A perpetual quest for human agency in the cyber world of KevinAnderson's Hopscotch

Amna Hashmi [1] Muhammad Noman Ur Rehman (Corresponding Author) [2]

[1] BS (Hons) English Literature, GGC Tahlianwala Jhelum, Pakistan amnahashmi323@gmail.com

[2] Lecturer in Department of English Government Graduate College Talianwala Jhelum, uk4541746@gmail.com

Abstract

The transition through eras, presents forth a spectrum of meanings in regards to the term 'agency'. The events and circumstances particular to each age, human beings endeavor to retain their freedom and agency as an expression of non-conformity in the accepted discourse. This article aims to highlight the challenges and barriers to practice human agency in a cyber world, a world where everything is under constant surveillance. It utilizes Micheal de Certeau's (1925-1986) concept of dark spaces, explained by him in Walking in the City, as a lens to analyze the novel and prove that agency can be preserved even with the incessant watch of an observant eye. Explains how people challenge the prevalent discourse while existing within a modern world, where the domination of modern technology poses a threat to oppress and subdue human agency. Kevin Anderson illustrates this contemporary dilemma of cyber world with great genius and is a remarkable instance in presenting the characters' struggle to escape the oppressive scrutiny and influence of the watchful gaze of cyber power. The paper argues that despite a controlled and continuous check on the human actions and influence over conscious, the individuals are able to maintain and practice their freedom in making decisions and establishing an individual self.

Keywords: Agency, human agency, cyber world, Micheal de Certeau

Introduction:

Man has behaved like a pendulum, since the beginning of time, caught between the antagonistic relation of agency and accepted discourse. This persistent battle to make decisions may vary from inconsequential and trivial tasks, like what to cook and eat, to the critical and grand decisions of believing in a religion or opting to denying the god's existence altogether. On a societal level, individuals are also entangled in that intricate dilemma of choosing, either intentionally or unintentionally. The society's structure and culture are immensely influenced by the morals and rules dictated by the religion and other mechanisms that dominate that society, as described by French sociologist Durkheim in The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (1912). The act of choosing comes into play when the individuals either choose to obey and conform to the rules, regulations, morals and traditions, or opt to revolt against them and resist the predetermined foundations. The above-mentioned instances assist in comprehending the concept of agency, which is the point of discussion and debate in this article.

The term 'agency' itself is a concept which demands a very special and peculiar fulcrum to be defined and explained in different epochs by different critics, according to their respective ideologies and philosophies. For some, it is the capacity of an individual to demonstrate their independence in a social, legal, or moral structure, however for others it may mean something else. The term encompasses a spectrum of meanings related to it with slight differences, yet shades of similarity.

Through the lens of psychology, 'agency' is one's ability to control one's own actions and exercise their own agency (Bandura, 2006). In sociology, Giddens (1984) elucidates this term as that, which changes, modifies, or alters the social result or outside world. He further argues that, if a person does not have the capability to make a change in the prior state of events, they lose their power (1984).

This volatile term has been transforming itself though evolution, since the time of Greek philosophers, to the present contemporary philosophic concept associated to the term, human agency. The Greek tradition reveals that they believed in the human being's ability to have control over the decisions made by them and are simultaneously responsible for them. Although the ancient view correlates individual's autonomous free will with the pursuit and struggle to attain delight and joy by being 'Good', yet it displays that human beings do possess the potential to govern their actions and consequently be responsible for them.

'While this is not unrelated to our modern conception of agency, there are important differences with the ancient view, but also shades of common understanding, not the least f which is a fairly close tie between the powers of self-direction and moral considerations – that is the pursuit of happiness in the form of the good and furthering the Good in was available to us as the kinds of beings we fundamentally are… As early as pre-Socratics, the unique human capacity for reason-solidified later in Aristotle, as the possession of a rational soul-provided a capacity to recognize 'the Good' in various forms' (Richard N. Williams, Edward E. Gantt, Lane Fischer, 2021)

The shift into the Renaissance era transformed into another incarnation of the term 'agency', which became prominent in the Enlightenment age. The spirit of agency in the Enlightenment can be captured by Pico della Mirandola's views as cited by him in his essay.

