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## The Battered Lives of the Others and the Issue of Indian Liberal Thought: A Critical Study of Neel Mukherjee's *A State of Freedom*

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### Article

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### Abstract

**Aims:** *This article examines how A State of Freedom interrogates dignity, freedom, migration, aspiration, and the contradictions of liberalism in modern India through the fractured realities of contemporary society.*

**Methodology:** *The study adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach grounded in postcolonial and Subaltern Studies frameworks. Through close textual reading, it analyses representations of subaltern subjectivities and critiques of Indian liberalism concerning caste, class, gender, and neoliberal development.*

**Outcome:** *The paper argues that Mukherjee's fragmented narrative exposes the persistence of caste, class, gender, and neoliberal inequalities through marginalised figures such as Milly, Lakshman, and Ramlal, while reimagining Indian liberalism as an unfinished and contested project.*

**Conclusion and Suggestions:** *This study argues that A State of Freedom exposes the contradictions of Indian liberalism by revealing the gap between its ethical promises and the lived realities of subaltern communities shaped by caste, class, and neoliberal inequality. Through fragmented narration and shifting perspectives, Neel Mukherjee critiques neoliberal India while reimagining Indian liberalism as an evolving ethical tradition rooted in indigenous thought rather than merely a Western import. The study concludes that the project of Indian liberalism remains unfinished and calls for continued engagement with questions of dignity, agency, and freedom at the margins of society.*

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Building a nation requires continuous making and remaking within and outside of its boundaries. In the arena of discourse. The value of the inside part of the mechanism of building an identity among its people is no greater than its shadows that are cast outside its boundaries, which is how the manifestation of a people is viewed by the rest of the world. After Napoleon's invasion of Iberia, Indian literati such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Ramesh Chunder Dutt, Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, in the span of almost a hundred years, built a space for liberal discourse globally. Although they failed to make their European counterparts pay any significant attention to what they were saying, they very successfully managed to reach their fellow countrymen inside. The allegations of their idea of liberalism being derivative or borrowed from the West were beside the point, as all modern political discourses are mixed. Christopher A. Bayly defends this point in *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire*. Centuries later, the modern Indian discourse finds its putative interlocutors engaged in similar dialogues, giving space to fictions that delve into similar English-Victorian themes of the value of life, regardless of their status in a society. Neel Mukherjee's novel *A State of Freedom* encourages Anglophone readers to locate the issue of the Indian idea of liberalism and morality against the backdrop of the world's largest democracy, which demands that it has always had its own tradition of Vendantic continuity that helped it achieve self-realisation as a nation.

The present article tries to evaluate the questions of dignity of human lives and their freedom to make independent choices in modern India as the most poignant issue raised by Mukherjee's 2017 novel, *A State of Freedom*. The novel ruptures the spatial and temporal unity of history and, in doing so, makes opposites meet. The novel brings to the forefront both the consumer-infused foreyard and the memory-laden junkyard (or backyard) of Indian society and encourages readers to engage in uncomfortable conversations about migration, crushing aspirations, and modernity. The study makes use of its space to discuss the ideals of liberalism in India by its founding figures, gradually placing the text in focus under the resultant light of what the country and its sons make of the debate that starts with the question whether India is and has been a liberal

country, although the scope of the study seeps into the broader dialogue of universal morality and freedom.

Mukherjee starts the novel with two epigraphs: the first by V. S. Naipaul in *A Bend in the River*, “After all, we make ourselves according to the ideas we have of our possibilities”, and the second by a Syrian refugee at the border of Austria, “Migrants? We are not migrants! We are ghosts, that’s what we are, ghosts.” Mukherjee does not explicitly confess that his novel is based on the metaphorical dynamics between the visible and the invisible of society, but the epigraphs set the tone for the upcoming contrast throughout the novel between the metaphorical foreyard consisting of the privileged and the junkyard of the ‘others’. What emerges through the stories here is a striking spatial metaphor that may best be understood through the lens of the chronotope—a fusion of time and space that structures narrative meaning. The foreyard, in this sense, is not merely a physical setting but a carefully curated present which is visible, aspirational, and ideologically charged. It is populated by spaces such as urban apartments, gated communities, restaurants, and malls, all of which signify mobility, security, and consumption. The temporality that governs this space is unmistakably linear: it moves forward with purpose, anchored in planning, self-fashioning, and the promise of progress. Characters inhabiting this chronotope, like the academically accomplished NRI returning to India, embody a future-oriented consciousness, one that presumes agency and continuity.

