

Tales of Human Suffering: A Study of Neel Mukherjee's a *State of Freedom*

Dr. Shailendra P Singh

Abstract

Neel Mukherjee's *A State of Freedom* deals with five interconnected narratives which deal with the sufferings and anxieties of the lives of its protagonists who suffer in silence but at the same time show a zeal of life in thriving amidst their sufferings. Whether it be the domestic help or mazdoors or qalandars or expatriates – all seem to suffer some agony or the other – which is realistically portrayed by the author with sympathetic insights to make the readers feel how the real India lives and under what circumstances. The novel seems to be a brilliant exploration of the lives of the have-nots and their concerns.

Key Words: *A State of Freedom*, Adivasi, Domestic Helps, Expatriate, Hunger, Naxal, Neel Mukherjee, Poverty, Suffering, V. S. Naipaul

Neel Mukherjee, an expatriate Indian author, living in London, has made his mark on the literary scene with the publication of three highly acclaimed novels. His first novel, *Past Continuous*, won the Vodafone-Crossword Book Award in 2008 and many other prestigious awards later. His next novel won the Encore Award in 2014 from the Royal Society of Literature and was shortlisted for the prestigious Man Booker Prize 2014. His widely appreciated third novel, *A State of Freedom* (2017) deals with the theme of alienation and sufferings of its protagonists, from the lower order of modern-day India, who have been living life in such circumstances that every day for them turns out to be a struggle for existence. Every protagonist of the different stories in the book suffers from a sense of alienation, from which they cannot escape. Thus, the individuals are shown to be trapped in their very existence from where they can neither think of taking flight nor think of any way in

which they can resolve their struggles and live harmoniously with their environment.

The first story deals with an Indian father who is originally from Calcutta but lives in the United States of America. He comes to visit Taj Mahal and Fatehpur Sikri along with his six-year-old son who has been raised in America, to show him the rich heritage of India and connect him with his ancestral land. But the father and the son freak out at the experience of the historical monuments, and in the end, the father realises that he has somehow “become a tourist in his own country” (p. 18). The story seems to be a significant take on the Non-Resident Indians as they suffer from a sense of alienation when they visit their country – not being able to adjust or find any connection with the things native. The native ways become some nostalgic experience for them, and this nostalgia makes them come back to their roots again and again only to make them realise that the limitations of the nostalgia. The people of

the diasporic community thus share a longing for the homeland that they or their ancestors have left, either forcibly dispersed or voluntarily or consciously moved. This longing may not necessarily mean that they always want to come back to their mother country, though the hunger remains. Consequently, the identity of the diasporic individual is never fixed, never static, it is ever changing – they live in an in-between culture where they are nostalgic about what they have left behind and at the same time they try to assimilate to their host country and culture. Thus, both the erstwhile and the host nations become spaces for their ‘imaginary homelands’ which leads to their suffering and therefore make them feel the pains of their migrant experience.

In the second story too, there is a migrant who has come from England to Bombay in India, but in this story instead of focusing on the tale of the life of the migrant person, the author deals with two maids of his parents’ house in Mumbai – Renu and Milly. Both of them are victims of their situations, and the story delves into the life of Renu in quite a significant way. As the protagonist of the story visits Renu’s village, Putihari in Medinipur, West Bengal and learns how Renu had been working hard for all these years so that she can meet a part of the educational and living expenses of her nephew who is studying Physics in Heidelberg University. Even though she faces many hardships, while living in the slums of Mumbai, as she worked hard day and night to meet two ends meet, she tries her best to educate her nephew, who lives in an extremely remote village. She enables him to study in premium institutions so that he would be able to lift the family from the

state of abject poverty and attain a significant position in life. Her suffering knows no bounds, but yet at no point in time, she talks about her nephew to the protagonist of the story. She has a strange relationship with the other maid Milly as she cannot stand Milly and therefore, she always finds ways in which she could badmouth her.

In the third story, we are shifted to another rural atmosphere where we meet a cub bear being harassed by the village boys only to be saved by Lakshman who then expects that he will be able to make the bear perform dance shows and earn enough money to become rich. Living in a state of extreme poverty, he cannot afford to feed a bear without making money by putting up bear shows. As the bear grows up a little, he leaves his village to put up bear-shows in different places to earn some cash but finds out that life is not as easy as he expected it to be. He has to inflict tortures on the bear to train him to meet the expectations of the people in a show. It is expensive to feed and take care of a bear and often people do not have enough money to give at the end of a show. Leaving him home behind, he becomes a wanderer and faces numerous risks and hardships. Both bear and Laxman are removed from their natural habitations and face innumerable difficulties in their struggle for survival. They are often shunned away and are forced to move from one place to the other continually. Andrew Motion comments: “We hear about his family and their hardships, about the training of the bear, about their time on the road together, and about the ways in which their relationship allows and simultaneously denies “a state of freedom.” (Motion)

