

Imagining the Future: AI Policing and Capital Surveillance in Laila Lalami's *The Dream Hotel*

Yirjum Loyi¹

¹Research Scholar

¹Department of English, Rajiv Gandhi University

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Abstract: In contemporary dystopian fiction, overt authoritarian violence has given way to more subdued, bureaucratic forms of control. *The Dream Hotel* by Laila Lalami depicts a near future in which surveillance capitalism, artificial intelligence, and predictive algorithms influence daily existence. The book, which is set in Los Angeles in the 2040s, depicts a society where freedom is only granted under certain conditions, dreams are tracked, and risks are measured through one's digital footprints. This article examines how *The Dream Hotel* depicts capital surveillance and AI policing as intertwined systems that control mobility, bodies, and minds. The study explores how algorithmic governance, while portraying itself as impartial and effective, reproduces earlier forms of racialized and gendered control by heavily referencing the novel's narrative details, characters, and institutional spaces. By foregrounding the surveillance of dreams and interior life, Lalami exposes the psychological reach of future policing systems. Ultimately, the novel suggests that the most dangerous forms of surveillance are those that operate through comfort, care, and economic logic rather than force, making dystopia feel not distant, but familiar.

Keywords: *Dystopian Fiction, AI Policing, Surveillance Capitalism, Laila Lalami, Speculative Fiction.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The future has never been the exclusive focus of dystopian fiction. Its real focus is on highlighting the concerns, inconsistencies, and paths of the present. Previous dystopias depended on obvious signs of oppression, violent enforcement, and visible authoritarian governments. However, systems that seem commonplace, logical, and even kind are becoming more and more prevalent in modern dystopian speculative fiction. Control doesn't make a big announcement anymore. It comes silently and is integrated

with technologies that guarantee convenience, effectiveness, and safety.

The Dream Hotel by Laila Lalami is part of this modern dystopian tradition. The novel, which was published in 2025, describes a near-future Los Angeles in which artificial intelligence uses psychological surveillance and predictive algorithms to control public safety. People are imprisoned for potential threats rather than for crimes they have committed. Once thought to be the most intimate aspect of human experience, dreams now serve as sources of information and

proof. In this world, surveillance extends beyond screens and the streets to include memory, emotion, and desire.

Lalami examines how corporate interests, state power, and technology come together to reshape freedom through the life of Sara Tilila Hussein, a Moroccan-American woman, historian, archivist, wife, and mother. Sara's detention is brought on by an algorithmic interpretation of her social media post, her cousin who has a criminal record but with whom she is not in touch with for more than a decade and her dreams via an implant known as DreamSaver, not by violence or misconduct. She was taken to Madison facility, earlier an elementary school refurbished into detention centre, for only 21 days but ended up staying for almost a year. Instead of a dramatic arrest, what happens is a protracted bureaucratic detention concealed by institutional care and euphemistic language.

This article explores The Dream Hotel's conception of capital surveillance and AI policing as mutually reinforcing power structures. The study contends that Lalami highlights the moral perils of predictive governance, particularly for women, immigrants, and racialized subjects, by basing the analysis on narrative moments, institutional practices, and character experience. The novel's depiction of a dystopia is unsettling precisely because it seems plausible, shaped by logics and technologies already found in modern life.

II. DYSTOPIAN SPECULATIVE FICTION AND THE POLITICS OF THE FUTURE

Political imagination has always been a function of dystopian speculative fiction. It pushes current social trends to their ethical and emotional limits rather than forecasting the future. This genre has concentrated more on technologies that indirectly control life instead of using overt force in recent decades. Prisons and armies are replaced as the main tools of control by surveillance, data extraction, and algorithmic decision-making. This change is reflected in the Dream Hotel, which presents a seemingly orderly and functional society. There are no totalitarian spectacles or crumbling cities. Rather, the book depicts a society in which institutional language and standard operating procedures normalize control. People comply because resistance seems dangerous or illogical, not because they are beaten into

submission.

