

The Self as Other: Estrangement in/ and the City in Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart*

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Abstract

Neel Mukherjee's first novel *A Life Apart/ Past Continuous* (2008) is a lofty 400-page literary endeavour that delves into a person's entanglements of illegal migratory experience and his/ her place in society. The crucial purpose of the novel in literary writings highlights the concept of the self as the other, by following the life of the protagonist in a city. City Narratives studies have recently emerged as an important discussion in examining the social processes whereby an individual intersects and interacts with the city, creating a connection with it. Set in the "city of joy", Calcutta, the chosen novel probes the feeling of estrangement experienced by the protagonist's emotional, cultural, and social self and with such factors as migration – hence, marginalization – contributing to it.

Keywords: Estrangement; Homelessness; Marginalization; Migration; Nostalgia.

Neel Mukherjee is a contemporary Indian writer who has published critically-acclaimed novels such as *Past Continuous* (published in 2008 in India) which was re-published in the UK as *A Life Apart* (2010), *The Lives of Others* (2014) and *A State of Freedom* (2017). Calcutta-born and London-based Mukherjee's writing offers contemplations on the universal themes of misery, alienation, dislocation, displacement, with respect to life in the heart of India's "city of joy", by exploring the city's underbelly in all its gory details. His works delve into the multitude of probabilities staring at people in the scuffle for a better life, even as those (his works) simultaneously open up the layers of the political, economic and social realities of life around his characters. His fiction and non-fiction, both, ingeniously sketch the depths and formations that the lives of people (can) assume through their own actions, ranging from a harsh defiance to a calm escape, from a tactical positioning of oneself to a rash renouncing of the self, com-

posed with unrelenting honesty. Rakes Sarkar too mirrors such a picture of the marginalized and presents the murky reality of the city of Calcutta in his thesis entitled '*Exploring the Interface.....*', as follows:

The world of illegal migrants in England, the conflicts and dilemmas of sexual marginalization, the flow and flowering of histories in terms of both inheritance and endurance make this novel all the more rich with the possibilities of being situated within the interface of marginality, power and resistance. (24)

By better understanding the role of emotional responses and their connection with urban forms of living, we can begin to understand marginalization, alienation and the concept of self as the other towards influencing individual lives. The novel also entails an understanding of how an individual develops the narratives of his/ her city that provide social and cultural significance through meaning of place and space, for stories are a means of symbolic politics that can be used for building the city as a brand. The Paper is, therefore, an analysis of how the nexus of escapism, racial discrimination, exploitation, violence, memory and the past tap into the protagonist's self via the city.

A Life Apart is set in the 1990s and deals with the protagonist's MA year in Oxford as well as his experience of illegal migration which sees him being treated as marginalized, alienated and as an 'other' in a Western society. The 400-page literary endeavour portrays a modern India through the lens of a young man, Ritwik, who escapes a ruined adolescence of wretchedness and maltreatment in Calcutta by turning into a homosexual in an estranged land at the age of twenty one. Memories play a big role in the novel during which the protagonist associates the memories of the past to the present. The novel is verbose and operatic in prose. Kunal Sen reviews it thus: 'The language in the novel is consistently spectacular and it's a great piece of meta-fiction with a great concept and focused on aesthetics. This is sweeping, ambitious, but it's also an intimate, doll-house of a work.'

Mukherjee presents Ritwik's dislike of the poisonous ventilation system of Calcutta, with its huge and messy traffic and a seriously insanitary environment. The demise of his mother is a huge loss for him at his age. His tale thus takes shape as a narrative of loss that frames Ritwik's risky and insecure life, lacking in certitude. The other characters in the novel too are more or less condemnatory of the blood relationships in their own ways. Ritwik plays the role of an alien for whom the land also becomes alien when he shifts from Calcutta to Oxford. Mukherjee is thus concerned

with racial issues as well when everyone at Oxford makes fun of Ritwik's brown skin as also his use of the English language and accent, thus pushing him outside of the mainstream.

The novelist posits the main character as a disgruntled young man and representative of the deadening realities of Calcutta. In the beginning of the novel, Ritwik is at the *Kalighat* crematorium for his mother's funeral. He was not present for the cremation rites for his father which took place only a few days ago, but had to perform what he had so wilfully avoided some days back. We find him contemptuous of his social group and calls them a 'parliament of vultures' that had been "gathering for the last week to circle around that one death when it looked as if it could suddenly, thrillingly, jump up to two. Their piously suppressed excitement provided a tight murmur in the background, like the muffled buzzing of bees: grief offered such a delicious peek into the minutiae of other people's lives". (*A Life...*, 4)

The story of Ritwik who, after the death of his parents, moves from Calcutta to Oxford to study for an MA in English Literature, throws light on his varied experiences of estrangement and alienation. When his student visa expires, he continues to remain in the UK and starts residing with illegal migrants and sex workers, working without a permit. His story has a contradiction in that of Miss Gilby, which occupies almost half of the novel and is a re-writing of Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* (or *The Home and the World*). As the English teacher for Bimala, the wife of an Indian landowner, Miss Gilby attempts to amalgamate into the Indian community; but, in the wake of the Independence movement, she is the first victim of nationalist violence. The story of Ritwik's transformation - from a young man to illegal migrant to homosexual - exposes a blotched picture of society. The novel justly delineates the immigrant's position within the society both in his country of origin and that of arrival. Both at home and abroad, he is and remains an alien.