In contrast, the junkyard operates as an obverse chronotope or an allegorical repository of what is disavowed or rendered invisible. It gestures toward submerged histories amplified with rural impoverishment, displacement, generational precarity, and what might be called a condition of non-memory. The individuals who occupy this space—namely, Lakshman, the street performer with deferred aspirations, or Milly, the migrant domestic worker severed from her tribal origins—remain structurally peripheral, both within the narrative and within the socio-economic order it reflects. Their temporality is not progressive but recursive: cyclical, stalled, and often repressed by forces beyond their control. Taken together, the foreyard and the junkyard do not simply denote two contrasting spaces; they articulate a deeper dialectic between visibility and

erasure, between the celebrated present and the silenced past. The novel, therefore, invites us to read these chronotopes not as static backdrops but as dynamic sites where power, memory, and time itself are unevenly distributed. In 1925, Surendranath Banerjea, a liberal who believed in the religion of humanity, stresses on the role of the moral in his book, *A Nation in Making*. He says, “The qualification of the orator is moral rather than intellectual... The equipment of the orator is... moral, and nothing will help him so much as constant association with the master-minds of humanity, of those who have worked and lived dedicated lives, consecrated to the service of their country and of their God” (Banerjea 130). The orators of liberal thought of India, including Gandhi, whom many Western thinkers mistake as counter-liberal or a religious leader, laid the stones for the country to grow up as what it is today.

Some of the fiercest defences of post-colonial India being a place of liberal traditions come from the West and mostly the ‘statistical liberals’ (a term coined by Bayly) who had a factual analysis of India’s economic fate under the colonial power in vision. However, in doing so, the spirit of Tagore and Gandhi gets left out while the statistical liberalism that matched the epistemic violence of the colonial rule with epistemic insurgency gets all the praise.

It did not go unnoticed though that Gandhi’s idea to work on individual commitment and their right to exercise civil resistance was as liberal as anything. Tagore strove for the same through his fictions and short stories that talk about the corrosion of the soul and the need to realise humanitarian responsibilities to save the soul through connecting to a higher power. Such a spiritual undertone might have contributed to people such as Bayly to misjudge Gandhi or Tagore as religious figures and thus keep them out of their intellectual discussions, but recent waves of Indian fiction suggest a relocation of sensibilities to the roots by writers such as Neel Mukherjee. The space for negotiating humanity and civil rights with the authorities is rooted in the discourse of Asian nationalism.

Anderson contends that nationalism, as practised in Europe, the Americas, and Russia, served as a modular framework for the concept of nationalism, which was later adopted by African and Asian nations. Leaders in these regions selectively adapted elements of this framework to align with their specific

agendas. This perspective exemplifies a hegemonic narrative that reinforces Western hegemony by positioning the West as the originator of ideologies, while relegating non-Western societies to passive recipients of externally conceived ideologies. Partha critiques this framework by questioning, “If nationalism in the rest of the world has to choose their imagined community from certain ‘modular’ forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine?” He adds that adopting this perspective reduces anticolonial resistance to a derivative construct, implying that “Even our imaginations must remain forever colonised” (Chatterjee 5). The idea of the West positioning itself as the centre while the rest strive to internalise the ideology is an echo of Gellner’s idea of uneven development.

Ernest Gellner considers nationalism as a modern product which has nothing to do with ancient times. It is a post-industrialisation idea and should be treated as such. He insists on the idea that there will always be core areas that are industrially advanced and then some that will be on the periphery who lag behind, retaining pre-modern agrarian structures and localised cultures. The peripheral elites, recognising this disparity, mobilise nationalist movements to create their own culturally homogenous nation-state. However, the parallel this study draws here may agree with Anderson’s idea, but the intention is not to position Tagore or Gandhi as peripheral elites. The reason behind such desistance is that just like Bayly and Rawls, Anderson as well failed to address the imagination Tagore and his likes advocated.

