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## Postcolonial Perspectives and Fractured Solidarities in Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* and *A State of Freedom*

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**Abstract:**

Neel Mukherjee's fiction exposes the persistent fissures of class, caste, and ideology that shape postcolonial India. *The Lives of Others* (2014) revisits the Bengal of the late 1960s to uncover the moral and economic contradictions of a society caught between feudal privilege and revolutionary idealism, while *A State of Freedom* (2017) refracts contemporary migration and displacement through five interlinked narratives. Reading both novels through postcolonial theory and ethics of solidarity, this paper argues that Mukherjee dismantles inherited narratives of national unity and exposes the fragile networks of empathy that fail to bind the privileged and the dispossessed. Drawing on insights from Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, the study situates Mukherjee's work within the postcolonial turn toward neoliberal critique and moral responsibility. The analysis demonstrates how fragmented voices, shifting narrative forms, and the tension between belonging and estrangement articulate the crisis of collective identity in twenty-first-century India.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Fiction; Neel Mukherjee; Fractured Solidarity; Migration; Class Politics

### Introduction

Postcolonial fiction remains haunted by the paradox that political independence seldom delivers psychological or economic emancipation. As Edward Said observes, "decolonization has not meant the end of imperialism but its continuation in new forms of domination" (*Culture and Imperialism*, 1993 p. 19). Writers such as Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, and Kiran Desai have re-imagined national narratives through the lenses of displacement, ecological crisis, and class violence. Neel Mukherjee belongs to this generation of authors who expose the contradictions between India's democratic ideals and its lived inequalities.

In *The Lives of Others*, Mukherjee revisits 1960s Bengal to portray the Naxalite movement as both a cry for justice and a symptom of bourgeois guilt. *A State of Freedom*

extends that inquiry into a globalized twenty-first-century context, tracing the migrant body's dislocation between aspiration and servitude. Elleke Boehmer (2018) notes that postcolonial literature has increasingly turned from "national allegory to the ethics of relationality" (*Postcolonial Poetics* p. 7). Mukherjee's fiction embodies this transition, revealing that empathy—once the moral promise of postcolonial humanism—has become fragile and fragmented.

This paper situates Mukherjee's work within debates about postcolonial solidarity and ethical representation. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) exposes the complicity of post-independence elites in reproducing colonial hierarchies. Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) interrogates the mechanisms through which privileged voices claim to represent the oppressed. Homi Bhabha's *the Location of Culture* (1994) redefines identity as hybrid and ambivalent rather than stable or redemptive. Read together, these frameworks help reveal how Mukherjee dramatizes the erosion of solidarity in postcolonial modernity.

Mukherjee's novels resist both sentimental humanism and nationalist nostalgia. They ask what remains of ethical commitment when the revolutionary project collapses and when global capitalism replaces the rhetoric of liberation. By foregrounding fractured families, itinerant workers, and silent witnesses, Mukherjee compels readers to confront the exhaustion of empathy itself—a theme that resonates deeply with Fanon's vision of decolonization as an "unending struggle to remake the human" (Fanon 1963 p. 236).

**Literature Review**

Scholarship on Mukherjee's fiction reflects a broader shift in postcolonial studies from historical recovery to moral and affective inquiry. Boehmer (2018) argues that contemporary postcolonial writing "seeks new languages of connection" amid global inequality (*Postcolonial Poetics* p. 11). Graham Huggan's *the Postcolonial Exotic* (2001) cautions that Western readerships often commodify postcolonial suffering; Mukherjee's unsparing realism counters this tendency by exposing how empathy itself can reproduce privilege.

Anjali Gera Roy (2016) situates *The Lives of Others* within the lineage of the Indian social novel, claiming that the Ghosh family's domestic sphere "condenses the contradictions of class revolution and inherited privilege" ("Fictional Politics," *South Asian Review* 37.2 p. 58). Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (2015) provides a crucial framework for understanding Mukherjee's depiction of capitalism as the afterlife of colonial modernity. The letters of Supratik Ghosh, oscillating between guilt and conviction, exemplify what Fanon describes as the "double consciousness of the colonized intellectual" (Fanon 1963 p. 178).
For *A State of Freedom*, critics such as Boyd Tonkin (2017) and Priyamvada Gopal (2019) highlight Mukherjee's polyphonic narrative form and ethical tension. Tonkin calls it "a quiet anatomy of displacement" (*The Independent*), while Gopal, in *Insurgent Empire* (2019), interprets its fragmented empathy as "a critique of liberal humanitarianism that stops at feeling" (p. 422). These readings align with John McLeod's claim that postcolonial fiction

increasingly "interrogates the sentimental economies of empathy" (*Beginning Postcolonialism*, 2010 p. 211).

