

From Dao to Data: Spiritual Alienation in Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits*

Dr. Sonia James^{1*}, Ms. Sophia James², Dr. Meera Elizabeth James³

¹Department of English, St. Peter's College, Kolenchery, Kerala, India | Email: sonia.james@stpeterscollege.ac.in

²Department of English, Morning Star College, Kerala, India | Email: sophiajamesmorningstar@gmail.com

³Department of English, Baselius College, Kottayam, Kerala, India | Email: meeraej@gmail.com

***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Sonia James | Email: sonia.james@stpeterscollege.ac.in

Abstract

This paper is a critical reading of *Chosen Spirits* (2020) written by Samit Basu with the aim of analysing the juxtaposition of ancient Daoist thought of cosmic harmony with the modern paradigm of digital alienation. The novel portrays a condition of spiritual dislocation created by algorithmic control in contrast to the Daoist concept of the organic and uninterrupted flow of human existence. The hyperrealist world of the novel projects a highly mediated and commodified day-to-day life where everything is quantified by the networks of surveillance. The text is a specimen of South Asian cyberpunk which portrays a speculative near-future Delhi that is a technologically saturated dystopia. The theory of surveillance capitalism put forward by Shoshana Zuboff and the formulation of digital psychopolitics by Byung-Chul Han are employed as theoretical frameworks for the study.

Augrels are the institutionalized augmented religions in the narrative. The notion of “The Years Not to Be Discussed” stands for the digitally manipulated erasure of collective historical memory. This is a clear demonstration of how the internal conscience of the human subject is systematically erased, denying existential agency as well. Basu presents frugal or makeshift innovation and grassroots solidarity of human beings, though on a small scale, as possible localized versions of ontological resistance against the tyrannical coercions of the data economy.

Keywords: Dao, Tyranny of Algorithmic Manipulation, Surveillance Capitalism, Psychopolitics, Spiritual Dislocation, Daoistic Ontology.

Introduction

In the genre of speculative fiction, cyberpunk is apt for representing the anxieties aroused by the technological transgression of the human mind and subjectivity. Technological and corporate hegemony has destabilised the human subject. Classic Western cyberpunk has been pioneered by William Gibson, Bruce Sterling and Philip K. Dick. The dread they highlighted was the existential angst generated by the overlapping of the biological and the mechanical.

However, recent South Asian speculative fiction has explored a different terrain. The Indian English writer Samit Basu in his *Chosen Spirits* (2020), published internationally as *The City Inside*, probes into how the human psyche and consciousness are victims of technological colonization. One does not find any cyborg modification of the physical body as in the usual cyberpunk.

Daoism is a philosophical and spiritual tradition which originated in ancient China. The classical Eastern philosophical tradition signifies the Dao as the organic medium of cosmic harmony which is ultimate and unmediated. Dao is the ineffable spirit that governs the cosmos and nature. In this state of being, life moves in perfect alignment with the natural flow of existence, unaffected by artificial constructs. Laozi put forward the concept of *Dao De Jing* which is against artificiality of any kind, imposing structures and forceful striving. Simplicity, emptiness and stillness are the values necessary to generate meaningful harmony. Data is quite contrary to Dao. The rule of data has led to the regime of surveillance capitalism by fragmenting and monetizing the existence of human beings. Their behavioural data is continuously monitored, extracted and engineered for corporate profit. This has led to a spiritual dislocation of the postcolonial subject from the cultural internal moral compass which has sustained the core of existence.

Basu's novel is consciously placed at the turn of the 2030s, by which time Delhi is a smog-choked, water-scarce New Delhi. Most often, Delhi is presented as a spectacular place drenched with neon bulbs by the aesthetic of cinematic dystopias. The setting of *Chosen Spirits* delineates a highly plausible socio-political structure terrifyingly dominated and controlled by the vibrant and powerful digital ecosystem. *Wu wei* or "non-forceful action" is a Daoist concept which is critically applicable in *Chosen Spirits*. It does not mean passivity, but is living in tune with the flow of nature. Laozi has explained this in *Dao De Jing* that the Dao never acts, yet nothing is left undone. Manipulation through coercion is a threat to harmony and balance. *Ziran* is another Daoist concept which means naturalness, authenticity and spontaneity. In this system human beings do not live in accordance with artificial social expectations but in harmony with their inherent nature.

