

Duality of Human Soul in *The Lives of Others* by Neel Mukherjee

“That Evil Ended. So also may this!” (Deor’s Lament, 06)

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Abstract

The article depicts India’s development, liberty and equality is stymied by socio-economic realities which keep most of the people living in poverty. In *The Lives of Others*, Neel Mukherjee challenges Indian culture and governance to create an egalitarian society in which individuals are truly equal and independent. The protagonist of the novel, Supratik leaves his happy life in the novel to eradicate duality and to enlighten the society. The novel is the microcosm of West Bengal in which Neel highlights the terrified life of poor peasants and their devious landlords. The paper also aims to highlight Neel’s portrayal of oppressive socio-political and economic behavior of village heads, officials, political parties, jotedaars and plightful, miserable condition of the poor peasants and tenants, their struggle throughout their lives and finally their indulgence into criminal activities like naxalites. Neel earnestly pleads for the protection and rehabilitation of the people who have been displaced, authorities should ensure peace, prosperity and social justice to prevent people from sufferings and elimination of duality from the society especially for the benefit of these marginalized sections of the society.

Key Words: Rehabilitation, Duality, Naxalbari, protest, inequality, frustration, victimization, illumination, exploitation and dominance.

Neel Mukherjee is a Calcutta born and London inhabitant, young and accomplished writer. *The Lives of Others* is his second novel after his award winning novel *A Life Apart*. Neel has a profound impact on his psyche about the oppressive socio-political condition of India. His novel *The Lives of Others* is about exploitation and dominance of the society. He has been successful in portraying these issues with the implementation of the techniques like stream of consciousness etc. The novel contains epilogue, prologue and the map of West Bengal, family map and also glossary of Indian diction. The novel is divided into chapters, takes epistolary form at some places and somewhere the writer is very intense and loses his grip which makes the novel very lengthy and dull. But the novel is harmoniously praised and admired by the critics. Amitav Ghosh said about the novel “*The Lives of Others* is searing, savage and deeply moving: an unforgettable vivid picture of a time of turmoil” (Amitav Ghosh) while Anita Desai’s comment on the novel is

A devastating portrayal of a decadent society and the inevitably violent uprising against it ... it is ferocious, unsparing and brutally honest (Anita Desai).

The novel is a dark comedy through which the author satirizes modern India’s caste system, economic system, social system and political system. Neel incarnates India into duality: murky and luminous India. According to the writer the luminous side belongs to rich and bourgeois people while the murky class belongs to poor, oppressed and marginalized people. The main characters of the novel belong to bourgeois family of Calcutta, whose harmony is distorted when Supratik becomes dangerously involved in extremist political activism. Supratik, an amiable, sensitive gentleman was very much affectionate and caring for proletariat class and his neighborhood. At the young age, he was a country loving, a patriotic “Ma, Ma, its independence Day next week, I’m going to play the bugle and lead the Balak Sangha boys in a procession down the street...” (Neel, 73). He is a social activist, who believes in egalitarian society, refuses to eat lavishly, I have “one dal, one fry, one vegetable dish, a bit of fish” to eat and thousands of people are dying by starvation. “Gagan, Madan-da, Malati-di, the other people who work for us, do they eat like this”, they should eat like we are eating; unfortunately Supratik is perturbed by the imbalance of the society, so he became involved in student politics, “an important figure, a

student leader...” (Neel, 76). During which lot of students were taken into police custody which gave birth to infringement and compelled Supratik and others to join Naxalbari in the hope to eradicate the duality like crime, corruption, malpractices and class discrimination from the society.

Ma, I feel exhausted with consuming, with taking and grabbing and using. I am so bloated that I feel I cannot breathe any more. I am leaving to find some air, some place where I shall be able to purge myself, push back against the life given me and make my own. I feel I live in a borrowed house. It's time to find my own... forgive me... (Neel, 60)

The present study endeavors to explore the nature of duality enclosed by all social issues like inequality, frustration, victimization, ambition, protest, class discrimination and above all indulgence in criminal activities like Naxalbari and Militancy that goes with it. Neel profoundly explores the awful outcome of duality that impedes the genuine growth of any society or nation. Any nation like India howsoever illuminating can hardly retain its brightness forever in the face of bias or inequality created by the duality. West Bengal is the microcosm of the nation; it reflects the reality as observed by the facts.

- According to UN report 4 in every 10 Indian children are malnourished.
- India Ranks a lowly 66 out of 88 countries in the Global Hunger Index 2008.
- According to the latest poverty estimates from the World Bank one third of the world's poor live in India. (Saini, 170-171)

Neel leaves a profound impact on his readers; he focuses on two vital aspects of human life are instrumental to sustainable development and enlightenment- but unfortunately there are innumerable evil forces that destroy human liberty and equality. Neel's portrayal of the plightful story Nitai Das and his family speaks volumes about the life of an ordinary Indian peasant. The continuous drought of consecutive three years brought him down from tenant to beggar. He begged from his landlord some food for his children but the landlord refused to provide and “explained to him what lies in the store for his children if he does not pay off the interest on his

first loan...” Which disappointed Nitai Das and decided “what to do now” (Neel,02), picks up the sickle and killed all his children, wife and finally himself.