Lalami's dystopia is consistent with an expanding corpus of speculative fiction that explores the use of data in governance. In this world, power is dispersed. It is challenging to identify a single source of authority because responsibility is dispersed among machines, agencies, and systems. It is precisely this diffusion that permits injustice to continue unchecked.

The Dream Hotel's focus on ordinary life is what gives it its political power. Because the future it envisions is so similar to the present: airports, a public elementary school before repurposed into a retention facility centre, corporate health and fitness, air purifier, DreamShare, and bureaucratic risk assessments, it feels unsettlingly familiar. As a result, the book challenges readers to understand dystopia as a slow restructuring of social life rather than as an abrupt disruption.

III. SURVEILLANCE, POWER, AND ALGORITHMIC GOVERNANCE

A helpful framework for comprehending the systems portrayed in The Dream Hotel is provided by Michel Foucault's examination of surveillance and disciplinary authority. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault makes the case that internalized discipline, normalization, and observation, rather than overt punishment are the ways in which contemporary power functions. Self-regulating subjects are the result of surveillance. Lalami applies this reasoning to the era of digital technology. The Dream Hotel uses automated, predictive, and continuous surveillance. To determine risk scores, AI systems examine behavior, biometric information, and psychological trends. These scores influence freedom, privacy, and mobility. This type of power is especially potent because it is invisible. Seldom are people informed about how scores are determined or decisions are made.

In the novel, algorithmic governance asserts objectivity. Rather than being moral judgments, decisions are framed as technical results. However, the book makes it clear time and again that these systems are based on historical data that has been influenced by social inequality. Bias becomes ingrained in the code rather than vanishing. This process is demonstrated by Sara's experience. Nobody makes direct

accusations against her while she is being held at LAX. Officials instead submit to the system. Algorithms take over authority, enabling human agents to assert objectivity. Since there is no obvious decision-maker to oppose, resistance is practically impossible as a result of this deferral.

IV. CAPITAL SURVEILLANCE AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF LIFE

The state is not the only force behind surveillance in The Dream Hotel. It is closely linked to the interests of capitalism. Personal experience becomes a resource that can be extracted, examined, and sold because data is valuable. This is an example of what Shoshana Zuboff refers to as surveillance capitalism, a system where people's actions are exploited for financial gain. Zuboff's this insight is now the primary objective of monitoring. The Dream Hotel operates exactly like this. After being monitored and assessed for "risk" and "compliance," dreams are packaged and sold. Dreams became a trial ground. Julie Ransstrom, posing as Easley Richardson, broke into the Madison facility and conducted covert experiments on women of different ages regarding the recently released DreamSaver, in which DreamInc. ran ads to see if the dreams were "Dream social." She claimed, "She was testing something on us. Like we were being used as test subjects." (Lalami 290). Thinking back on the consent forms she signed on the day of the implant, Sara's fantasies of visiting new nations and riding enormous carrots with celebrities are instances of surveillance capitalism in its most basic form: the extraction of human experience, its conversion into behavioral data, and its resale as influence and prediction. Selling dreams to a government agency or any other third party was not mentioned. "The information would have been concealed in incomprehensible legalese if they had" (Lalami 73). Sara's deepest self has been transformed against her will into a commodity, and it is terrifying that she is being watched.

The retention facility functions as a business. Digital tablets, messaging services, meal subscriptions, and communication pods are all paid for by inmates. They are consumers even though they are confined. The longer people are detained, the more money is made. As a result, detention becomes profitable. The concept of surveillance is presented as a service. Comfort, as opposed to coercion, encourages

compliance. This arrangement is similar to modern business practices where consumers give up privacy in exchange for convenience. Lalami demonstrates how financial participation becomes a prerequisite for freedom by incorporating surveillance into economic transactions. Further marginalization occurs for those who cannot afford compliance. Together, capital and control support a system that gains from extended observation and incarceration.