Despite this growing body of criticism, most scholars treat *The Lives of Others* and *A State of Freedom* separately—the former as historical realism, the latter as global modernism. This paper bridges that gap, reading the novels together as a sustained meditation on fractured solidarities. In doing so, it joins current conversations about postcolonial ethics advanced by Robert Young (2016), Neil Lazarus (2011), and Leela Gandhi (2006), who each call for a renewed attention to the moral dimensions of decolonization.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on three major postcolonial theorists—Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha—to frame Mukherjee's engagement with class, empathy, and representation.Fanon's ethics of decolonization underlines the persistence of internalized oppression after political independence. His vision of liberation requires "a new humanism" that rejects both colonial paternalism and bourgeois nationalism (*The Wretched of the Earth* 1963 p. 239). In Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others*, Supratik's revolutionary zeal echoes Fanon's call for radical renewal but ends in self-destruction—an emblem of what Neil Lazarus calls "postcolonial melancholia," the inability to translate moral anger into structural change (*The Postcolonial Unconscious*, 2011 p. 34).

Spivak's theory of subalternity questions who has the right to speak for the marginalized. Her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) exposes how representation often becomes a form of silencing. Mukherjee's servants, labourers, and migrant workers inhabit precisely this silence; their stories surface only through the mediation of elite narrators. Yet Mukherjee uses narrative fragmentation to signal awareness of this limitation, creating what Boehmer terms "ethical hesitation" (2018 p. 53)—a pause that prevents appropriation.

Bhabha's notion of hybridity and ambivalence complicates binary notions of colonizer and colonized. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha defines cultural identity as "the negotiation of in-between spaces" (p. 2). *A State of Freedom* enacts this hybridity through its multiple narrative voices that traverse class and national boundaries. The migrant's experience becomes a liminal condition where belonging is perpetually deferred.
Together, these theoretical perspectives illuminate Mukherjee's fiction as a critique of both colonial residue and neoliberal modernity. His characters struggle within what Fanon might call "the zone of nonbeing" (1963 p. 10)—a moral vacuum where solidarity collapses. Spivak's warning about the subaltern's muteness and Bhabha's concept of hybridity together underscore Mukherjee's refusal to offer closure. The fractured narrative form thus becomes an ethical form: it resists the illusion of total understanding and insists on the reader's responsibility to listen.

**Textual Analysis1. 4.1**

**Class, Guilt, and Revolutionary Failure in *The Lives of Others***

Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* portrays the Ghosh family as a microcosm of Bengal's social contradictions during the 1960s. The novel opens with the suicide of a rural worker, an act that exposes the moral blindness of urban elites. Supratik Ghosh's decision to join the Naxalite movement emerges from a Fanonian realization that privilege itself perpetuates violence. As Fanon writes, "The bourgeoisie of the underdeveloped countries takes over the colonial apparatus and becomes its mimic" (*The Wretched of the Earth* 1963 p. 152). Supratik's revolutionary zeal, however, collapses under the weight of familial and ideological disillusionment. His letters home function as confessions of guilt rather than instruments of change.

Gayatri Spivak's insight that "representation is always re-presentation" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 1988 p. 275) clarifies the tension between Supratik's voice and the **voiceless** peasants he seeks to defend. The novel dramatizes what Boehmer calls "the crisis of the sympathetic imagination" (*Postcolonial Poetics* 2018 p. 65): empathy that exposes complicity rather than resolving it. Mukherjee's interlaced family chapters mirror the fragmentation of solidarity; each character's moral awakening ends in silence.

**Fragmented Empathy and the Politics of Witnessing**

Empathy in Mukherjee's work functions less as sentiment than as ethical risk. In *A State of Freedom,* the middle-class narrator who documents the life of his domestic worker embodies the Spivakian problem of "speaking for." Priyamvada Gopal observes that contemporary fiction often "interrogates the liberal desire to feel for, rather than act with, the oppressed" (*Insurgent Empire* 2019 p. 427). Mukherjee stages this interrogation formally: the polyphonic narrative disperses authority, denying readers a stable moral centre. Each vignette becomes an act of witnessing that refuses closure.

Homi Bhabha's notion of "ethical ambivalence" (*The Location of Culture* 1994 p. 26) illuminates these narrative strategies. The novel's fractured structure enacts the instability of identification across class and cultural lines. In one story, a cook's migration to Mumbai exposes the invisible labour sustaining cosmopolitan modernity; in another, an academic's encounter with poverty reduces empathy to aesthetic consumption. Mukherjee thus critiques what Huggan (2001 p. 32) calls the "postcolonial exotic"—the conversion of suffering into symbolic capital for privileged spectators.

**Migrant Displacement and Postcolonial Globalization**

Migration in *A State of Freedom* represents both material necessity and ontological exile. As Ania Loomba (2015 p. 231) notes, global capitalism reconfigures colonial patterns of exploitation rather than erasing them. Mukherjee's itinerant characters—manual labourers, animal performers, expatriate intellectuals—embody this continuity. Their journeys across borders and hierarchies echo Fanon's claim that "the zone of nonbeing" persists wherever human dignity is denied (1963 p. 10).

Neil Lazarus argues that postcolonial modernity must be read as "a dialectic between global capital and local despair" (*The Postcolonial Unconscious* 2011 p. 78). Mukherjee transforms this dialectic into narrative form: freedom becomes a paradox where mobility

coincides with entrapment. The repetition of hunger, labour, and silence across stories underscores what Leela Gandhi (2006 p. 19) terms the "ethical residue" of colonialism—the lingering moral debts between classes and nations. By juxtaposing cosmopolitan privilege with precarious survival, *A State of Freedom* reveals that globalization has not dissolved colonial hierarchies but merely redistributed them.

