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The Other Kinds of Grotesque: Neel Mukherjee's Disenchantment of the glorious and the Issue of Nationalism through *The Lives of Others*

Dr. Motahar Hossain
Independent Researcher,
Former Research Scholar
Department of English
Aligarh Muslim University, U.P., India
Email: motahar.hssn@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper interrogates Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* as a site where the "grotesque" is re-inscribed beyond colonial and bourgeois nationalist frameworks, and where Kolkata's contested identity becomes a metaphor for the fraught imagining of the nation in post-colonial Bengal. Through the decaying Ghosh family, the peasant Nitai Das, and the revolutionary Supratik, Mukherjee exposes the fractures of caste, class, and ideology that unsettle monolithic narratives of progress and unity, replacing the colonial "city of horror" with an indigenous, unsettling realism. The article situates its reading against the backdrop of colonial and anticolonial constructions of Kolkata, drawing on Partha Chatterjee's distinction between the "material" and "spiritual" domains of nationalism and Rabindranath Tagore's affective, aspirational imagination of the nation. It argues that Mukherjee neither restores a Tagorean "golden motherland" nor replicates colonial caricatures, but instead decentres both by foregrounding the grotesque everyday; household decay, slum violence, and the unmourned death of Chhaya, as a more honest reckoning with Bengal's post-independence realities. By analysing the Ghosh mansion as a palimpsest of colonial grandeur, bourgeois hypocrisy, and unspoken subaltern suffering, the paper shows how Mukherjee uses the form of the novel to track the "disenchantment" of nationalist idealism, especially in the figure of Supratik, whose radical commitment collapses into betrayal and violence. In this way, the essay positions *The Lives of Others* as a crucial intervention into contemporary debates on nationalism, arguing that Kolkata's fragmented, grotesque vitality; its refusal of purity and easy unity, becomes a model for reimagining the nation as a contested, imagined, and ethically ambiguous project.

Keywords: Identity, Culture, Nationalism, Ideology, Violence, Post-colonial Bengal

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Introduction

Kolkata suffers a bad press. Such claims are rooted in the post-colonial investigations of this historically contested city, shaped by colonial misrepresentations. The counter arguments or the indigenous reclamations come from a variety of sentiments but are mostly results of an urgent call to tell their own stories. The gap between the colonial intentions of exposing the weaknesses of the city to a merciful and benevolent Western master who could fix them, and those of the nationalists who claim simply to lay bare the truth of the city is huge. While the necessities of both the sides are heavily contested in the academic sphere, the discussions are lively in contemporary less formal space as well. The scant, wrong, contemptuous and often ideological representations of the city by its former masters are now visited up front by indigenous genuine accounts even on the streets.

Dominque Lapierre's *City of Joy* trended on the hands of every visitor from the West for a long time as their trusted travel guide to India. Lack of available literature played a prominent role behind its popularity but eventually the book's controversial reception as an insult to the residents of the slum placed it with the likes of Moorehouse, Kipling and Levi Straus. The disclaimers by the writer that one book cannot and therefore does not intend to represent the entire country had little to no impact on the readers who later failed to distinguish the images of poverty, charity and filth drawn in the book from the larger India. It eventually failed to convince the residents of the slum to receive a generous amount of profit money from the book on account of it being insulting. The glorification of the orient being a place of charity and enlightenment had to give in and therefore invited nuanced indigenous tales.

One such writer in the contemporary scene is Neel Mukherjee. He challenges the colonial and post-colonial narratives that were woven around grotesquery, absurdity and shocking encounters of unsuspecting visitors to the city and offers a rich version of how the city looks from his lenses. The indigenous take does not offer a soothing relief from Moorehouse's or Kiplingesque sharpness but rather offers a different kind of uneasiness. His debut novel *The Lives of Others* deals with the post-independent India, or rather, a turbulent Bengal that is bloodied by the revolutionary claws of several uprisings in the late twentieth century namely the Naxalites. It lays bare both the external (colonial) and the internal (caste and class struggles) fractures in the society that eventually reveals a glimpse of nationalism settling with its post-independence shape in Bengal. Mukherjee's approach acknowledges his doublly fractured society which can be seen in contrast with not only the others (the colonial visitors) who talked about the horrors of Kolkata, a fuming marsh infected with unspeakable diseases and its hundreds of *others* among themselves, but also those who romanticised an imagined unity on both sides of its walls. The modern Bengal or at least a part of its defiant voices such as Mukherjee himself is at loggerheads with both the colonial and the bourgeoise nationalist framework. The present paper aims to open up the conflict although limitting itself to the debut of Mukherjee but not without acknowledging it as potentially one of the many in the future to talk about this different kind of grotesquery in the accounts of Bengal.

