

Posthuman Subjectivity and Digital Surveillance in Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits*

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Abstract

This paper examines Samit Basu's renowned novel Chosen Spirits through the lenses of digital modernity, psychopolitics and posthumanism to demonstrate how technologically mediated societies strip human subjectivity of its essence. The novel highlights the extensive use and pervasive presence of technological surveillance and digital performance to demonstrate governmental control over the lives of the individuals in society. Set in the near-future dystopian city of Delhi shaped by digital hyperconnectivity, the novel primarily narrates the lives of a group of friends, especially Joey, who works in a media and communication industry. Throughout the novel, Joey's life and experiences are seen to be shaped by digital performativity and technological control, indicating a posthuman dystopian state in which digital frameworks and technology become inseparable from the formation of human identity. Drawing on Shoshana Zuboff's ideas regarding surveillance capitalism, N. Katherine Hayles's notion of posthuman condition and Rosi Braidotti's views on posthumanism, this paper examines how Chosen Spirits portrays the emergence of posthuman subjectivity through technologically mediated individuals in a dystopian society shaped by surveillance capitalism and digital control.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Digital Surveillance, Psychopolitics, Surveillance Capitalism, Digital Performativity.

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed the unprecedented emergence of technological epoch in the history of humankind, wherein human existence has been profoundly transformed by digitality, artificial intelligence and algorithmic governance. This growing dependence on digitality has formed a new sense of identity on the part of an individual self, which can be termed as technologically mediated selves in which human activities, choices and emotions remain intertwined with technology. In today's digital world, humans are no longer fully autonomous agents but have become datafied selves, where they are no longer in control of their privacy and identity. As Joris Van Hoboken argues, "Over the last decade, we have witnessed a remarkable concentration of power in the hands of a handful of dominant technology companies, which are together providing the services and platforms that are giving shape to the digital environment" (259). This growing dominance of technology has increasingly undermined individual autonomy as "personal information, including data from and about individualized

interactions between users and the internet has become a key ingredient in the production of digital functionality in this environment in ways that challenge existing approaches to data privacy rights” (259). This paper examines Samit Basu’s *Chosen Spirits* to demonstrate how excessive dependence on digital technologies, digital performativity and machines contributes to the formation of posthuman subjectivity. Posthumanism has emerged as a significant framework in contemporary literary analysis. It emerges as an important theoretical framework and challenges the traditional belief that human beings are free and autonomous. Instead, in the contemporary period, posthuman thinkers emphasise that the formation of human identity is entangled with machines, technological structure and digital frameworks. As argued by Rosi Braidotti:

The relationship between the human and the technological other has shifted in the contemporary context to reach unprecedented degrees of intimacy and intrusion. The posthuman predicament is such as to force a displacement of the lines of demarcation between structural differences, or ontological categories, for instance between the organic and the inorganic, the born and the manufactured, flesh and metal, electronic circuits and organic nervous systems(89).

Moreover, it can be contended that this stronghold of technology and digital frameworks has constituted the foundations of surveillance capitalism and digital control wherein technology wields its power by exerting significant influence over human subjectivity and autonomous modes of human existence in society. With the advent of technology in the contemporary era, capitalism derives its economic value not only through the means of production and exchange of goods but also through “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff 9). As suggested by Zuboff, surveillance capitalism denotes a newer form of economic practice in which personal data is collected and converted into profits through algorithms and behavioural prediction. While traditional capitalism suggests a disproportion between the means of production and rationality of human labour, surveillance capitalism extracts, monitors and analyses online behaviour, digital activities and makes individuals psychologically subordinated to technological systems and digital performativity.