'O supreme generosity of God the Father, O highest ad most marvelous felicity of man! To him it is granted to have whatever he chooses, to be whatever he wills.' (Mirandola, p. 225)

Obtaining individual pleasure and happiness from the choice between the alternatives became the essence of human agency, however the act of choosing whatever one wills and desires cannot be considered parallel to gaining and affirming to the virtues and morals that pre-exist. The individuals tend to choose whatever they want regardless of the fact whether they are morally acceptable and virtuous, or not (Richard N. Williams, Edward E. Gantt, Lane Fischer, 2021).

The core feature of Enlightenment was thinking of the rational mind as the absolute source of freedom. When human agency is analyzed traditionally, it leads to two conclusions regarding the choice being free or not. It is stated as a free choice if it's made based on extensive reasoning, however loses its position as a free one if no explicit and understandable rationale is the behind the decision making. Yet again, a choice made solely based on rational thinking and long list of reasons cannot be considered a free one. As a result, the division between the free and the determined choice is such a complex matter, that it is almost impossible to be explained and defined (Richard N. Williams, Edward E. Gantt, Lane Fischer, 2021).

The harbinger of revolution in philosophy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky lashes upon the prevalent notion of Enlightenment philosophers, who claimed that human beings always go for a 'rationally advantageous choice'. He criticized the Rationalist philosophers namely; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-17780) by arguing that several individuals 'consciously' rush into the path of

'peril and danger' and knowingly seek an absurd way 'in the darkness'. Such individuals, in enormous amount, do not think of the harmful path as 'disadvantageous. This appears to be a contradiction to the actions of humans, when they willingly opt for the disadvantageous path. Dostoyevsky asserted that there must be something more principle and paramount than a human being's greatest advantage, which he called 'the most advantageous advantage'. His viewpoint stated that humans persistently challenge every construct and system known for mankind's benefit to assert their freedom, namely their human agency. (Dostoyevsky, 1864). However, with the innovation of technology and robotics, the fundamental meaning of human beings forged into something new, and with that the meaning of human agency also changed. The initial function of technology to amplify the faculty and capability of human body, gradually became a part of it, transforming the individual into something different. This late twentieth century technological advances forged the modern and postmodern narrative of human freedom, which was a stepping stone to breakdown the previously constructed boundaries/walls distinguishing a man and a machine.

Donna J. Harraway (1944) and N. Katherine Hayles (1943) called this unification of man and machine as 'cyborg' and 'posthuman', respectively. Despite their differences, they both envisioned an individual with complete freedom with no limitations of what an individual ought to be. (Wilson)

The alternate aspect of technological rise is the constant surveillance of individuals' action. 'Daylight and overseers gaze captures the inmate more effectively than darkness'. Michel Foucault (1926-1984), in his discussion with Jean Pierre Barou (1940) and Michelle Perrot, used the concept of 'panoptic eye' which referred to the constant watch and surveillance of individuals. This optical device, the panoptic, was initially used to ensure overseeing the prison cells. The structure of a ring-shaped building with a central tower surrounded by prison cells, is the central idea of the panoptic. The constant surveillance and check on human actions are the manifestation of that 'eye of power'. Its purpose is to control the actions and decisions made by the individuals under observation. (Foucault, 1980)

Micheal de Certeau argued that the individuals still manage to challenge and avoid the watchful gaze of the panoptic, which he himself called 'the solar eye' or 'the god'. He exemplified this pleasure in 'seeing the whole' with Icarus. When he flies above the ones 'down below', he separates himself from them and is no longer clasped by the differences and laws of the people beneath him. When he distances himself, he becomes what de Certeau calls, a voyeur god. This elevation to a somewhere above everyone else is because of the desire to be viewpoint and nothing more.

De Certeau adds that despite the constant watching of the voyeur god from the elevated point, the walkers, Wandersmanner, make use of spaces that are not clearly visible. These are named as 'dark spaces' by him, which the walkers use to escape the gaze of the voyeur god. These operations are not visible to the solar eye and present and opportunity to these practioners to go against the accepted discourse, rules and regulations. These spatial practices are a mean to create a space for exerting one's own individuality and freedom, away from supervision.

