

Exploring Margin: Neel Mukherjee Voicing the Concerns of the Marginalized in 'A State of Freedom'

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Abstract:

Neel Mukherjee, a UK-based contemporary diasporic author, is much acclaimed for his three prize-winning novels 'A Life Apart', 'The Lives of Others' and 'A State of Freedom'. All these three novels penned by him, reveal his inclination towards Marxist ideology and his concern for the subaltern and marginalized sections of the society. However, the present paper endeavours to study the marginalized characters in his third novel 'A State of Freedom' without juxtaposing or comparing it with his other two novels. The paper attempts to shed light on how Neel Mukherjee imparts 'voice' to the neglected and marginalized sections of the society. The researcher tries to undertake a thorough textual analysis of all the five sections of the novel to examine the marginalized characters in the novel.

Key Words: Canon, Diaspora, Marginalization, Marxism, Novel, Subaltern

Introduction:

Neel Mukherjee, a diasporic author, routinely tries to bring to the forefront the abject state of the marginalised sections of the society through his novels- especially the Manbooker prize nominated 'The Lives of Others' and 'A State of Freedom'. The present research paper focuses on the marginalized characters leading an abominable and penury-stricken life on the periphery of the society with special reference to his third novel 'A State of Freedom.' The paper has two parts. The first one attempts to define the terms marginalized/ marginalization while the second tries to analyse how Neel Mukherjee imparts voice to such marginalized sections of the society in his third novel 'A State of Freedom'

Marginalization (Definition) :

The concept of marginalization was first theorized by noted sociologists Robert Ezra Park (1864–1944) and Everett Stonequist (1901–1979). In sociological

parlance, the term marginalisation refers to the process of being downgraded to the fringe of a society. Online Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the verb 'marginalize' as: "to relegate to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group"¹ Thus, marginalization is a process of social exclusion in which an individual or an entire community of human beings are systematically denied basic human rights, resources and opportunities. Various economic, social, cultural and political factors work in tandem to contribute to the process of marginalisation.

Marginalized communities/persons are "those excluded from mainstream social, economic, educational, and/or cultural life. Examples of marginalized populations include, but are not limited to, groups excluded due to race, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, language, and/or immigration status. Marginalization occurs due to unequal power relationships between social groups"²

According to Marxist theory, the marginalized people have limited or no control over resources available in the society. Marginalization inhibits a person from enjoying the privileges, rights and opportunities which a person at centre enjoys. As a result, marginalized sections are exploited and subjugated and are highly vulnerable. Theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also propound that the marginalized (e.g. the subaltern) have no voice in both social, political structures and mainstream, canonical literature.

Marginalization and Neel Mukherjee's novel 'A State of Freedom':

Giving voice to the marginalized and subaltern sections of the Indian society seems to be one of the major concerns of Neel Mukherjee in all his novels. However, it is more pervasive in his third novel 'A State of Freedom'.

Inspired by V.S. Naipaul's 'In A Free State', Neel Mukherjee's 'A State of Freedom' has five interlinked sections. In the first section, an Indian who has been a resident of the United States brings his six-year-old America-born son to a tour of Fatehpur Sikri and Taj Mahal. The son however, is not much interested or curious even though the father tries to ward off his son's boredom by "spinning stories that he thought would catch the boy's imagination"³ (A State of Freedom p.5) When the father and the son reach the tourist spot, they see "beggars with various forms of crippledness" (A State of Freedom p.8) and deformed limbs. They are also surrounded and encircled by touts and peddlers who attempt to sell knickknacks one of them pleading, "Babu, my child is hungry, hasn't eaten for four days" (A State of Freedom p.9)

The child and the father, witness a construction worker falling from a multi-storeyed building while their car enters the hotel entrance where they are supposed to put up. The child, barely six years old is shell-shocked owing to this and dies out of fear.