Samit Basu’s *Chosen Spirits* vividly portrays a near-future dystopian society in which digital surveillance, corporate capitalism, technology and influencer culture alienate human subjectivity. The novel centers on the life of Joey, who is a “reality controller” (Basu, ch.1) for Flowstars. These Flowstars are the highly influential digital celebrities whose lives are constantly livestreamed and Joey is entrusted with the duty of managing celebrity public images and shaping public reactions through digitality. From the beginning of the novel, Joey’s life is surrounded by technology and digital frameworks. The author shows that as Joey becomes indulged in the digital paranoia of managing these online narratives, she becomes exhausted and emotionally emptied. Joey’s excessive involvement with this digital performativity subordinates her identity, highlighting the manipulative nature of the entertainment industry. The author’s portrayal of digital performativity in the novel clearly resonates with posthumanism as it shows the overpowering impact of technology in shaping the lives of individuals. Throughout the novel, the presence of Artificial intelligence (AI) powered assistants such as “Narad” (Basu, ch.1) underscores how human existence becomes inseparable from technology. Moreover, as the novel progresses, Basu exposes the increasingly darker realities of futuristic Delhi. Individuals continue to live under digital vigilance as political ideologies continue to grip the lives of people through fear and propaganda. In fact, the novel presents a compelling and powerful vision of digital dystopia in which human actions are monitored through technological surveillance. The digital system remains hostile to dissenting voices that challenge the ideologies of the dominant political establishment. Therefore, by drawing on the theoretical frameworks of psychopolitics,

posthumanism and surveillance capitalism, this paper seeks to demonstrate the condition of individuals in a posthuman dystopian society in which human lives are shaped by technology. The study primarily involves close textual analysis of the novel, placing emphasis on the thematic structure, representation of characters and the intricate involvement of technology and digitality, which carry the narrative forward.

Analysis and Discussion

In “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century”, Donna J. Haraway, commenting upon the growing relevance of technology and machines, affirms that “Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert”(152). The statement evokes a distinctly posthuman perspective, where human beings are no longer the centre of the universe, suggesting how with technological advancements the identities of humans have become connected to digital frameworks. Set in the near-future dystopian society of Delhi, *Chosen Spirits* demonstrates how virtual and digital technologies underpin posthuman notions and at the same time, as argued by N. Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman*, underscores this fact that “this view of the posthuman also offers resources for thinking in more sophisticated ways about virtual technologies” (270). Hayles further argues that the intervention of technology and machines has served as one of the central ways through which the discourse of posthumanism came into existence. The central character in the novel Joey, who is a professional image builder for Flowstars, “feels like her whole life is a montage of randomly selected, algorithm-controlled surveillance-cam clips, mostly of her looking at screens or sitting glazed-eyed at meetings” (Basu, ch.1). The opening chapter of the novel portrays a technologically mediated society in which everyday human activities are increasingly structured by digital tools. Joey, who is bound by the duty to protect and manage the digital personas of certain celebrities, finds herself increasingly immersed in a network of AI tools, digital gadgets and smart tattoos. The narrator notes, “on her wrist, her smartatt pulses: a stress alert” (Basu, ch.1). The smart tattoo always remains connected to Joey’s body; it measures her sensations and accordingly directs her daily endeavours. Here, the smart tattoo, which tracks pulses and continually monitors physiological responses serves as an indication of how technology has become an essential part of the human body, suggesting a posthuman epoch where humans are no longer free from technological intervention and thereby suggesting a posthuman condition in which the boundaries between the organic and the technological become increasingly blurred. Moreover, Joey’s AI assistant, Narad, which monitors her activities further exemplifies the growing entanglement of human and machine within a posthuman framework. When Joey feels stressed and emotionally tense, Narad sends virtual hugs and loving emojis, illustrating the algorithmic mediation and digitisation of emotional experience. The conversation between Joey and Narad shows this:

You seem unhappy, Narad texts. Care to share? No. I can read your emotions more effectively if you do a simple series of facial exercises. Initiate fun-learn now? No. Would you like me to set up an appointment with a therapist? Tap here to see Top 5 results for you. I have to find my ex-boyfriend and current colleague an onscreen girlfriend,’ Joey says. ‘Do you have anything helpful to say? Would you like to hear a selection of inspirational quotes about love, break-ups, coping, finding new love, office relationships, hiring the best candidate or secrets of long-format content? (Basu, ch.2)