The novel *Chosen Spirits* portrays a world which is opposite to the Daoist principles. Technological surveillance and artificially constructed identities govern the individuals and the social relations. Interpersonal relationships are shaped by social media platforms and visibility in the digital world is the primary requirement for recognition in society. The system demands individuals to stay perpetually in digital connectivity and not in harmony with natural rhythms. The novel emphasises how the Daoist balance is challenged by technological capitalism when digital communication mediates emotional intimacy, political discourse is transformed into performative spectacle and personal identity is hidden behind the veil of online personas. When the individuals are increasingly connected in the digital world, they are seemingly more spiritually isolated.

One can find an anti-Daoist modernity in the novel where people are increasingly alien to silence, reflection and genuine relations. The characters are forced to perform continuously to remain visible in the

digital world. The shift from Dao to data results in a spiritual transformation which replaces organic existence with algorithmic logic.

The narrative moves through Bijoyini Roy, who is called Joey. She is an Associate Reality Controller for “The Flow” of the “Flowstar” or influencer named Indi. He is charismatic but problematic. Joey curates, edits and broadcasts Indi’s daily life. There is Rudra, Joey’s family friend, who is estranged from the corrupt corporate dynasty of his family. He finds refuge in media editing in order to escape from his family’s data driven business empire.

Basu criticises the digital networks which manipulate human subjectivity for profit. The theory put forward by Shoshana Zuboff in her text *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) is employed in the study to investigate how human experience and emotions are metamorphosed into behavioural surplus for predictive modification. The paper further uses Byung-Chul Han’s concept of *Psychopolitics* (2017) to trace how the data-driven advanced power structures not only stifle the individual through physical intimidation but plunders even the soul as a productive force.

The key argument of the paper is how *Chosen Spirits* brings about a remarkable paradigm shift in postcolonial cyberpunk. It reveals that the data oligarchy aims not only at economic exploitation or political surveillance, but its ultimate goal is an ontological takeover. The organic flow of life of Dao is overthrown and replaced with the curated, algorithmic “Flow” of data stream which yields maximum profit.

Authenticity in Peril

“The Flow” which is an omniscient digital surveillance in *Chosen Spirits* is truly a threat to spiritual alignment. According to classical philosophical practices “the flow” of life stands for a condition of unforced consciousness, a willing submission to the flow of the present moment which leads to genuine connection between human beings and with nature. “The Flow” in Basu’s Delhi is a hyper- real version of the internet which is intensely commercialized and privatized, a kind of sensory reality television where livestreaming and algorithmic surveillance are [synthesized. It](#) manipulates and manufactures reality for the consumption of the public.

Joey’s duty as digital Reality Controller is to mediate the digital current. At the beginning of the novel, she herself expresses her frustration at this creation of hyper-mediated consciousness. “ Sometimes Joey 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 3). This is an evident example of the ontological fragmentation which is the result of digital spiritual dislocation. Joey has lost the organic nature of life. She has an alienated perception about herself as she spends her time manipulating the show through the surveillance cameras and algorithmic feeds. Her identity is a fractured one of being both the spectator and the commodity.

The Erasure of the Real by Hyperreality

The theory of hyperreality put forward by Jean Baudrillard can be employed to analyse the world presented in *Chosen Spirits*. Baudrillard is of the opinion that simulacra dominates contemporary hyperreal societies. Reality is less convincing when compared to more powerful simulations. Mediated representation overpowers authentic experience. The novel depicts how social media platforms strategically construct skillfully curated public identities far removed from their true emotional selves.

Joey's duty is to manage Indi's public persona through commodifying his charisma and intimacy. The subscribers of the "Flow" indulge themselves in the emotional and sensory data manufactured by the production controller. Genuine and vulnerable aspects of the flowstar are precisely edited to suit the marketing expectations of the corporate sponsors. If Indi goes through an emotional breakdown or an unexpected display of genuine self, Joey has to use algorithmic filters and reframe the narrative by employing targeted emotional triggers so that the audience remains engaged to the maximum. Shoshana Zuboff defines this dynamic as the extraction of "behavioural surplus". In her opinion, surveillance capitalism "... unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data... manufactured into *prediction products* that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and next" (Zuboff 8).

It is very difficult to sustain authenticity in such a world where the characters are conscious performers. Everything is a spectacle including politics, media and personal life. The simulated hyperreal world leads to a loss of meaning as there is a circulation of science without stable referents. In spite of an active life in the digital world, characters in the novel feel spiritual emptiness. Relationships are artificial and there is no genuine belonging.