The first section thus highlights the wide gulf that separates Indian and American life. As a result, the father feels “he was no longer a proper Indian; making a life in the plush West had made him skinless like a good, sheltered first-world liberal. He was now a tourist in his own country” (A State of Freedom p.8)

In the first section of “A State of Freedom” the father and the son are at the centre, with all the comforts and ample money to enjoy a tour while the beggars, peddlers and construction worker are on the margin. Neel Mukherjee thus dwells on the two poles of social continuum viz. the elite and the subaltern and throws light on how their life differs as chalk from cheese.

In the second section of the book too, there are these two poles of the social continuum as an Indian working in London visits his parents living at Bandstand in Bandra to garner recipes for a cookbook that he intends to write and therefore interacts with the home cook Renu and servant Milly. In the process, he also visits Renu’s home place in a village called Medinipur. His mother is surprised at this decision especially as it means “traversal of class boundaries... (and) dissolution of certain impermeable, separating membranes that the intimacy of the son of a master going to stay in the home of a servant entailed.”(A State of Freedom p.66). At Renu’s village the narrator stays with her siblings Raja and Ratan. In a conversation he learns from Raja that Renu was married and had a daughter Champa from the marriage. However, she walked out of marriage with her daughter as her husband turned out to be a drunkard and a gambler. The narrator also comes to know from the brothers of Renu that the education of Raja’s elder son Dulal is taken care of by Renu through her work in Bombay.

After this brief sojourn at Renu’s village the narrator returns to his home in Bandra and thereafter in UK. Over the telephone, in his conversation to her mother he learns that Renu has been kicked out of her work as a cook at the behest of the narrator’s father, who does not approve of her rowdy behaviour on a couple of occasions. This tragic ending of the second section reveals that the wide gulf that separates those at the centre and those on the margin is unsurmountable and hard to bridge.

In this section, the cook Renu and the servant Milly are doubly marginalised due to their feminine gender. Renu is not only economically underprivileged but is the wife of a drunkard and gambler and suffers and bears the brunt owing to her

gender. The author, Neel Mukherjee presents her in a favourable light as she finances the educational expenses of her scholarly cousin Dulal who studies at Heidelberg, in Germany. However, there is a chink in her armour- her envy of and rivalry with Milly. Milly, the domestic servant in the house, is a Christian convert from Jharkhand, who probably belongs to a tribe displaced by mining companies. In Mumbai, she lives in the same slum where Renu lives. However, Renu does not stand her. The narrator mentions that the slum where Milly and Renu reside is close to the hotel Taj Land's End but unlike the hotel the slum does not have steady water supply. The reference to the luxury hotel in the vicinity of the slum once again also brings in the stark contrast between the two poles of the social spectrum viz. those at the centre and those on the periphery. Through this juxtaposition of the plush hotel with the slum the author highlights the gulf that separates the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'.

The third section of 'A State of Freedom' also revolves around a subaltern- a figure on the margin- viz, Lakshman a Qalandar .i.e.a vagrant who makes both ends meet by making a bear dance in public. Lakshman is a Qalandar by chance. Before, being a Qalandar he is penury-stricken and is unable to feed his wife Geeta and three children Sudha, Munny and Ajay. He also needs to provide for the family of his brother Ramlal, who has left the village to work on a construction site in the city. Lakshman and his children starve due to poverty. However, luckily he comes across a bear cub. He raises the baby bear with an intention to earn money by making it dance. He trains the bear cub under the guidance of Salim qalandar. He then makes some money by travelling from place to place and making the bear, Raju, dance.

The section vividly brings out the violence and brutality that Lakshman inflicts not only on the bear Raju but his wife too. The section starkly reveals how violence is a part and parcel of the lives of the poor. Like the previous sections, this section also concludes on a negative note as whatever money Lakshman earns gets wet in rains and reduced to "wet shreds , almost a pulp" (A State of Freedom p. 161).