V. AI POLICING AND PREDICTIVE CONTROL

In The Dream Hotel, law enforcement now anticipates crime rather than reacts to it. AI systems use pattern analysis to anticipate possible risks before any damage is done. The definition of justice is radically changed by this change. People are evaluated based on probabilities rather than their deeds. Sara's imprisonment is an example of this reasoning. She was returning home from a professional conference in London. Upon her arrival at the LAX airport, she was unexpectedly detained by officials from the Risk Assessment Administration (RAA). According to the algorithmic system that monitors her sleep patterns through a device called DreamSaver, Sara is flagged as a potential threat to her husband. Although the accusation is speculative, it has immediate repercussions. Sara is taken out of her life and imprisoned for an indefinite period of time.

The book portrays predictive policing as effective and logical. Lalami, however, reveals its moral cost. The presumption of innocence crumbles when risk takes the place of guilt. Context, emotion, and complexity are not taken into account by the system. Human life is reduced to patterns. It is rare to challenge the authority of AI systems. Even when results seem unfair, officials use algorithms to defend their decisions. This dependence produces a feedback loop where suspicion generated by machines starts to validate itself. After being flagged, people find it almost impossible to get their names cleared.

VI. GENDER, RACE, AND DIFFERENTIAL SURVEILLANCE

The Dream Hotel makes it apparent that not everyone is equally impacted by surveillance, even though it does not explicitly show discrimination. People's monitoring, interpretation, and control are shaped by their gender and race. Sara views surveillance as both observation and control because she is a woman. Her behavior, tone of voice, and emotional reactions are examined for indications of instability. "To be a woman was to watch yourself not just through your own eyes, but through the eyes of others," she says. This self-monitoring gets more intense under algorithmic surveillance.

Sara's home life likewise exhibits gendered power dynamics. She becomes increasingly aware of her husband Elias's propensity to make decisions without first seeking her input. Due to their twins, Elias had previously installed a Dream Saver that causes him to go to sleep and get up automatically, while Sara was left on her own without such a device, attempting in vain to keep up with caffeine. This demonstrates Elias's ignorance of Sara's predicament in a developed culture. The corporate environment of DreamInc.Co., where Julie Renstrom and other female employees are treated like objects, is another example of this gender-biased dynamic. These interpersonal connections reflect the institutional control people experience, suggesting that patriarchy persists even in highly advanced technical systems.

Immigration status and race make surveillance even more intense. Sara is more susceptible to suspicion because she is Moroccan-American. Her recollections of her mother's silent resentment and her father's fear of uniformed officials link futuristic policing to past instances of racial profiling (Lalami 28). Although the algorithm uses data influenced by racialized histories, it makes no explicit mention of race. Lalami demonstrates how discrimination endures by taking on a procedural form. Race and gender are important in The Dream Hotel because the system continues to act on them while refusing to acknowledge them.

VII. DREAMS, INTERIOR LIFE, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SURVEILLANCE

The novel's emphasis on dreams as places of surveillance is among its most inventive contributions to dystopian imagination. DreamSaver, which was first sold as a sleep aid, turns into a tool for keeping an eye on the unconscious. Dreams are converted into data and examined for indications of instability or hostility. DreamSaver's creator, Eric Hollins, is presented as something of a technological messiah. His white-clad, haloed, implant-offering promotional image implies that technology has supplanted religion (Lalami 75). The device's intrusive potential is concealed by the promise of more time and better sleep.

The system blurs the line between private and public life by transforming dreams into proof. Once-inaccessible thoughts and desires are now used as justifications for condemnation. Even inner life is no longer secure due to this intrusion, which signifies a new frontier of control. In the book, dreams serve as places of resistance as well. They maintain emotional authenticity and unpredictability. However, surveillance threatens even these areas, exposing the system's goal of totalization.