Daoism focuses on simplicity and genuine connection to lived reality. The condition in the novel is in stark contrast to the Daoist concepts of authentic existence. Individuals are estranged from direct experience by the powerful systems of representation. The narratives created by media and consciously created digital spectacles shape the public consciousness and they remain indifferent towards structural violence and authoritarian control. Political power enforces surveillance and manipulates the citizens by getting them absorbed unawares in technological entertainment and online discourses. The data - driven life is a move away from Dao, ie, from reality to simulation. Individuals are alienated not only from fellow beings but also from their own selves.

Quantification of Religion through Augrels

The novel talks about augmented religions which are called Augrels. There are apps called Smartatts (ie, smart tattoos). Both Augrels and Smartatts represent the literal quantification of the soul and the interception of human intimacy. Traditional religions have not been eradicated by advancement of technology, but they have been re-engineered into data -driven compliance mechanisms.

The wrists of the citizens of Delhi have been etched with Smartatts which function as the spiritual interface of the quantified spirituality. They are active, real- time biophysical and behavioural trackers, not mere passive identifiers. They can monitor heart rates, hormone spikes, consumer purchases and social interactions and are capable of translating these variables into a dynamic social and moral credit score. Good conduct and compliance and conformity to the corporate world and its ideology leads to rise in the spiritual - metric ledger of individuals. If one expresses anxiety or dissent, or associates with marginalized individuals, the scale will plummet.

In his work *Psycho politics*, Byung - Chul Han has theorised on the hybridization of technology and faith. He contends that neoliberal power structures do not operate through somatic suppression, modern power turns its focus inward. He says, "Digital psychopolitics proceeds from the monitoring of behavioral data to the active intervention in the psychological substrate of the individual....It does not negate or repress our freedom; rather, it exploits it. Freedom is capitalised"(Han 14).

'Augrels' in the novel symbolise the ultimate realisation of this psychopolitical control. Faith is no longer an internal and unquantifiable state of the soul, it is a gamified, external power play. The spiritual impulse is redirected into a corporate loyalty program. High moral scores, as determined by the algorithm, unlock tangible socio-economic privileges: access to clean water, passage through elite security checkpoints, and invitations to exclusive, corporate-sponsored utopian cult retreats. These retreats are marketed as spaces of ultimate spiritual peace, but they are in fact heavily monitored enclaves designed to reinforce the status quo of the ruling elite.

The profound spiritual dislocation here lies in the total alienation of the individual from their own conscience. Under the regime of the Smartatt, an individual does not refrain from an unethical act because of an internal moral conviction; they refrain because they fear the immediate, algorithmic devaluation of their digital profile. Conversely, acts of charity or solidarity are stripped of their altruistic essence, performed instead as calculated maneuvers to optimize one's score.

The soul is thus completely evacuated of its sacred, mysterious interiority. It is mapped, parsed, and converted into a transparent ledger of data points, ensuring that the postcolonial subject is continuously self-regulating, self-optimizing, and self-policing in perfect accordance with the demands of the digital oligarchy.

The Erasure of Memory and Digital Dispossession

A foundational tenant of spiritual stability, both for the individual and the collective, is the possession of an unbroken historical consciousness. To know who one is requires an uncorrupted relationship with the past—a grounding in ancestral memory, historical struggles, and geographical continuity. In *Chosen Spirits*, however, this continuity has been shattered through a systematic process of digital dispossession. The most striking manifestation of this temporal fracture is the cultural erasure of what the middle classes anxiously refer to as "The Years Not to Be Discussed" (14).

This euphemism blankets a turbulent period of real and speculative political violence, youth-led grassroots protests, citizenship revocations, and corporate-state crackdowns that immediately preceded the novel's timeline. Rather than executing a blunt, totalitarian erasure of history through physical book-burning, the ruling elite in Basu's world utilize the far more effective tools of digital saturation, algorithmic demotion, and memory curation. The internet firewall, colloquially named the Lakshman Rekha, acts as a national digital enclosure, systematically purging search results, altering metadata, and replacing records of state violence with an endless influx of trivial entertainment, consumer distractions, and hyper-nationalist propaganda.