The fourth section of "A State of Freedom" looks retrospectively into the life of Milly and her friend Soni. Milly's original name, before she got converted to Christianity was Manglu as she was born on a Tuesday. She had a brother Budhuwa and friend Soni. Milly, as a child, was interested in studies. "Milly was on fire to study, to learn to read and write, to go to a bigger school," (A State of Freedom p. 170). But, at the age of eight she is taken out from school. Her mother sends her to work as a housemaid at a Dumari, a place which is eight hours by bus from her village. "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.”(A State of Freedom p.171) When Milly entreats on pursuing her studies further at school, she is snubbed, “Studying. What good is that for a girl? You’ll be more useful bringing in some money.” (A State of Freedom p.172)

Milly then confides how her family and altogether eight families got converted into Christianity. They were promised a big sack of rice which would amount to a food for a whole month apart from free schooling. This is what leads to their conversion.

In the same section, Soni reminisces how she and her sister had been to forest to collect Kendu leaves as after selling hundred leaves, they used to get twenty-five paise. However, they are caught by forest officers. The officers ask whether they have a license to collect Kendu leaves and add that they are indulging in an illegal activity. The girls wonder, “Illegal? Everyone in the village had been doing it for as long as the girls had been conscious, and their parents and grandparents and ancestors before them...what if there really was a new rule they didn’t know about? Every day the government people made some rule that made their lives more and more impossible. They kept hearing talk about how they would have to leave their village and the forest and move far way because big companies wanted the land. Where would they go? What would they do? (A State of Freedom pp. 177-178)

These lines throw floods of light on the fact how tribal/subaltern people are denied their basic human rights and access to resources so that they perennially remain on the margin. The author then talks about the ‘Samaj Sewi’ i.e. social workers who raise awareness of the tribal regarding their rights: “ They spoke about how the forest was their home and protector, how it provided them with everything they needed. But the government wanted to move them out and give the forest to rich people, big companies, who wanted to cut the trees, sell the wood, dig up the land for the riches under it...they would lose everything, their homes, the forest, the air, the water, their freedom and would be made to work as slaves on the land, no longer theirs but someone else’s....They talked of adhikaar, haq, izzat. ...They’re going to take our water, land and forest away from us.” (A State of Freedom p. 193) The section, thus sheds light on the rights of the subaltern/ tribal and gives voice to those on the margin of the society.

The last section of “A State of Freedom” is without any punctuation marks. In it a subaltern -a mazdoor/ labourer -gives vent to his thoughts. In all probability, he is Ramlal, the brother of Lakshman from section three. The section opens with a legend regarding Mughal emperor Shah Jahan that indicates how mazdoors have

been at the receiving end from time immemorial. As the section opens, one construction labourer tells others that Shah Jahan did not want anyone to replicate the architectural wonder Taj Mahal and therefore, in accordance with his orders, the right thumb of all the mazdoors who built Taj Mahal was cut. The mazdoor, who is the narrator of the section, i.e. Ramlal also reveals that he has been suffering from cold and fever. He puts in labour for about ten hours a day for the wages of merely five rupees. The author, in this vein, brings out the agony of construction workers through the musings of the narrator.

All the foregoing analysis of the five sections of 'A State of Freedom' reveals that the entire book brings to the fore the appalling state of those on the margin of India like the peddlers, house maids, cooks, construction labourers, vagrants, beggars, tribal people etc. The author through the title 'A State of Freedom' appears to ironically highlight as to how these marginalized sections are unable to enjoy the real taste of freedom in a so-called free India. The author also seems to be attempting to give voice to these marginalised sections of India and disclose their plight to the armchair reader of the novel living in an ivory tower.

Notes and References:

1. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/marginalize> (accessed on 11 June 2022)
2. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7228861/#:~:text=Marginalized%20communities%20are%20those%20excluded,%2C%20and%20For%20immigration%20status>. (accessed on 11 June 2022)
3. Mukherjee, Neel. *A State of Freedom*. Penguin Random House, 2017. (All subsequent references incorporated in the body of this research paper are to this edition.)