The Rationale of the Study:

The use for such an essay on the account of nationalism and related studies cannot be assumed from the content of the novel which is set in the past and therefore serves little to no purpose in providing new perspective on how we see a nation and its others today. It must come out of the contemporary audacity to look at the past and own the differences that the Bengali intelligentsia began by disowning in the wake of modernisation, thus, have never yet come to terms with let alone work on them. The likes of Mukherjee are the writers who emphasise on class struggles and drag their readers to the uncomfortable zones where they are tickled to wonder who the others are and what sort of unity the nation of Bengal have aspired for so far. Looking for the answer inevitably echoes the age-long question of what binds a society (or a nation) and makes people die for it. By discussing a twenty-first century fiction dwelling in the retelling of what a society (Kolkata) of a mid-twentieth century setting aspired for social justice, one can better understand justice and unity which is the focus of the major movements including the likes of Nationalism. The Naxalite setting of the novel provides advantage in understanding class struggles which is relevant even in the contemporary times.

Contextual Background:

Kolkata was the site for colonial *grotesqueries*. Therefore, the larger anti-colonial discourse in Bengal built itself around negating external impressions and influences namely of the West. The anticolonial nationalism in India as a larger picture is a history of the clashes of internal and external forces. Nationalism in colonial Bengal was still a contested site where the lack of homogeneity was addressed by every proponent of it. Rabindranath Tagore was the most influential figure in that time and his priorities regarding nationalism echoed in the rest of the province. His idea of imagination in the context of a sovereign nation was intricate and a multifaceted landscape compared to the relatively uniform and homogeneous contexts of Europe and the Americas. Partha Chatterjee proposes, "By my reading, anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains—the material and the spiritual" (Chatterjee 6). Thus, he further argues the inner or the spiritual should be protected if the outer or the economic is influenced by outside. This was mainly the concern of Tagore and his allies who refused to take a purist stance on nationalistic debate of the West. He couldn't support the West entirely, for he deemed Western materialism necessary yet too much for its own good, while, at the same breath criticised China for not opening up to Western education system like Japan did.

> And Japan, the child of the Ancient East, has also fearlessly claimed all the gifts of the modern age for herself. She has shown her bold spirit in breaking through the confinements of habits, useless accumulations of the lazy mind, which seeks safety in its thrift and its locks and keys. Thus she has come in contact with the living time and has accepted with eagerness and aptitude the responsibilities of modern civilization. (Tagore 53).

Tagore is accommodating of opposite worlds coexisting for human welfare. It makes one think Bengal was largely accommodating which gives rise to the question whether Bengal saw its realities accommodating with fancy.

Benedict Anderson's exploration of the role of "imagination" in *Imagined Communities* remains indispensable to any analysis of nationalism. Dipesh Chakrabarty, in *Provincializing Europe*, interrogates the mechanics of emotional attachment within nationalism, proposing that love, as opposed to mere loyalty, holds greater significance. He challenges conventional assumptions by asking, "What if the real, the natural and the historically accurate did not generate the feeling of devotion or adoration?" (Chakrabarty 149). To bolster this claim, Chakrabarty draws on Rabindranath Tagore's vision of nationalism, which advocates loving a nation not for its present reality but for its unrealised possibilities. Tagore's framework, as interpreted here, positions imagination as a force that transcends the tangible, urging individuals to see beyond the immediate and embrace the aspirational dimensions of collective identity. The fancy is something to aspire for and the detractors of Tagore such as Radhakamal Mukherjee, Binoy Ghosh, Achintyakumar Sengupta, Buddhadev Bose, Dinesh Chandra Sen and even Jibanananda Das couldn't offer an alternate to Tagore's vision.