Micheal de Certeau's concept of these spatial practices presents the contemporary dilemma of modern age where everything is being seen through technological devices. A utopian and 'urbanistic discourse' is created by suppressing any rational, political or physical organizations and voices against the discourse. It also weakens the traditions and other values that may act as a challenge against it and creates a place where the free will and expression of human agency is controlled and surveilled and have to act according to what law says (Certeau, 1984).

The great science fiction genius and writer, Kevin Anderson, illustrates these spatial practices by trapping them in a world of high tech and cyber epoch, where each step taken, and every hopscotch, is recorded in data bases of COM. It creates a paradoxical world where human agency and restrictions are juxtaposed, where there is freedom and panoptic at the same time.. The article elaborates the character's journey from a point of conforming the cyber society to asserting their human agency, while remaining in that very society.

Research questions

1. How is BTL a 'voyeur god' and a challenge to human agency in the novel?

2. How do the characters realize de Certeau's 'dark space' in the novel?

3. What is the result of agency breaching and/or retaining as portrayed by the characters?

Data analysis

The world has transcended into a cyborg era, where the science fiction of remote future has become the present. Consequently, Kevin Anderson's novel, Hopscotch explores the dichotomies between the panoptic and the characters, and their endeavor of spatial practices. With the progress in the field of technology, the world has become a 'theoretical simulacrum'

where the workings and the behaviors of the individuals is under constant scrutiny and inspections. In spite of the fact, that people have become connected communicatively, it has put the individual's every activity under an un-ceasing inspection, which de Certeau calls as the phenomenon of inspection, the 'voyeur god' or the 'Solar

Eye'. He transforms himself into something glorious and exalted by distancing himself and separating from the total masses. This development in the technological domain has conspicuously demonstrated itself in the field of literature where the boundaries for imagining beyond the imaginable is possible. Kevin Anderson's science fiction novel, Hopscotch, demonstrates a world where individuals have gained the power to transfer their minds from one body into another. A person could become anyone for a decided time by exchanging their bodies. It constructs a world where apparently the human beings can be anything, however in reality, their every move is kept under check by an organization. The Bureau of Tracing and Locations (BTL) acts as the panoptic eye, or in de Certeau's terms, 'the solar eye' and 'the voyeur god' that keeps a strict check and significant data regarding each individual mind's switch from one body to another. The highly organized monitoring and tracing ability of this 'solar eye' can be inferred from the following lines in the novel where Daragon is introduced to the chief of BTL for the very first time. The function of BTL in the novel seems to be similar to what a voyeur god does. By the aid of COM, they store and can trace everyone's location and activity, in addition to the use of invisible surveillance cameras.

'The BTL used a broad spectrum of methods for locating and tracking people as they moved through a society where physical appearance and identity could be made meaningless by body swapping' (Anderson, 2002, p. 18)

When Daragon is being given an introduction to what he would be dealing with in BTL, Mordecai Obagain describes the workings and mechanisms of data collection.

'COM infiltrates every aspect of our lives from finances to entertainment to the national infrastructure. Therefore, information about everyone's daily activities can be found somewhere in all of those databases. You need only look for it.' (Anderson, 2002, p. 30)

Eduard, one of Daragon's friend, vocalizes his paranoia with his friends as they reunite at the

Club fora daily meetup.

> "I wonder if he spies on us.' Eduard flicked his dark eyes from side to side in a comically paranoidfurtive glance. 'It's what Beetles do''. (Anderson, 2002, p. 12)

Eduard, Teresa and Daragon embark on a journey of resisting and defying the widely accepted discourse and venture to obscure themselves from the 'panoptic' or the 'solar eye'. The search for'dark spaces' facilitates and expedites them in enforcing their human agency. Daragon's inability to hopscotch like others put him in an inferiority complex and a constant urge to please others. However, his ability to recognize a person's true identity without the aid of ID patchesintrigued the BTL, who took him in and raised him to be an ideal 'Beetle' (a BTL officer). In spite of him being brainwashed and drilled with BTL ideals, he still manages to avoid the gaze of the 'solar eye' or the 'panoptic'. These spatial practices materialize themselves in the novel on several occasions.