Ritwik's recollections of his memories of squalor and sexual abuse, domestic violence and discrimination, cast an ominous shadow on his present life exposing the lack of love from his mother. This is seen to make it difficult for him to mingle with other people and causes in him a heavy feeling of isolation. Ritwik did not want to live in filth and dirt like his father who was not able to escape the drudgery of it all. He wanted a different life and so left the city and the country. The plot thus raises the subject of the act of transatlantic migration in a bid to flee from an oppressive and suffocating (city) life.

Cultural alienation plays a vital role in the novel. Ritwik is culturally alienated in a foreign country. When he loses his citizenship there and starts to look for ways to make ends meet and - more importantly - to keep his body and soul together, he comes face to face with fear, hunger, misery and suffering Mukherjee pertinently brings out the experience of homelessness experienced by the protagonist. In a comprehensive sense, alienation is used to indicate sentiments of detachment from the rest of the community, elimination from political life and a sense of absence of meaning in one's own existence. Besides cultural alienation, social alienation also marks Ritwik who picks up unknown people for sex in the public toilets in Oxford, and gradually forays into homosexuality.

The novel thus opens up layers of displacement, isolation and alienation. If spatial terms are given attention, we have not only one but double displacement: first from Calcutta to Oxford, and then from Oxford to London. In both the new places, Ritwik is assailed by the perpetual fear of getting lost. His 'home' is first the college room, which he describes both as a paradise and a cell, and then with Anne Cameron, an old British woman, whose decadent house in London provides him a shelter of sorts from the harshness of immigrant life. So, here Cameron functions as a sort of contemplative centre of the novel. On the one hand, her condition of social oblivion and alienation is the same as that of Ritwik. For the latter, however, denial and reminiscence mark the association with his city of beginning. Delineating the shape of migration and the perception of estrangement in Calcutta, Suchetana Chattopadhyay, in her article "War, Migration and Alienation in Colonial Calcutta...." (2007), talks about Calcutta's urban social environment, the sources of self-alteration and the political shift apparent in the city throughout the 1910s and views the movement from the rural to the urban through the prism of migration.

Calcutta can also be seen in countless memories as a city characterized by either dust or monsoon floods and, above all, by decadence and sickness. Mukherjee's extremely graphic prose conveys all the disdain that Ritwik feels for his hometown and his final decision not to go back there. Sometimes, the British weather reminds him of the Calcutta monsoon and makes him dewy-eyed. This is reminiscent of how Amit Chaudhuri's *Calcutta: Two Years in the City* (2013) makes 'place' a complex character. Chaudhuri creates a portrait of Calcutta to explore and challenge prevailing literary and artistic concepts of modernity. Sukhdev Sandhu in 'Calcutta: Two Years in the City by Amit Chaudhuri- review' states that Chaudhuri considers the reader a city possessed of a 'self-renewing way of seeing, of inhabiting space, of apprehending life.' The reader is taken through green avenues and derelict alleyways; introduced to intellectuals,

Marxists, members of the declining haute bourgeoisie, street vendors and domestic workers too. The portrayal of the city as a character, inspiration, childhood, and nostalgia, runs in tandem with the ideas presented in Stuti Khanna's book entitled *Writing the City.....* (2020) as well, especially in showing how the city becomes a silent spectator in individual works of literature.

Mukherjee's novel deals with the issue of marginalization as the process of disempowering or eliminating a group or class of people who are taken as less important or downgraded to a secondary position and are clustered together as second class citizens. For Ritwik, it is a case of double jeopardy for he is not an insider at home and always an outsider abroad. Apala Saha's article "The Kolkata Imageries..." (2017) argues that:

..... an association with the 'city has been circumstantial for the fittest (who could manage prolonged survival). Just by virtue of the fact that nobody belongs to the city, the city belongs to everybody. One always forgets that the city itself has, or rather develops, a perception of its own; the city is not what it is, but what it emerges to be. The inhabitants characterize the city that interacts with them. As more and more people become part of the city, its character evolves and so does that of its people. This is what time does to the city. Space finds character and meaning through the imaginings of those who are the current inhabitants of urban life and are the images of the same. (25-26)

Ritwik remained on the fringes in England. His passing away in a foreign land ironically becomes the disastrous high point of his long-lasting marginalization which had steadily widened to assimilate him fully. Even his book about Miss Gilby has a ghostlike similitude with his own life. The other character Nikhilesh's death in rampage matches the protagonist's passing away in the alleys of England. Nikhilesh too was also marginalized at home as well as outside, in search of a better life. *A Life Apart* is thus a scalding novel about dislocations, marginalization, migration, alienation, and is as much about the tenuous and insensible crisscrossing of lives and chronicles as about the solace and comfort of soulful story-telling.

Bridge and Watson, in *A Companion to the City* (2007) write that cities "...are more than only material or lived spaces and that ideas about cities are not simply formed at a conscious level; rather, they are also a product of unconscious desires and imaginations". (7). A number of theories assist in exploring and analyzing the complex - and often contradictory - elements of the self in relation to the city; the individual vis-a-vis society, in

literature. These theories help explain the city fast emerging as a lens to view the micro and the macro spaces in a multicultural world and to critique the city for its problematic relationship with the interacting self of its resident. No more does the study of city typically fall under the purview of Sociology and/or Anthropology, believing that it has mere material value, but is now being widely read and acknowledged from a literary point of view as well.

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