... feudalism was still the order of the day, where the exploitation of formers by jotedaars and money lenders and landowners ...tribal peoples whose ancient lands had been taken from them and who had been reduced to a form of slavery. (Neel, 61)

When Supratik learnt the story of Nitai Das and his misery from Bijli and Kanu, it struck his mind the conversation of Pishi and Boro-Kaka, when he was seven or eight years old, “a woman lying dead on a narrow side-street and a crow picking out her eyes, while her child, near dead with hunger...” (Neel, 126) and Supratik also learnt that those were the poor peasants of the same Medinipur district who had flocked to Calcutta in the hope of food, but nobody helped them. Neel’s dispersed meditation on the issue has a modern relevance. The gripping plot engrosses the modern readers, who easily empathize with the grief and destitution of the poverty stricken peasants who ultimately chooses to become a Robinhood.

The eradication and elimination of *Zamindari* system and intermediacies was a protracted and strenuous step taken by Indian government, which meant that most of the formerly tenants are now landowners, which was not done by actual reform but by dislodgement of tenants by landlords. Supratik learnt from Samir that one old man spat at them, when he saw them at first and Supratik found out that old man, MukundaMashan after his father, used to be the tenant of four bighas of land, who was eligible to occupy the land under Land Tenure Act. The illiterate Mukunda, unaware of the legalities is deceived by the manipulations of the jotedaar “if Mukunda wanted to register as a tenant, he would be evicted immediately; if he didn’t, he would be kept on as a tenent” (Neel, 98). The poor innocent thought that things are on the right path, from last two generations everything is working likewise so he believed on his devious landlord and didn’t register. On the top of the day he was not also in the position to register, if he did so “what would he feed his family, what would he eat, how would they live if he got evicted...” (Neel, 98) and if the jotedaar would not have succeeded in his felonious plan he,

“his legion of supporters and yes-men have other ways too: arbitrarily increasing rents, say from half the yield on the land to three quarters; or killing the tenants bullock so that he cannot work the rented land efficiently enough, thus falling behind with the rent; a son or a daughter or a wife threatened...” (Neel, 98).

Finally Mukunda was evicted and he had no recourse to the law because he was not a registered tenant. This is how the jotedaar pushed the family from bad to worst. Jotedaar was a rich man who added these four bighas to his existing two hundred fifty bighas, this is the hard fact of this polluted society that greed has eaten the soul of humanity. Mukunda suffered a lot and nobody came to his rescue because “ Mukunda belonged to lower caste, so it was not in the interest of the village head or any official to enlighten him” (Neel, 99). These poor, uneducated, simple people have been deceived by village heads, officials and even by political parties. By this felonious deceit, they are being pushed into a real demotion from tenants to wage laborers and from wage laborers to criminals. These and more problems were abiding without any reformation of legislation but the spirit of law remained confined to papers only. The people were left in these circumstances to languish, which enforced them to become pugnacious.

Samir narrates the story to Supratik, of their first come over the place, the domicile tribal people thought that this is any political party looking for votes, if it would have happened peasants would have beaten them with their *lathis* but fortunately they escaped and learn their story of treachery by authorities. Initially these poor people used to cast their votes to which the village head asks them to cast because the village head was being paid by some political party and no such rewards was given to the poor villagers who cast their votes. During drought, CPI(M) cadre was distributing rice to hard-hit villagers but on understanding it was not done on the basis of humanity or responsibility but for enhancing their vote bank. Some people of Changripota have also received rice, but on discovering that the people of Changripota have casted their votes to congress not to hammer and sickle sign, “the cadre went back and took away the rice from the starving farmers” (Neel, 98). Which according to Supratik is earlier said by God in *Bible* “for everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him” (Neel, 99)

These starving farmers found a radical solution to driven out the greedy jotedaar from their illegally consolidated lands. Police couldn't harm the peasants because orders had come from CPI(M) headquarters that this was legitimately the first step of land reform which actually was not so but politics of CPI(M) which the innocent people couldn't understand, it added nearly five lack votes to the vote bank of CPI(M) . Their masks slipped only when naxalbari came to existence because they wanted people to stay under their set boundaries. But "they underestimated what would really happen if the landless were given a taste of their own power" (Neel, 100). The Naxal upsurge sparked because the land reform was ineffectual even in the government of United Front in the West Bengal, which was fuelled by class and caste tensions, and the sense of desperation by social and economic condition of the people. Nothing seemed to be more natural than the vested interests of the authorities. This socially biased bureaucracy impeded progress and give birth to unproductive governance.

In conclusion the story of the novel, *The Lives of Others* is relevant to India's current state of affairs in general and West Bengal in particular. Supratik, an amiable gentleman leaves his luxurious life to live with homeless peasants for the benefit of society so should the government authorities do for the upliftment of the nation. Neel remains faithful to the history of West Bengal and blends it with the fiction, highlighting the issues which were inevitable for the common masses to evade, with the implementation of literary techniques but sometimes he loses grip which makes the novel lengthy and dull. The problem that Neel deals in his novel has modern relevance. Neel aims that authorities should ensure peace and prosperity to prevent gentle people like Supratik to become Naxalites.

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