Laxman, to keep his money secure from thieves, hides it in the bear's collar. He has to tie his bear against a tree in the open. It rains torrentially for a few days, soaking the bear's collar and Laxman discovers that all the money, which he earned while facing a lot of hardships, in the last few months has been reduced to a mere pulp of paper. He is not left even with a ten-rupee note to meet his needs in this bad rainy season when he cannot put up public shows. Feeling devastated, he cries, howls and screams to give vent to his despair.

He holds his hands to the sides of his head and sits on the floor. Then he howls. Unmindful of who may be listening, whom he awakes, what unwelcome attraction he may be attracting, he screams. He screams not from his throat but from his lungs, his navel- the sound comes from somewhere deeper than where his voice is. He screams and screams and screams until there is no sound left in him. (162)

In the fourth story, we are taken to the Naxal area where two young girls are portrayed – Milly and Soni. Milly and her six siblings are born in an impoverished tribal household. Their suffering is further intensified when the right hand of her eldest brother is chopped off by the Naxalites. The cries of her eldest brother, Budhwa left her traumatised for the rest of her life. "Her mother had nine mouths to feed- herself, seven children and a drunkard of a husband, who instead of earning money was a drain on what little they could pool together." (171) Though Milly has a passion for studies, yet to feed her family, she has to become a domestic help from the young age of eight. Milly while leaving her home for the first time cries as she is "just beginning

to understand the weight of the world." (171)

Her friend Soni's mother is discovered with a lump on her right jaw. It grows and causes enormous pain that "wouldn't allow her to speak." (176) Her father has to borrow money on an excessive rate of interest to take her to a hospital in the city. In his two visits to hospitals, he returns without getting any treatment for his wife, for poor people were shunned at every step in the hospital, which suffered from a shortage of doctors. Ten days after the second unfruitful visit to the hospital, Soni's mother hangs herself bringing to an end all her suffering. Eoin McNamee comments: "Everything corrodes and rots. Everywhere the stink of excrement. A young mother takes her own life when she cannot find medical care for a facial tumour." (McNamee)

Soni, along with her elder sister, goes to the forest to gather Kendu leaves. She and her elder sister are attacked by the forest guards, who accuse them of illegally collecting Kendu leaves. Soni succeeds in running away but her elder sister is brutally raped by them. Soni starts finding solace in the meetings organised by Maoist sympathisers as they talk of "adhikar, haq, izaat" and the "rights to jal, jameen and jangal." (193) The idea of the direct action of taking power into your hands" (198) sounds very alluring, and she is instigated to join the Naxalite forces and gain training in combat. Instead of fulfilling her dream of living in an egalitarian and classless society, she finds herself exhausted by the necessity to constantly run to escape from the reach of police and para-military forces. She and her comrades engage in hollow ideological discourses, while they suffer from "the

recurring bouts of malaria and diarrhoea” with “the exhaustion like a second skin over them, the slow erosion of the body that was the gift of living in the open like animal.” (213) The police later kill her in an encounter.

Milly moves from one house to the other, continually facing discrimination and abuse in various forms. Her childhood is robbed from her as she has to serve the family, she works in, without ever expressing her own need of pleasure or fun. She is even denied an opportunity to interact with the world outside and kept as a domestic slave. The last part of the book again comes back to the town where the labourer is shown to be suffering from the severe cough which the “green potions” in the medicine shops could not cure leading to his death. He works in highly risky and hazardous situations on a rickety scaffold made of bamboo canes. Michael Gorra comments on the portrayal of his plight by Neel Mukherjee:

Safety precautions are nonexistent on this job, no matter what the law says, and Mukherjee’s description makes it clear that the man’s earlier work has given him asbestosis. Only alcohol numbs his pain. And what Mukherjee does is to step inside him, offering an unpunctuated stream-of-consciousness that’s clearly meant to recall Molly Bloom’s soliloquy at the end of “Ulysses.” (Gorra)

The narratives of the five sections of the book are not discrete as they all tend towards similar interests and conclusions that are to portray the lives of the subalterns from close quarters in a realistic way to provide the way the real India suffers in silence. But it also conveys a sense of inter-

relatedness that allows Mukherjee to say something about how families and communities work in general, and about how Indian society functions in particular. His sharpest focus is on the way life carries characters “like dice on the slot of a roulette machine and delivers [them] ... to destinations that [are] endlessly repeatable, each ever so slightly different from the other, all more or less the same.”