Mukherjee's novel is reflective of this duality except that his acceptance of a corrupt society does not have the charm of Tagore's golden motherland. His novel critiques the colonial symbols of the place but embraces the grotesque with boldness and treats them as natives of any place. The contempt of the colonial accounts is not visible and is substituted by a tone of self-reflective irony. Kolkata has been rejecting all the monolithic ideas regarding nationalism starting from Tagore. However, the essay argues that Mukherjee's rejection of this monolithic structure is comprised of the competing visions such as bourgeois against revolutionary and Hindu against Marxist.

Mukherjee in his novel treats Kolkata and the domestic space as representative of the world he belongs to. His city is a text. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), the city is a text authored by power structures (colonial planners, postcolonial elites) but constantly rewritten by ordinary people through their movements, memories, and resistance. In the present context Mukherjee offers the accounts of the lives of ordinary people of the past and in doing so he deciphers some of the contemporary concerns. Andreas Huyssen (*Present Pasts*, 2003) describes cities as palimpsests where past and present coexist in charged tension. Kolkata's colonial architecture (e.g., Victoria Memorial, Howrah Station), Marxist graffiti, and sprawling slums layer competing narratives of power and resistance through the Ghosh mansion, Supratik's letters and Chhaya's death unmourned by the Ghosh family.

Grotesqueries, Disenchantment and Mukherjee:

The Lives of Others first came out in 2014. It positions itself as one of the accounts of a devastating portrayal of Indian society which is decadent and inevitably reaches for violence as an expression of uprising. Apart from telling the story of a decaying rich family the novel

lets the reader in on the middle class minds which is neither bourgeoise nor fully accepts the nobility or the working peasantry. Through different characters and their struggles it highlights the lives in the late nineteen sixties at a city that has now changed. Or has it?

The grotesquerie starts at the beginning as we are offered a prologue depicting Nitai Das, a peasant during a drought that turned his irrigation lands into a scorched wasteland. He is starving and so is his entire family of five including him, his wife and three children. After unsuccessful attempts to beg, borrow or steal food which now also included boiled hey in muddy water, from the landlords, he uses the last ounce of strength in his body to choke, hack and chop down his entire family. He poisons himself at the end. The story is unrelated to the rest of the novel but plays a significant role in establishing how it sees the vices of class disparities in the country.

The Ghosh's mansion is called a "zoo" in the very beginning and the members, animals. The tone stays throughout the novel setting up for a drama of a household. Once a potentially rich family is poorer now but manages to appear rich through whatever is left of its glories that saw colonial times. The elder son of Prafullanath, the head of the household is seen in contemplation of the future:

> Samik Babu had brought himself to utter the word reposition, and then quickly skate it over his own embarrassment by suggesting that both outfits be sold to some Marwari at whatever price they were willing to pay. The creditors won't be put off for too long now: that will be the pointed truth at the heart of the ticket of numbers, waiting by his side, resilient and impatient at the same time with their dangerous, whispery story (Mukherjee, 10).

The fortune of the family seems to have started decaying significantly after a single event involving the son of the house-help Madan. There was agitation under the leadership of Dulal that made everyone, including Prafullanath, uncomfortable regarding their fortune. It positions, the story, right in the middle of the labour uprising in post independent Bengal. The sign of decay is prominently clear.

The family nevertheless has not come out of Its colonial hangover, which is why despite being proud of their own language and culture. The family adores fancy English medium school.

> It was she who had suggested to Sona's Boro-jyethima that the boy should look in a couple of evenings a week to help Sougata with his mathematical homework; was not the brightest of students in his famous English-medium school, Saint Lawrence, especially in arithmetic, and the prospect of starting algebra and geometry next year was terrifying. (Mukherjee, 25)

The mansion is also decaying, which is evident in multiple occasions, reflecting on the structural defects that the house started showing. It is a metaphor of the post-colonial digressions of the middle-class. The family is into charity for fame, but exploits its workers inside their on premises. This is a commentary on the moral decay that writers of the colonial times mentioned, but here in Mukherjee, it is presented for truthfulness.