Empathy, once considered as an exclusively human attribute, has become increasingly technologised. The novel also displays the blend between digital gadgets and traditional art forms. In chapter one, Joey gets information about an ongoing protest by taking a picture of a kolam and then uploading it on a decoder app. Here, a traditional kolam design becomes

a medium for data extraction, demonstrating how even cultural artifacts are incorporated into digital systems of information gathering. Joey's holidays are also never free from digital intervention. On Sundays, Joey's streaming account remains occupied as her parents watch entertaining shows there, suggesting how digital tools have become part of their routine life. The novel repeatedly depicts the characters engaging in Flowverse to build and maintain carefully their curated digital personas. These engagements with digital platforms indicate the omnipresence of technology in the lives of people in a posthuman society. Indi, the ex-boyfriend of Joey, is a popular flowstar or online influencer whose image depends upon the degree and intensity of digital performance. Joey is entrusted with the task of "boosting Indi's value as a nationwide trendsplainer" (Basu, ch.2) and enhancing Indi's digital visibility. Indi's identity is inseparable from digital technologies. His curated online persona is shaped by corporate interests and data-driven marketing, highlighting how corporate platforms gain profit by commodifying personal identity and transforming digital visibility into economic value. Amid these technologically mediated forms of existence, where human and technological agencies have become increasingly intertwined, the novel also highlights the pervasive influence of digital frameworks on the lives of humans, demonstrating the decentering of the autonomous human subjects in posthuman frameworks. This pervasive technological influence manifests itself through mechanisms of digital monitoring and self-regulation whereby individuals internalise systems of control and surveillance digital technologies. In the book, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, Byung-Chul Han argues that in today's technology-driven era human psychology is shaped by big data and "if Big Data has access to the realm of our unconscious actions and inclinations, it is possible to construct a psychopolitics that would reach deep into our psyche to exploit it" (64). Byung-Chul Han utilises psychopolitics to argue that in contemporary capitalist structure, the human body "no longer represents a central force of production, as it formerly did in biopolitical, disciplinary society" (25). In today's capitalist structure, "it has discovered the psyche as a productive force—that is, the turn to psychopolitics" (25). Consequently, psychopolitics emerges as a new dominant mechanism of contemporary capitalism, regulating human emotions, desires and behaviour through digital technologies and data-driven systems. Joey's role as an image builder for the Flowstars exemplifies the operation of psychopolitical control as her job is to safeguard and manage digitally mediated identities of the Flowstars. Although Joey contemplates distancing herself from Flowverse, the platform's pervasive digital ecosystem continually compels her to manage and curate the public images of the Flowstars. Here, Joey's immersion in the ecosystem of Flowverse shows how contemporary digital culture regulates human emotions and behaviour through data-driven technology. Although Joey is not explicitly coerced into participating in the platform's ecosystem, Floweverse exerts a subtle form of psychological influence that encourages voluntary participation, often resulting in psychological exhaustion. As the narrative progresses, the posthuman vision gradually evolves into a digital dystopia which seems to evoke the characters' perpetual struggles in a posthuman dystopia. However, this dystopic intervention is different from mere physical vigilance and monitoring, showcasing the growing influence of digital surveillance or surveillance capitalism. As argued by Shoshana Zuboff, "Surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data" (9). Apart from the constant monitoring of human behaviour, these digital platforms utilise those datafied patterns of behaviour to develop sophisticated mechanisms of prediction, regulation and social control. The author vividly explores how the ownership of data and networks helps powerful elites to create a divide between the elite and marginalised through the control and manipulation of data, suggesting how the elites maintain social inequalities through algorithms and control over data. Preetigandha Naik, in "Exploring

Dalit-Futurism in Caste-Flavored Techno-Scientific Worlds” argues:

These social inequalities are orchestrated and maintained through media organizations that operate on the FlowVerse. The FlowVerse hosts multiple FlowStars simultaneously, and engineers multiple realities, a hyperbolized version of our contemporary reality wherein AI algorithms on social media craft an exclusive “feed” that is in tune with an individual’s tastes, preferences, and attitudes. Initially, the FlowVerse was being used by the marginalised to highlight their opinions, but over time was seized by caste-corporate entities. (47)

This argument illuminates how within the surveillance framework, the author demonstrates the divide between the digitally empowered elites and the technologically marginalised communities. The elites in the novel are described through the concept of “access-caste”(Basu, ch.3), signifying their privileged access to data, technology and digital networks which they use to remain informed about the society. On the other hand, the marginalised people remain excluded from data-driven systems of knowledge and technological participation. The author explicitly demonstrates this digital divide between the elite and the marginalised by comparing and contrasting the lives of Chopra and Jyoti, thereby exposing how unequal access to data and technology reproduces the existing social hierarchies. Chopra, being the elite, has access to data and technology, while Jyoti remains perpetually marginalised in gathering information and having access to data-driven technologies. The writer has vividly argued through the character of Rudra, who says:

Jyoti will never know what his rating is, or get to rate anyone else: it’ll be wholly secret, wholly automated, based on every transaction, every observed adherence to or violation of every unwritten rule, every movement, every word spoken or messaged [...]only the Chopras of the world will have access[...]. (Basu, ch.3)

These developments exemplify the condition of posthuman dystopia wherein the excessive reliance on data and technological systems erodes human subjectivity and autonomy. The utilisation of digital technologies in the prospect of caste division indicates how in a posthuman dystopian society privileged individuals consolidate their power and authority through extraction, control and manipulation of data. Earlier, the practice of caste discrimination was perpetuated by marginalising the lower caste and denying them social roles equal to those enjoyed by the elites. However, in a posthuman dystopian society, where human activities are connected to technology, powerful people exploit data-driven systems and digital infrastructure to reinforce existing social hierarchies and inequalities.

The novel further discusses how the posthuman conditions produce datafied subjectivities within a technologically mediated society, where the notions of authentic selfhood are increasingly displaced by digital performativity. In a posthuman society, the demarcation of human agency and digital technologies gets blurred because humans become increasingly merged with technology, treating it as the sole condition that determines their relevance. Rosi Braidotti argues in *The Posthuman* that “discourses and representations of the non-human, the inhuman, the anti-human, the inhumane and the posthuman proliferate and overlap in our globalized, technologically mediated societies”(2). This comment highlights that in a posthuman world, the clear distinctions between human, inhuman, anti-human and even posthuman get blurred as everything is shaped by digital technologies. In the novel, one of the Flowstars, Indi presents his intimate encounter with his stylist as a carefully orchestrated digital performance designed for public consumption, making sure that the performance reaches as many people as possible and thereby earning for himself the opportunity to be in the limelight. This suggests that Indi’s identity is no longer grounded in physical embodiment alone, but is constituted through digital network, algorithmic governance and online audience, solidifying Rosi Braidotti’s view that

human subjectivity becomes entangled with non-human platforms in a technologically mediated society. The public circulation of such intimate moments in the digital domain underscores the decaying value of human essence in a posthuman world, where the relevance of human agency is solely dependent upon digital performance and algorithmic engagement.

Moreover, the novel also offers a critique of how institutional power deploys digital technologies to marginalise those who stand against its ideologies, highlighting the vigilance and politicisation of digital platforms. This is identical to the concept of Foucault's panopticon, but here institutional surveillance operates through digital monitoring instead of physical vigilance. Commenting on this paradigm of surveillance, Byung-Chul Han in *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* argues:

Big Data is leading to the emergence of a new digital class society. Human beings assigned to the "waste" category belong to the lowest class. People with a bad score are denied credit. Thus, the panopticon has been joined by a "ban-opticon". The panopticon kept watch over prisoners of the system who were incarcerated. The ban-opticon, on the other hand, is a dispositive that identifies persons who stand outside the system or are hostile to it, and excludes them. In contrast, the ban-opticon ensures the system's security and efficiency. (66)