**Domestic Space as Microcosm of History**

The household in *The Lives of Others* functions as a symbolic site where personal and political betrayals converge. Anjali Gera Roy (2016 p. 60) notes that the Ghosh family's mansion "implodes under the pressure of class resentment." Mukherjee turns the domestic interior into what Bhabha (1994 p. 13) calls "the unhomely," where private guilt mirrors national trauma. Women characters—Charubala, Priya, and Madhu—mediate between silence and resistance, embodying Spivak's concern with the muted female subaltern. Their constrained agency exposes the patriarchal underpinnings of revolutionary discourse and gestures toward a gendered ethics of empathy.

**Comparative Reading: From Revolution to Resignation**

Read together, the two novels trace a historical trajectory from the revolutionary fervour of the 1960s to the precarious cosmopolitanism of the 2010s. In *The Lives of Others*, solidarity collapses under ideological contradictions; in *A State of Freedom*, it dissolves into neoliberal individualism. Mukherjee's narrative evolution mirrors the postcolonial nation's shift from collective politics to fragmented survival.

His ethical project is not to redeem solidarity but to reveal its fragility. The family, once the emblem of Indian moral order, becomes the site of decay; migration, once the promise of freedom, becomes another form of alienation. In both texts, the reader occupies the uneasy position of witness—complicit in privilege yet yearning for moral clarity.

As Elleke Boehmer (2018) notes, "the postcolonial writer's task is not to imagine unity but to articulate fracture." Mukherjee's realism—at once compassionate and unsparing—fulfils that task by forcing readers to confront the limits of empathy in a stratified world.

**Discussion**

Neel Mukherjee's novels articulate a deeply ethical vision of postcolonial India, one that resists both nostalgic nationalism and celebratory globalization. His characters are neither heroic rebels nor passive victims; they inhabit moral grey zones where the impulse toward compassion continually collides with the inertia of privilege. Through formal fragmentation and multiperspectival narration, Mukherjee redefines the postcolonial novel as a space of *unsettled solidarity*.

In *The Lives of Others*, the ideological energy of revolution falters against the weight of inherited hierarchy. Mukherjee reframes class conflict not as a binary struggle but as an intimate corrosion of moral vision. The novel's letters—personal, self-accusing, desperate—embody what Fanon (1963) calls the "nervous condition" of postcolonial consciousness, torn between solidarity and self-preservation. The family's tragedy mirrors the nation's inability to translate moral outrage into structural change.

By contrast, *A State of Freedom* exposes the globalized phase of this crisis. The revolution has ended; what remains is economic migration, precarity, and emotional fatigue. Yet Mukherjee avoids cynicism. His narrative compassion, though fragmented, insists on the humanity of those relegated to invisibility. This is not the sentimental empathy of the privileged observer but what Spivak might describe as an "impossible responsibility"—the duty to listen even when comprehension fails.

Mukherjee's aesthetic method—fragmented, non-linear, polyphonic—transforms the realist novel into an ethical experiment. The fractures in form mirror the fractures in society. The discontinuous narration, the shifting pronouns, and the oscillation between first-person intimacy and third-person distance all reinforce the instability of solidarity in a stratified postcolonial world.

Importantly, Mukherjee also critiques the very act of writing about the poor. His self-reflexive narrators expose the violence of representation: every attempt to give voice risks appropriation. This aligns with Spivak's (1988) argument that the subaltern cannot "speak" within the dominant discursive structures. Mukherjee's fiction thus performs its own ethical hesitation—writing *toward* the subaltern without presuming to speak *for* them.

The two novels, read sequentially, represent a moral cartography of postcolonial India: from the revolutionary idealism of the 1960s to the atomized despair of the neoliberal present. Their fractured solidarities remind us that freedom, in the postcolonial condition, is not a destination but a perpetual negotiation.

**Conclusion**

Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* and *A State of Freedom* collectively dramatize the collapse of empathy and collective purpose in modern India. Through his deeply textured portrayal of class, caste, and migration, Mukherjee interrogates the myth of postcolonial unity. His characters strive to transcend social barriers but are repeatedly defeated by the structural violence of inequality and the moral fatigue of privilege.

The study concludes that Mukherjee's postcolonial vision is neither wholly pessimistic nor utopian. Rather, it acknowledges fracture as the ethical truth of our time. By tracing the movement from revolutionary solidarity to cosmopolitan alienation, his fiction reveals the continuing relevance of postcolonial critique in an era of neoliberal globalization. The novels urge readers—and nations—to reconsider freedom not as autonomy but as *relational responsibility*.

Mukherjee's fractured solidarities ultimately call for an ethics of humility: to witness without claiming mastery, to empathize without appropriating, and to imagine justice beyond sentimental compassion. In doing so, his work extends the postcolonial conversation from the politics of decolonization to the moral crises of modernity.

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