychological integrity for the simple reason that "*Resilience emerges as a critical protective factor, offering a buffer against the development of PTSD and facilitating post-traumatic growth*" (Bonanno *et al.*, 2011) [27]. Beyond internal processes, survival in *The Panopticon* requires navigating complex social and institutional environments. Anais exists within a network of surveillance and control that reflects the disciplinary structures described by Michel Foucault. The omnipresent gaze of authority figures compels her to adopt strategies of adaptation that are both reactive and strategic. According to Kumari,

Social support, defined as the assistance or comfort provided by others has been consistently identified as a key determinant of resilience in the face of trauma and PTSD. It encompasses emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support from family, friends, peers, and community networks. (Kumari *et al.*, 2024: 227) [24].

A key aspect is the main protagonist's capacity to adapt herself to situations and circumstances and to adopt strategies to cope with the latter. Anais learns to adjust her behaviour according to context, presenting different versions of herself depending on the expectations of social workers, police officers, or peers. As she admittedly states, "*the right to respond is cited in the Freedom of Speech Human Rights Act*" (Fagan: 192) [7]. According to Becker, "*The lower-class delinquent who fights for his 'turf' is only doing what he considers necessary and right, but teachers, social workers, and police see it differently*" (Becker 1963: 16) [21]. However, Anais plays the role expected of her to avoid more difficult forms of institutional punishment and manages to maintain a degree of control over her behavior. "*I'll learn tae master mind control*" (Fagan: 73) [7]. In addition, she adopts a strategic observation approach by monitoring the behaviours and attitudes of people around her closely; using this approach to anticipate reactions and adjust her own actions accordingly. Butler's conception of agency helps explain this dynamic: "*Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible*" (1999: 187) [28]. He furthermore explains the dialectical relationship between agent and agency, considering that "*Without an agent, it is argued, there can be no agency and hence no potential to initiate a transformation of relations of domination within society*" (Butler 1999: 33-34) [28].

This heightened awareness becomes a tool for survival, enabling her to navigate power structures with a degree of agency. Anais becomes aware that, "*One day*

you'll realize it's up to you, and you alone, to make something of your life" (Fagan: 209) [7]. Anais also forms selective alliances with other young offenders. These relationships provide solidarity, emotional support, and a substitute family structure. *"The girls develop unusually strong bonds in here, they are a family"* (258) [7]. Eventually, the Panopticon itself begins to resemble a fragile form of home. *"It almost feel like home, cause of, like, Shortie, and Isla, even Angus, and the roof"* (209) [7]. For this fundamental reason, Anais lets us know that she is ready to give her life to protect those she loves: *"I'd lie down and die for someone I loved; I'd fuck up anyone who abused a kid"* (150) [7]. These connections are based on careful evaluation of the situation, illustrating her capacity for strategic social engagement. Thus, survival in *The Panopticon* appears as a socially embedded practice that requires both adaptability and critical awareness that can draw on bonds of friendship, solidarity, and mutual aid. In this sense, Butler admits that *"Conscience is the means by which a subject becomes an object for itself, reflecting on itself, establishing itself as reflective and reflexive. The 'I' is not simply one who thinks about him or herself; it is defined by this capacity for reflective self-relation or reflexivity"* (Butler 1997: 22) [29].

It must be acknowledged that one of the most distinctive aspects of Anais's survival strategy is her fascinating use of creativity as both a coping mechanism and a form of resistance. Through writing, poetic expression, and imaginative narration, she constructs a space in which she can assert control over her experiences. Anais displays a vivid imagination and a clear artistic ingenuity that allow her to escape from reality, from a present that is oppressive, harsh, and almost unbearable, as well as insurmountable, both physically and psychologically. In this sense, she creates what she calls "the birthday game" and "the imaginary gallery", a creative expression that functions as a means of self-assertion that allows the main protagonist to play, tell, and reinvent the story of her birth through an imaginative form of resistance, a creative re-signification of identity. It also allows her to give voice to an unrevealed and undeveloped know-how or experience with her "imaginary camera" (Fagan: 141) [7]. Therefore, her writing can be understood as a form of narrative therapy, through which fragmented experiences are reorganized into a meaningful whole. This is precisely the meaning that can be given to Asati and Tiwari's remarks when they assert that *"These narratives can also function as healing mechanisms, assisting both writers and readers in processing and interpreting traumatic occurrences"* (2025: 39) [5]. This aligns with theories of narrative identity, which emphasize the role of storytelling in the construction of the self by displaying traumatic experiences. Also, *"Trauma-focused narratives often serve as testimonies, exposing historical injustices and personal hardships"* (39) [5].