This digital scrubbing results in a collective amnesia that deeply unmoors the younger generation. Joey retains fragmented, haunting memories of attending massive, organic protests during her teenage years—spaces of genuine, horizontal solidarity that mirrored the historic Shaheen Bagh movements. Yet, in the current digital landscape, those events have been rendered completely invisible. When she attempts to recall them, she is met with a wall of synthetic data that reframes those movements as chaotic acts of terrorism or historical insignificance.

This environment perfectly illustrates what Mark Fisher termed Capitalist Realism—the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it (Fisher 2). By erasing the memory of past resistance, the data oligarchy eliminates the imaginative capacity for future rebellion.

The ultimate terrifying axiom of this digital dispossession is summarized in the novel through the concept of "blood and no cameras" () In an era completely dominated by "The Flow," the ontological

status of any human event is entirely dependent on its digital transmission. Basu writes of a world where a brutal police crackdown or the disappearance of an entire marginalized settlement can occur in absolute silence if the local cellular towers are deactivated and surveillance feeds are looped. If an event cannot be converted into broadcastable, trackable, and consumable data, it functionally never happened.

The spiritual horror here is immense: human suffering, sacrifice, and death are robbed of their existential weight. They are denied a place in history because they failed to register on the digital ledger. The postcolonial subjects are thus left completely unanchored, drifting in a perpetual, synthetic present constructed by corporate algorithms, severed from the historical truths that give meaning to human existence.

Spatial Dislocation: The Fractured Topography of Delhi

The spiritual dislocation produced by data regimes is not confined to the digital sphere; it materializes directly within the fractured physical geography of New Delhi. In *Chosen Spirits*, the city is split into two distinct, irreconcilable topographies: the hyper-insulated, climate-controlled spaces of the techno-elite, and the choking, water-starved, hyper-surveilled reality inhabited by the subaltern and the struggling middle class.

The elite spaces are characterized by their complete detachment from the local ecology. These are corporate strongholds and gated communities shielded by advanced air-filtration domes and private water reserves, where the wealthy live in a state of synthetic comfort. Within these enclaves, technology functions seamlessly; the air is breathable, and the environment is an idealized, aestheticized extension of the global digital economy.

However, step outside these enclaves, and the physical reality of Delhi reveals itself as a dystopian nightmare of environmental degradation and infrastructural collapse. The city is suffocating under a permanent layer of toxic smog, and fresh water has become a highly militarized commodity controlled by predatory corporate monopolies.

This stark geographic divide induces a profound spatial dislocation in characters like Joey. To survive her daily commute, she must move between these two worlds, transitioning from the pristine, air-conditioned corporate offices of Flowco to the oppressive, burning heat of the Delhi streets. This physical movement mirrors her psychological fragmentation. In the corporate dome, she is an omnipotent digital curator shaping the desires of millions; on the street, she is a vulnerable biological organism inhaling toxic particulates, subjected to the constant gaze of roadside facial-recognition cameras and the threat of molka (hidden spy cameras) planted arbitrarily by gig-economy workers.

Furthermore, the domestic sphere offers no refuge from this invasive spatial network. In the apartments of the middle class, traditional spaces of familial intimacy are completely penetrated by corporate hardware. Smart appliances, automated security systems, and AI assistants like the Narad units are ostensibly marketed as conveniences to manage schedules or monitor health. In reality, they function as corporate Trojan horses. Joey's Narad unit does not merely track her appointments; it monitors her physiological indicators, dryly informing her when she is experiencing an anxiety attack and immediately serving her advertisements for corporate-approved sedatives.

The home is no longer a sacred, private sanctuary for spiritual replenishment; it has been transformed into a transparent extraction chamber where every sigh, argument, and moment of vulnerability is immediately harvested as behavioral surplus.

Ontological Resistance: Jugaadpunk and the Reclamation of the Human

Faced with a monolithic data architecture that seeks to absorb and monetize every facet of human consciousness, the question of resistance in *Chosen Spirits* becomes a complex, high-stakes dilemma. Basu firmly rejects the naive, techno-utopian trope of the lone hacker capable of bringing down the entire system with a single virus. In a world where dissent itself is routinely anticipated, packaged, and sold back to the public as a counter-cultural aesthetic on "The Flow", traditional forms of political revolution are rendered largely ineffective. Instead, resistance within the novel takes on a distinctly South Asian character, manifesting as "jugaadpunk"—a gritty, localized form of ontological survival.