VIII. RESISTANCE AND THE LIMITS OF CONTROL

The Dream Hotel does not discount the possibility of opposition despite its dismal outlook. In the end, Sara and Toya refuse to complete their assigned tasks because they have realized that the institution runs on their submission and the price they are paying for. Here, resistance is brittle, expensive, and uncertain in the beginning because they have become hopeless for getting out from such vicious circle but unexpectedly came out victorious.

Small creative acts by Sara and her prisoners start to resemble coordinated counter-surveillance rather than private coping. The commonplace items Sara cherishes are the source of her resistance. For Sara, the elderly woman who sells straw baskets, hats, and mats and who she watches every morning from her window wearing beaded earrings that swing with every step is an artist. Sara enjoys engaging in regular activities outside the facility, much like the elderly

woman who "emerges out of her workshop three days a week to sell her original pieces at the farmer's markets in nearby towns." (Lalami 17) is a piece of art to which she no longer feels a connection: "Home feels so remote to her (Sara) these days that it's become less a place than an idea." (Lalami 235).

By including "the only piece of art in the entire facility is WPA mural painted by Victor Arnautoff, depicting a farm scene from the 1930s: hatted laborers kneel between furrows, picking lettuce, while in the background an overseer in a blue dungarees leans against rusty white truck," Lalami further illuminates the novel's social commentary on class, labor, and power. The colors are remarkably well-preserved. (Lalami 18), the artwork is a social realist critique of American labor practices and history. "Even a brief moment spent beneath the mural feels to Sara like traveling back a hundred years in time," she says (Lalami 18) reflecting the kind of labour all the detainees undergoing in the novel.

The plastic-framed photo of her twins is more than a keepsake, it's a lifeline to her in the facility, a hope, a connection to the outer world, and a symbol of love that the system cannot erase. Initially, she was against journaling because "she worried that whatever she wrote could be held against her by agents who cared only about the data, not about the truth." (Lalami 15), where she shares her thoughts and artwork, becomes a personal sanctuary to communicate what the AI seeks to suppress. The storybooks and Frank Kafka's novel *Metamorphosis* that she receives from a fellow prisoner in exchange for hand sanitizer during the facility's Norovirus outbreak represent the struggle between physical survival and the preservation of humanity. The novel embodies inner life, introspection, and her resistance against the dehumanizing systems of the Madison facility, while sanitizer stands for safety, control, and the protection of the body. This small act of trade, which puts her own safety at risk, turns into a quiet rebellion that she recently started by giving up the tasks assigned to her in the facility. This demonstrates how the human need for purpose, creativity, and emotional survival endures even in the face of fear, bureaucracy, and isolation.

As we read the material more closely, we learn that Sara's roommate Emily is making a comic about a pyromaniac mutant. She can't afford colors, but she spends all of her money on paper and pencils. This absence of color

symbolizes the options and freedoms she was denied, where an imagination seems limited, and it portrays the quiet deprivation that everyone in the facility goes through. This is why her comic, which features a mutant woman with fire in her hands, matters so much. Emily transforms her artwork into a small act of resistance and hope, creating a universe where a woman can transcend constraints even in the absence of color. Another level of significance is added to Emily's art by having Sara pose for her model of the fire-powered mutant lady, as Sara becomes the live spark that burns through the facility's restrictions and ultimately regains her freedom.

Everybody at the facility has their own tiny means of clinging to themselves since their only remaining freedoms are small rituals. In the end, only Sara and Toya were able to take these little rituals and turn them into a protracted protest before leaving the facility. For example, Victoria Aguilar uses little gestures, jokes, and amusing expressions to make mealtimes into a little show for her prisoners. Marcela DeLeon, a sharp jello guitarist, clings to her instrument once the facility has approved it. Through books, especially those by Chester Himes, who is well-known for both his powerful social protest and his unique hard-boiled detective series, Toya sustains her relationship. The antiseptic walls will never be able to provide her with the kind of understanding that his characters do.