Moreover, creativity enables symbolic resistance for Anais, who rejects the label that the institutions have pinned on her. By reimagining her environment and reframing her experiences, Anais challenges the dominant narratives imposed upon her by institutions: *"I am not an experiment. I am not a stupid joke, or a*

trippy game, or an experiment" (Fagan: 160) [7]. Her engagement with language becomes a way of reclaiming authority over her own story, resisting reduction to stigmatizing labels such as "delinquent" or "problem child". As underlined by Goffman, "*The stigmatized individual tends to hold the same beliefs about identity that we do; this is a pivotal fact. His deepest feelings about what he is may be his sense of being a 'normal person', a human being like anyone else, a person, therefore, who deserves a fair chance and a fair break*" (Goffman: 7) [20]. The novel's fragmented and experimental style reinforces this process, reflecting the instability of imposed identities while simultaneously affirming the possibility of self-creation. And according to Butler, "*Power not only acts on a subject but, in a transitive sense, enacts the subject into being*" (Butler 1997: 13) [29].

Last but not least, Anais's resilience is also expressed through the struggle of memory against oblivion. "*They would fry patients' memories as well as their voices, and sometimes they'd even fry out their names*" (Fagan: 65) [7]. She not only develops a photographic memory but also adopts photography as a means of immortalizing certain events from her life in the Panopticon. "*I wantae photograph them all and hide the photos in a box—then even if they do fry me, someone will open the box one day and find them. Then they will have the memory*" (Fagan: 68) [7]. For Anais, it is important to maintain the clarity of mind that allows a person to exercise good judgment, but above all to use their brain to think and come up with coping strategies in the face of the system's restrictive nature. Moreover, she informs us that "*It's your own mind that kills you. The most dangerous weapon in the world is a brain*" (200) [7]. In this excerpt, she highlights the cognitive aspect that allows one to use subtleties, to have an imaginative mind, to resist and survive in a world where even the slightest mistake comes at a high price. Memory becomes both a survival tool and a form of resistance against institutional erasure. Anais's resilience eventually demonstrates that survival is an active negotiation with trauma, institutional control, and social marginalization.

6. Conclusions

Jenni Fagan has shown in *The Panopticon* that the institutional care system for young offenders is diverted from its original social function: to re-educate youth in difficult situations and then facilitate their reintegration into the society to which they belong. By having the prison and the nuthouse turned into a care facility, Fagan questions the way visual relations are structured in our collective management of mental and social work. The conclusion she reaches is that the system has forfeited its duty of care: that it will watch, observe, and overlook, rather than watch over, look after, and care for (Leblond 2022: 12) [30].

In her endeavor to uncover the traumatic experiences of marginalized youth, especially those in the care system, Jenni Fagan draws on storytelling techniques such as intentional gaps in the narrative to highlight difficult to process traumatic events; an altered chronology to disclose the impact of trauma on the person inability in order to dissociate reality and imagination and the use of disjointed nar-

ratives and non-sequential storytelling to reflect the belatedness of traumatic experiences. Fagan invites the audience to reflect on how mental health shows pathologies and patterns of vulnerability, social exclusion and marginalization when it is psychological or trauma induced. It is in this perspective that Asati and Tiwari assert that “*exposure to trauma-centered narratives enhances readers’ comprehension of and empathy towards marginalized or traumatized groups*” (2025: 40) [5].

In *The Panopticon*, survival emerges as a multidimensional and dynamic process that bridges trauma, identity, and agency. Anais Hendricks’ strategies, ranging from psychological coping to social adaptation and creative expression, demonstrate that survival is neither passive nor purely instinctual. Rather, it is an active, ongoing negotiation with both internal and external forces. The survival mechanisms as reflected in the novel can be considered as decisive to the construction of identity and the emergence of agency. Through her coping strategies, social adaptations, and creative practices, Anais actively participates in shaping her sense of self. By foregrounding these mechanisms, Jenni Fagan challenges reductive representations of marginalized youth, highlighting their resilience, complexity, and capacity for self-definition. Survival, in this context, becomes a form of resistance and a pathway toward agency, revealing the profound ways in which individuals can reconfigure their identities even within the constraints of systemic marginalization.

Beyond its analysis of trauma, surveillance, and survival, this article contributes to current scholarship on *The Panopticon* by repositioning Jenni Fagan’s novel within the broader field of contemporary care narratives and representations of marginalized youth. While previous studies have largely emphasized the novel’s critique of institutional control, dystopian dimensions, and the experiences of vulnerable adolescents, this study highlights the complex interaction between trauma, identity formation, and agency. It argues that care institutions in contemporary literature should not be examined only as spaces of protection or discipline, but also as environments where marginalized subjects negotiate, resist, and reconstruct their identities. By bringing together trauma studies, Foucauldian theories of surveillance, stigma theory, and resilience approaches, this article extends existing readings of *The Panopticon* and demonstrates how contemporary marginalized youth narratives transform experiences of exclusion into narratives of survival, self-definition, and resistance.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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