Through Supratik's letters the bigger picture of disparity is exposed outside the Ghosh mansion. Discussing them would inflate the study out of proportion. Therefore the study seeks to stay focused on Ghosh family. The novel juxtaposes the fate of the family against its members who are in turn, oppressed and the oppressors. The exploitation of members, including Chhaya, Madan and even Charubala are echoes of timeless injustice of the marginalised. Chhaya's death is unmourned by the Ghosh family, which is representation of the undocumented suffering of the subaltern. The systematic exploitation in the novel does not stop Mukherjee from being able to establish Kolkata's identity from an indigenous reclamation point of view.

Supratik, the son of Adinath and Sandya is dangerously involved in extremist political activism. He is compelled by a desire to change his life and the world around him. He leaves behind a note to his mother saying that he felt exhausted with consuming. Unable to breathe freely and consciously, he has decided to set out on a path to purge himself and making life for himself, other than the one that was given to him by fate. In his letters, he expresses his inability to connect with the privileged members of his family. He rather invites the reader of his letter to look outside the walls of their mansion which is full of poverty and depression. He set out to connect with them.

> I left the city to work with landless peasants, the sharecroppers, wage labourers, and impoverished tenants who were the backbone of our movement. My job was to go to the villages and organise them into armed struggle. That was the only way to seize power, one field, one village, one district at a time. (Mukherjee 61)

In his earlier letter, Supratik expresses his inability to mingle with his co-workers and how he felt an outsider there as well. He considered himself a leader and that he was meant to do much more beyond the petty politics in college. He admits

> What did I know of such lives, sheltered, bourgeois boy that I was, living in the cushioned vacuum created by my grandfather's temporary boom of minor-mode prosperity – four-storied house, cars, many servants? Nothing. Yes, I was a communist activist from my very first year in Presidency College, but there is a large gap between being an activist out of the idealism that comes from books, conversations, the fire of youth, and being one because you have lived through the depredations that life has thrown at you. (Mukherjee, 33-34)

He feels like an extremist and rejects like a revolutionary. After his entire life dedicated to a revolutionary cause and an attempt made to discover his own people, he ends up, betraying the same people that he set out to connect with. He steals from his family to support his cause and Madan, the house help is accused and thrown into jail. Later when Supratik gets caught by the police, he gives in under the immense pressure of third degree torture.

> 'Shut up! The SP commands. The questions are ours to ask you son of a whore.
> Names, I want names'.
> 'Ashu Chatterjee, Ramen Niyogi, Debashish Ray Chowdhury, Debdulal Maity, Ashish Mukherjee', the names come out, as if from a tap; Supratik has no idea if they are real

> or fabricated, or semi fictional hybrids, where the surnames and forenames, both tethered in truth have become mismatched. (Mukherjee, 487)

Before getting shot at the back, he thinks of forgiveness from his mother. It is not clear if he gives out the correct names of his associates, but they said they would let him out on the account that he has already provided enough lead for the police to investigate further. The juxtaposition is the essence of Mukherjee's Kolkata, where the line between what people hate and what they aspire to become are blurred into non-existence. The lives and deaths are not glorious, but the minds are. Tagore's idea of imagination of an ideal reality is once again echoed through Supratik's fate.

In the first epilogue, one of the youngest members of the Ghosh family who is a mathematical genius becomes a reason of celebration. Swarnendu receives the Fields Medal, the Nobel Prize for pure mathematics. He is the child of the hapless widow of the house and his genius is presented by Mukherjee in the word of a colleague and a teacher of Swarnendu, Professor Pfeiffer: "Well, most mathematicians you will find our creatures somewhat dissociated from the real world, he said. The abstract matters to them much more than the concrete. Swarnendu is a very pure example of that (Mukherjee 498). Swarnendu looks at the inscription on the back of his medal written *To rise above oneself and to master the world* in Greek and announces "That will do. That is enough" (Mukherjee 499). It echoes Rabindranath's plight for every nationalist soul to pierce the veil of the real in order to understand beauty, something that Anderson seemingly ignored about the nature of imagination of one's motherland.