The first incident happens when Eduard entangles himself with an affluent CEO of a company, who pays him to hopscotch with her for a life-threatening surgery. Due to his impulsive nature, Eduard signs a legal document without adequate knowledge regarding the terms. The issue arises when the CEO refuses to hopscotch back into her original body and Daragon uses his channels and position inBTL to coerce the CEO to swap back.

> "Just keeping an eye on my friends.' Daragon smiled down at him, resplendent in his BTL regalia. 'COM found your name on this contract when the records were filed, and I just wanted to make sure nothing . . . accidentally happened during your surgery.'' (Anderson, 2002, p. 82)

Daragon tracking Teresa using COM data bases demonstrates the spatial practices of the character. The confidential information regarding Teresa's whereabouts leads him to her location after she escapes from the clasps of Rhys and his Sharetaker's cult.

> 'Teresa lifted her bruised eyes to Daragon. "How . . . how did you know?" Eduard leaned closer toTeresa. "He spies on us." (Anderson, 2002, p. 145)

Daragon's freedom to act of his own will, manipulate the data bases, and take liberty of the resources when needed, is analogous to how he retain his freedom to act. Even towards the resolution of the novel, Daragon tells Garth how he can manage updating his identity after Eduard's uploading into COM.

'Yes, I know it's you, Garth. You don't think your little scam with Madame Ruxton could stay hidden from me?' Abashed, Garth looked at Daragon. "I think I'm going to need a bit of help from the Bureauto get my identity straightened out again." (Anderson, 2002, p. 405)

Daragon's character accomplishes to free himself from the psychological chains of BTL's brainwashing of being the 'voyeur god' by helping his friends, that BTL considered the 'walkers'. De Certeau's postulations regarding the free will being maintained under the 'panoptic' is substantiated.

Teresa, another character in the novel, had an extremely inquisitive nature that made her question the what life is and why they are there. These intriguing questions sparked her curiosity and acted as a catalyst for the impulsive decision she took of joining the Sharetaker's group, where she realized too late, of hypocrisy of the leader, Rhys. Teresa is another distinctive example of de Certeau's 'walkers', who in the quest of searching for answers, meets Arthur, the 'dark space' for Teresa. Her existential questions regarding being in the world, and meaning of life are the evidences of her challanging the conventional discourse in that society.All her life she had ineffectively tackled unanswerable questions,but found no answers. Why are we here?

'Each person had a different answer to that question, and Teresa needed to find her own. Instead of searching for someone to hand her the solutions, she should have been searching inside herself.' (Anderson, 2002, p. 403)

Her encounter with Arthur paves the way to finding answers to her questions and thrusts her into he right path needed for her knowing the meaning of her existence. Arthur guides her and explains the significance of the 'body', that the cyber society had jeopardized. His views concerning the complexityand intricate networking in the human body made her realize of how

she had forgone prioritizing her own body.

"Once you know the details, you can't help but worship the complexity. This delicate and intricate machine is far superior to any mechanism human beings have managed to devise. Okay, just look at your fingerprints, at the bloodvessels beneath the skin. See your pores." He bent two of her fingers down. "See the way the tendons move in your wrist. Magnificent, isn't it?"

"Oh—I never really thought about it before." (Anderson, 2002, p. 167)

Discussions with Arthur unveiled a new perspective to look from and aided in her quest for answers. These meetings at the fountain behave as de Certeau's 'dark spaces' and what he called, the 'spatial practices'. She forged her own path, shrouded in the dark space, where she found her meaning of life, concurrently establishing her free will.

'She had never met such a complex and unpredictable person, who had thought through deepquestions that few other people bothered to consider' (Anderson, 2002, p. 181)

The reasons of her admiring Arthur and his philosophy, were the pristine nature of his answers. He valued his own body, which the cyber world had risked. Teresa's peril was finally solved towards the end of the novel, where she discloses to readers about the answers she finds on her quest.