The character of Zaria, an investigative journalist, explicitly represents how institutional power excludes those who remain hostile to the system in a posthuman framework. Zaria's reports frequently challenge dominant political ideals by exposing criminal activities, class division, social injustice and violation of human rights. Zaria serves as a constant threat to the dominant political ideals. Therefore, her reports and videos are subjected to immediate online censorship and internet blocking and this highlights how political power maintains its dominance by monitoring digital technologies in a posthuman framework in which individuals are only served the curated versions of reality of the society. Moreover, the constant death threats directed at Zaria by different political institutions, politicians, online trolls and organised mobs further substantiate this fact that power operates across multiple social and technological domains to penalise those who remain opposed to the dominant ideologies. The author vividly portrays the convergence between political authority and the manipulation of digital technologies to highlight that power operates through digital digital monitoring in a posthuman framework:

She's been chased out of cities by murderous mobs, shot at by riot police, gone entirely underground for months, been doxxed multiple times and assaulted quite a few. She's faced death threats from a sea of internet trolls, members of Parliament, religious leaders and major CEOs. She's survived actual assassination attempts. She shot to national fame after Hindu extremists put a price on her head, after a series of stories about cow corpses blocking highways because nobody dared to touch them. (Basu, ch.7)

It is important to note that despite the digital suppression of her online narratives, the character of Zaria presents a dissenting perspective on digital surveillance and political control. Zaria demonstrates how digital platforms themselves can be appropriated to challenge hegemonic discourses and dominant structures of power. Since her mid-teens, she has utilised digital platforms as spaces to voice her resistance against the political establishment. One such notable instance highlighted in the novel is that "there are even videos of her shouting pro-democracy slogans in Shaheen Bagh as a child" (Basu, ch. 7). Such instances position Zaria as a figure of resistance against the same dominant political ideologies that utilise technology and algorithms to monitor, regulate and manipulate dissenting voices. In fact, in this regard her actions resonate with Michel Foucault's argument in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* regarding power and resistance. Foucault argues that "Where there is power, there is resistance" (95). Furthermore, it can be contended that Basu's representation of Zaria stands in marked contrast to his

portrayal of Joey. While Joey remains deeply entangled within systems digital performativity and algorithmic control, Zaria appropriates the same digital platforms to confront social and political injustices, thereby foregrounding the view that technology and digital spaces also could have an emancipatory potential in that it could facilitate freedom of expression and reinforce individual agency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* reflects a potent vision of a posthuman dystopia in which human subjectivity and agency get increasingly subordinated to digital technologies, algorithmic systems and surveillance mechanisms. One of the novel's most significant contributions lies in its exploration of the intersections among posthumanism, surveillance capitalism, psychopolitics and digital surveillance within the context of contemporary Indian society. It is important to note that the novel's treatment of the posthuman condition is subtle yet persuasive, thereby revealing how contemporary human subjectivities have been formed by digital and technological systems. Unlike other posthuman narratives that explicitly incorporate robots and other non-human elements, *Chosen Spirits* primarily employs data, technology and algorithmic engagement to present the growing entanglement of human and technological existence. Furthermore, the novel also addresses the inherent issues of caste and marginalisation through the use of digital framework. The notion of the "access-caste" (Basu, ch.3), which demonstrates how the elites take control of information through manipulation of data, thereby reproducing the existing forms of social discrimination which too is mainly based on caste system. The novel also critiques the ways in which political institutions and structures of power operate through digital surveillance, data extraction and information control, thereby reinforcing the notions and characteristics of a posthuman dystopian society. Overall, through an analysis of the convergence between posthumanism and the influence of digital technologies on human life, this study offers a critical reading of *Chosen Spirits* to demonstrate that human agency and socio-political structures are increasingly mediated by machines and digital technologies. It thus foregrounds the emergence of a technologically mediated world in which human subjectivity, identity and social relations are increasingly shaped by digital networks, algorithmic governance and surveillance technologies.

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