Throughout the novel, thus we see that along with the myriad dramas of migration there is always a constant story of lamentation and grief which permeates all the lives of the protagonists of *A State of Freedom*. This lamentation and grief somehow envelop the lives of the people, and yet we find that these people have the zeal to live life with all the potentialities. Neel Mukherjee seems to be insisting that the burden of their existence may have cowed them down, but that has not taken away from them the right to thrive. Thus, *A State of Freedom* may be about tales of suffering, but in spite of that, it is also a tale which affirms life. Hope, the foulest tricky thing, never loses its significance as people carry on living with the affirming flame that life would carry on, even though they may be very pathetic and dismal.

The title of the book *A State of Freedom* reminds us of a book by V.S. Naipaul’s *In a Free State* which was published in 1971. In some ways, Mukherjee’s book even resembles Naipul’s one as both of them are somehow a collection of diverse stories which presents to their reader the limits that poverty imposes on individuals and their freedom. Neel Mukherjee has used a significant trick in the book where the stories are interlaced with each other where

the minor character of a particular tale becomes the protagonist of another one. Even though there are many major stylistic experiments done by the author in the book, yet one thing which runs almost common in all the stories is how the so-called “have-nots,” “the subaltern” are living their lives to whom any change in the governmental policies does not change anything in particular. Therefore, one of the protagonists speaks in the story, “the pangs of hunger are great pangs, and it’s a burning. God gave us stomach to punish us.” This statement comes as a major avowal in the novel as for the poverty-ridden people and their suffering “hunger” seems to be the most significant issue in life. In one of the story we see Milly going from one town to another and then to the big city of Mumbai as a housemaid, and everywhere she is treated with much hatred. Getting two meals a day was a relief to her, as back in her village she never used to get one meal a day and sometimes had to go without food. Again, the qalandar Lakshman and his baby bear Raju is being shown moving from one place to another to put up the performance of the bear as that would make them have a proper meal which they could not afford otherwise. Physical hunger seems to be a significant driving force in the lives of almost all the protagonists which even make them move out of their villages as mazdoors (bricklayers), as domestic helps and even as qalandar. Thus, throughout the book, Neel Mukherjee makes attempts to portray how the subalterns in modern-day India live a life of suffering. It describes a society, where domestic servants are beaten up for breaking a cup, where domestic servants are kept locked in the room. In such a community the priest does not hesitate in taking a cut from the little money that the

qalandar gets from the performance of his bear, while an innocent girl is made to join the Naxalite movement as it provides with a dream to achieve justice. Even after all these, these protagonists never lose hope and carry on doing their best so that they can survive the odds. Apparently, the book seems to be about their intense suffering, but at the same time along with the pain, there is always the notion of thriving with life as these people teach the humankind that suffering is part and parcel of human life and should be taken in its stride to live life.

India is a free country and people have given their lives for the sake of the freedom of India; but for people like the protagonists of *A State of Freedom*, the supposed freedom is only a hope. The Constitution of India grants them freedom; but that freedom remains a theoretical construct as they are victimised from every corner. The tribal women are being raped by the forest guards, who are supposed to protect them. The poor tribals are not allowed admissions in hospitals, and they have to take recourse to suicide to end their pains. They have to walk for miles to reach the school only to find that teachers are not present in most times, where for a bag of rice people convert to a different religion, where the domestic helps are beaten and abused and even locked up, where the bricklayer cannot reach back to his family from the town for years in want of money. Hamilton Cain, commenting upon Mukherjee’s achievement in this novel, says, “Few writers come at the intersection of class and politics with his subtlety and compassion.” (Cain) All the incidents, in the novel, portray how the real India suffers in silence when there is another India which is

shining, where there is another India who travels to the West to accomplish its dreams and feels that they have become tourists in their own country. The novel presents the dichotomy of the Indian nation – where one part of it is thriving in the era of , and the other is not even aware that there is something which lies beyond their village.

It is true that Neel Mukherjee is a migrant who probably hasn't experienced the sufferings of the people, firsthand and like a dalit or an Adivasi, but that does not make his narrative a less convincing one as he is

writing on behalf of the “subalterns” and making the world know about their sufferings. In most case when a novelist who hasn't suffered these atrocities himself or herself tries to portray the characters that belong to the underprivileged sections of society, he falls prey to a sense of guilt. Mukherjee's, in his fiction, escapes this trap as he is able to balance his hold on realism by portraying their lives with complete objectivity and yet at the same time interweaving it with a certain sympathy.

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