Jugaad, a Hindi term denoting a makeshift, creative workaround or an innovative fix born out of necessity and scarce resources, becomes the primary weapon against algorithmic totalization. Jugaadpunk represents the subversion of high-tech infrastructure by the marginalized and the displaced. It is seen in the actions of back-alley technicians, radical media editors, and underground collectives who hack corporate hardware, bypass the Lakshman Rekha firewall using improvised mesh networks, and construct blind spots within the ubiquitous surveillance apparatus.

This mode of resistance is epitomized by the character of Rudra. Born into immense wealth and privilege, Rudra's inheritance is tied directly to his family's corporate empire—a predatory conglomerate deeply complicit in algorithmic human exploitation and data-driven dispossession. Rudra's rebellion begins not with a grand political manifesto, but with an act of radical flight. He runs away from the sterile, elite digital enclaves and deliberately dives into the chaotic, unquantified underbelly of Delhi's gig-economy media editing labs.

By choosing to work in the shadows, editing raw video footage using hacked, open-source software alongside working-class technicians, Rudra is attempting to reclaim an authentic, unmonetized self. His resistance is fundamentally ontological; he is fighting to remove his consciousness from the predictive corporate loops that defined his upbringing.

Similarly, Joey's evolution throughout the novel traces a path toward micropolitical resistance. As the narrative progresses, she becomes increasingly disillusioned with the hyper-real, toxic circus of Flowco. Her internal transformation culminates not in an explosive public crusade, but in a quiet, deliberate decision to alter her professional practice from within. She begins using her immense skill as a Reality Controller to subtly manipulate "The Flow," inserting micro-narratives of real human solidarity, dropping hidden QR codes that lead to underground historical archives, and protecting vulnerable individuals from corporate predation.

This form of resistance finds its theoretical validation in the work of postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha, who conceptualize resistance not as a total, external overthrow of power, but as an act of hybridity and mimicry that disrupts the colonial or authoritative discourse from within its own spaces (Bhabha 122). The characters in *Chosen Spirits* do not destroy the data networks; instead, they occupy them, creating fissures, anomalies, and pockets of unquantified humanity.

The ultimate act of defiance in Basu's Delhi is the refusal to be completely translated into data. It is the insistence on maintaining small, unprofitable, and highly unpredictable spaces of genuine human empathy, memory, and connection. In a world that has replaced the Dao with Data, preserving the untranslatable mystery of human interiority becomes the most radical revolutionary act of all.

Conclusion: The Soul in the Age of Digital Enclosure

Samit Basu's *Chosen Spirits* offers a vital, deeply unsettling intervention into contemporary speculative fiction, providing a sharp blueprint of the anxieties plaguing the postcolonial digital subject. By tracing the transition from Dao to Data, this paper has demonstrated how the novel charts an existential crisis that extends far beyond economic exploitation or political authoritarianism. The true horror of Basu's near-future Delhi is its realization of an algorithmic spiritual dislocation—the complete enclosure and monetization of the human soul.

Through its sharp depiction of "The Flow," the novel demonstrates how genuine human intimacy is intercepted and replaced by engineered counterfeits designed purely to generate behavioral surplus. In its depiction of Augrels and Smartatts, the text illustrates a chilling psychopolitical reality where conscience is externalized and faith is degraded into an algorithmic credit system. Furthermore, through the systematic erasure of "The Years Not to Be Discussed" and the terrifying reality of "blood and no cameras," Basu exposes how digital networks dispossess communities of their historical memory, leaving them spiritually unanchored in a synthetic, corporate-managed present.

Yet, by grounding its final movements in the messy, resilient practice of jugaadpunk and localized human solidarity, *Chosen Spirits* refuses to succumb to absolute nihilism. Basu suggests that while the data oligarchy can construct a hyper-surveilled, highly restrictive world, it cannot completely extinguish the erratic, spontaneous, and sacred flow of human consciousness. The resistance of Joey and Rudra is small, exhausting, and devoid of cinematic triumph, but it proves that the human spirit remains a stubborn anomaly that cannot be entirely quantified.

For the field of postcolonial cyberpunk and science fiction studies, *Chosen Spirits* stands as a crucial warning. It reminds us that the ultimate frontier of technological colonization is not the land, the labor, or the body, but the internal architecture of the mind and spirit. As we hurtle toward increasingly quantified futures, Basu's novel serves as a powerful, ear-splitting scream for help—a urgent call to recognize the corporate machinery enclosing our lives, and to fiercely protect the unquantifiable Dao of our shared humanity before it is permanently lost to the archive of data.

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