Sara's memories of her kids, her education, and her identity beyond facts are what keep her going. As a postcolonial African historian, Sara is aware that systems and borders are created rather than predetermined. The book refuses to provide a tidy conclusion. According to Sara, freedom is "teeming and complicated and, yes, risky," and it must be developed collaboratively (Lalami 330). The logic of prediction itself is rejected by this ambiguous conclusion.

IX. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE AND GLOBAL CONTEXT

Despite its futuristic setting, *The Dream Hotel* resonates strongly with modern reality because the control mechanisms it envisions are already present in daily life. The novel's governance is based on data-driven evaluations, biometric surveillance, and predictive algorithms that purport to be impartial while perpetuating preexisting social biases, as

Lalami demonstrates through Sara Hussein's detention. Predictive policing systems, algorithmic risk scores, airport biometric screening, and AI-driven mental health monitoring are examples of real-world practices where people are increasingly assessed by opaque technological systems rather than by human judgment. These practices are reflected in this theoretical framework.

In recent years, biometric surveillance at airports and borders has increased under the pretext of "national security," while predictive policing tools like COMPAS in the US have come under heavy fire for disproportionately targeting racial minorities. The novel illustrates how automated systems can turn suspicion into punishment without due process, much like Sara's experience at LAX, where a routine immigration check escalates into indefinite confinement. Similar reasoning is used by The Dream Hotel's Risk Assessment Administration to predict future harm based on probabilistic data, blurring the lines between crime, dream, and thought.

Lalami's portrayal of DreamSaver technology also touches on current debates about data extraction and permission. Examples of gadgets marketed as wellness tools today include biometric wearables, sleep trackers, and mental health apps that already collect individual physical and psychological data. DreamSaver, a harmless sleep aid at first in the book, eventually transforms into a surveillance tool that converts dreams into useful information, illustrating how easily corporate and governmental interests can take control of a person's private life. This pattern resembles real-world situations where user data from health apps has been shared with law enforcement or sold to third parties, often without the user's knowledge.

Global inequality is another important area where reality and fiction collide. Before becoming widespread, invasive surveillance technologies are frequently tested on marginalized and disadvantaged groups, including immigrants, racial minorities, and economically disadvantaged groups. Sara's immigrant background and Moroccan heritage make her particularly susceptible to algorithmic mistrust, reflecting the unequal distribution of technological "experiments" in society. Similar patterns can be seen in real surveillance systems, where refugees and members of the Global South are routinely subjected to

biometric identification systems long before these technologies are used in more privileged and wealthy settings.

By situating dystopia inside familiar places like elementary school refurbished into detention facility, airports, wellness technologies, and formal language, The Dream Hotel rejects the convenience of distance. Similar to contemporary euphemisms like "preventive detention" or "risk management," the "retention center" that pretends to be a care facility illustrates how administrative language, as opposed to overt violence, undermines freedom. By doing this, Lalami's book acts as a warning and a mirror, compelling readers to think about who benefits financially and politically from surveillance infrastructures, whose rights are being violated in the name of safety, and why resistance usually doesn't surface until technological control has already taken hold.

X. CONCLUSION

The Dream Hotel by Laila Lalami envisions a future in which capital surveillance and AI policing subtly restructure social life. Instead of using violence, control is exercised through efficiency, comfort, and economic reasoning. Dreams turn into data. Identity turns into a danger. Conditions are placed on freedom. The novel's restraint is what gives it its power. Because the world it portrays is similar to the real world, it seems plausible. Lalami illustrates how injustice can continue in the absence of spectacle by basing dystopia on routine activities and formal language. In the end, The Dream Hotel serves as a reminder to readers that the most perilous systems are those that seem logical and unavoidable. Instead of being imposed abruptly, the future it envisions is gradually constructed through decisions that appear modest, sensible, and challenging to reject.

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