Internal fractures are visible in generic tropes. It is exposed through Nitai, and Ghosh family's treatment of Chhaya. Nitai was suffering because of the cruelties of his landlords. The class divide was so fierce that on this side of the wall landlords were living a rich life while on the other side children were forced to feed on dried hey boiled in muddy water. Even that was luxury at one point which resulted in many fortunate fleeing the villages and some others who couldn't gather the resources to leave ended up like Nitai. Supratik on one of his letters acknowledges that there are hierarchies in the slum as well where the fortunate ones end up becoming rickshaw pullers.

On the other hand, Chhaya was their own blood and she died a tragic death despite living, nothing less of a life of disappointment. The family fails to get her married which is attributed to the middle class notion that only a fair skinned girl is desired. The naming of her Chhaya, which means shadow brings out how conscious the family was regarding their daughters fate. In the beginning, everyone aspired her to marry into a wealthy family.

> In the beginning, nothing but doctors and engineers would do, particularly with the parenthetical word, London or Edinburgh after FRCS or MSC, but a while later that London or Edinburgh clause was silently dropped. Then they relinquished their hold on FRCS and MSc; and ordinary MBBS or BSc would suffice. Soon those requirements too fell away as the search was broadened (diluted, some said) to other professions – lawyers, lecturers, businessman. (Mukherjee, 45-46)

The struggle of Chhaya lives on through Sabita Kumari even after forty years of her death. Sabita's experience is of betrayal from her protectors. Her own house turned against her and the only way she could find an escape from her suffering is in death. However, she does not go that way and instead takes up arms and stands against the injustice— determined to take back however little a portion of what was taken from her and meet a meaningful destiny. Mukherjee places an unchanged, stubborn, resistive of significant change Bengal at the pedestal of a destructive goddess sworn to blow up thousands of lives just so the revolution continues. The acceptance of the grotesque is coupled with the hope of a better future.

There is a generational conflict which the novel critiques through showing the internal hierarchy within Bengali society. The complicity of the older generation in colonial and post-colonial power structures and widening the gaps in the society is also pointed out through the fear of Prafullanath and his sons that the friendly government might get overthrown by the revolutionary leftist government.

> There is labour unrest and unionism in the mills and given the fragility of the coalition government and the way the left party is strongarming, where would they be if the communist party, the CPI (M) actually comes to power? Which could be any day now, he [Adinath] suspects. Charu & Sons will have to accede to every demand of the unions. (Mukherjee 10)

Supratik stands in contrast to his father and grandfather in this context by becoming an agent of change that his predecessors feared.

Conclusion:

In *The Lives of Others*, Neel Mukherjee excavates Kolkata's contested identity, not as a static relic of colonial caricatures or nationalist mythmaking, but as a dynamic site of struggle where competing visions of nationhood collide. By framing the Ghosh family's decay alongside the visceral despair of figures like Nitai Das and Chhaya, Mukherjee dismantles monolithic narratives of progress, exposing instead the fissures of caste, class, and ideology that fracture post-colonial Bengal. His Kolkata emerges as a palimpsest— a city where colonial grandeur, Marxist graffiti, and subaltern silence coexist in uneasy tension, reflecting the broader contradictions of a nation oscillating between utopian aspirations and violent disillusionment.

Mukherjee's scepticism toward revolutionary idealism, embodied in Supratik's tragic arc, underscores the moral ambiguities of resistance. Yet, even as the novel refuses to romanticise struggle, it resists colonial frameworks by centring indigenous voices that reclaim agency through everyday acts of survival and defiance. This duality mirrors Partha Chatterjee's contention that anticolonial nationalism carves its sovereignty not through mimicry but by reimagining the spiritual and material domains. Tagore's vision of a nation loved for its unrealised possibilities lingers here, not as nostalgia, but as a call to confront the unresolved legacies of exploitation and exclusion.

In tracing Kolkata's layered past, Mukherjee compels readers to grapple with contemporary India's identity crises—Hindutva's hegemony versus regional pluralism, neoliberal modernity versus agrarian dispossession. His work posits that post-colonial literature cannot escape colonial frameworks entirely; instead, it must inhabit their contradictions, rewriting them from the margins. The answer to nationalism's enduring question; *What binds a society?*, lies not in purity or unity, but in embracing the fragmented, the contested, and the imagined. Kolkata, in all its grotesque vitality, becomes a metaphor for this reckoning: a city forever in flux, its stories a testament to the audacity of reimagining nationhood anew.

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