'The meaning of life is to make life have a meaning ' (Anderson, 2002, p. 403)

Lastly Eduard, an embodiment of de Certeau's 'walkers', defies the boundaries, and conventional ideology in the cyber world of Hopscotch, and succeeds in acting on his own accord and free will. He does not blindly idealize and follow the narrative regarding BTL, which acts as the 'solar eye' in the novel, rather his conversations and inner dialogues reveal his dustrust in them. The novel's beginning reveals his antagonistic views about being predictable as he displays his mistrust and suspicions on being observed and his choices being evaluated.

'I hate being predictable." Eduard reached over to switch his usual drink with Garth's foamy darkbeer instead. "It could be dangerous." (Anderson, 2002, p. 11)

This dialogue reveals his qualms and mistrust on COM and BTL. Existing within a world,

where having freedom to be anyone takes precedence over how they are under the constant gaze of 'voyeur god', Eduard evades the conformism of accepting BTL as their saviors and protectors. Although his actions appear to be impulsive, he escapes from BTL's surveillance cams and trackers in addition to his venturous run from BTL headquarters after exacting revenge on Mordecai Ob, the chief of BTL. He blantantly points out the hypocracy and polarity of standards that BTL has for themselves and the 'walkers'.

"I'm sorry, Daragon, but your past behavior doesn't inspire much confidence," Eduard called with a cynical laugh. "I've seen you gun down at least two innocent people while you were trying to catch me. Two people who had nothing to do with the crime you want me for." He paused a beat, knowing the Inspector must be wrestling with a response. He said, taunting, "Who exactly is the murderer around here? Or are there different standards for BTL troops?" (Anderson, 2002, p. 352)

Eduard's obsession of becoming a phantom and staying alive for centuries, eluding and dodging the gaze of panoptic or 'voyeur god' is another instance show casing his agency that sets him apart from others, who accept and mold their moral and legal extremities in accordance with the BTL's ideals and paradigms. Although, after his encounter with Artemis, a real phantom, he changes his decision and resolve to become one. Both of his resolves are a manifestation of his free will and consequently the realization and epoch of 'spatial practices'.

But Eduard was finished running. Having had time to objectively consider Artemis's long but ultimately wasted life as a Phantom, he realized how little he had accomplished in his own existence, as well.' (Anderson, 2002, p. 394)

Eduard, therefore becomes an apostle of free will and de Certeau's Wandersmanner by upholding his ideals and values in a controlled discourse. His altruistic act to sacrifice himself for the sake of his friend is the quintessence of what de Certeau expounds as the 'use of spaces' by the walkers, viz. spatial practices, which becomes a mean to exert his agency.

"He said it was high time for him to do a selfless act of his own.' (Anderson, 2002, p. 405)

The article extrapolated de Certeau's notions of 'spatial practices', propounded by him in his essay, repudiating Foucault's 'panopticon' and acknowledging the character's strength to

challenge the recognized discourse, nevertheless maintaining their free will. Eduard and his friends, Teresa and Daragon, the nemesis of Foucault's panopticon and faithful representation of de Certeau's stance about the liberty to act independently, oblivious to the 'celestial eye' or 'panoptic gaze'. BTL fails todefine and hegemonize the character's freedom to think and censuring their actions despite being the 'panoptic' or 'voyeur god'. Daragon, Teresa and Eduard acquire their respective 'dark spaces', eventually retaining their human agency through spatial practices.

References:

Anderson, K. J. (n.d.). Hopscotch. Bantam Books.

Bandura, A. (2006). Towards a Psychology of Human Agency. Perspectives on Psychology Science.

Certeau, M. d. (1984). The Practice of Everyday Life. (S. Rendall, Trans.) University of CaliforniaPress.

Dostoyevsky, F. (1864). Notes From Underground. (C. Garnett, Trans.) Readings Classics.

Durkheim, E. (1912). The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life.

Foucault, M. (1980). The Eye of Power. In Selected Essays and other Writings. Pantheon Books.

Giddens, A. (1984). The Constitution of Society.

Richard N. Williams, Edward E. Gantt, Lane Fischer. (2021). Agency: What Does it Mean to Be aHuman Being. Frountiers in Psychology.

Wilson, J. (n.d.). Of Machines and Meat: Cyberpunk, the Postmodern Condition and a PosthumanReality.