The discourse of liberalism in a colonised India had to start from within, disowning the ruler’s narrative of what constitutes liberalism. The British oppressive rule upheld that their rule in India was based on the rule of law. German historian Professor Dietmar Otto Ernst claims, “Gandhi used the right to resistance to demonstrate that the British-Indian state was not based on the rule of law; the British claim that their colonial state upheld the rule of law was essential for the maintenance of their control over India” (Rothermund 168). Further down, in his review of Bayly’s work, he concludes: “Reclaiming Gandhi for liberalism would have been a great asset to Bayly’s magnificent attempt at ‘recovering

liberties” (Rothermund 168). Recovering liberties in Indian fictions by and for Anglophones has had an interesting journey so far.

Whatever was native to the language English had to be discarded, and a new way of sensibility in Indian English had to emerge, of which Raja Rao and his contemporaries were proponents. They accepted the Western idea of nationalism and the usefulness of the language still foreign to most Indians and rejected the native essence. In choosing the substance of their fictions, Indian literati relied heavily on Vedantic Hinduism. Professor Regina Gagnier, a contemporary scholar on geopolitics of language and literature migration, comments:

The Indian liberals deployed arguments from Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), Lord Byron, Charles Dickens, Auguste Comte, and John Ruskin, and developed a sophisticated mathematical rhetoric of statistics to undermine the statistics of the colonisers. Theosophy was attractive as a social evolutionism, liberal communitarianism, and Vedantic Hinduism. Theories of amalgamation of Hindu and Muslim were compared to the dynamism of Anglo-Saxons. Darwinism was invoked as Spirit’s evolution in history. Indigenous systems of thought in both Hindu and Islam, more worldly religions, avoided the deep conflicts between science and religion that divided Europe. (Regina 287)

Soon after the world saw the rise of religious unity in the context of Europe, Christendom became the basis for religious superiority facilitated by a truth language. In the eighteenth century, the world saw the gradual demise of imperialism, which was a product of the religious doctrine that the emperors derived their right to rule from divine powers. People merely aligned under them as subjects to die for the preservation of the kingdom of God. The century was not only marked by the demise of religious modes of thought but also heralded the rationalistic and secular enlightenment.

Since the ‘political baptism of the lower classes’, as Tom Nairn loves to observe in *Breakup of Britain*, the Nationalist journey of the West started witnessing the induction of the common into mainstream politics and the emergence of the middle class. His observation is in the context of the arrival of

nationalism in the most modern sense that gave the popular force an entry into the politics of Britain, but if viewed from a historical perspective, the lower-class energy was used by the intellectuals of the time that gave rise to many nations of the world. Since the time when Western Europe started developing nationalism in its borders, the consequences were waiting to be seeped out across them. Nationalism does not have a date of birth; rather, it is a result of an age-long convergence. Hans Kohn reflects:

Like all historical movements, nationalism has its roots deep in the past. The conditions that made its emergence possible had matured for centuries before they converged at its formation. These political, economic, and intellectual developments took a long time for their growth and proceeded at a different pace in the various countries. (Kohn: 36)

The growth Kohn is talking about had a change of a particular kind at its heart: a breakaway from traditional economic life to enter into the more people-centric discourse where they took pride in the art, language, and the life of the people in general. The central power of the absolute monarchs and courts that set the pace for the growth of the country and national community-feeling before the latter half of the eighteenth century was replaced by a more secular force. India, on the other hand, thrived on *udartavad*, implying generous communitarianism rather than narrow selfish individualism and utilitarianism of the West. Instead of following Western rights as entitlement, India was led into the task of improvement of self through spiritual exercise brought to the attention of Indians by the *Swadesi* and *Swaraj* movements.

The duality is in approach. Western nationalism never flourished in a homogenous setting. Apart from the jumpy terrain of differences in politics and culture, the West was never truly liberal, let alone unified in it. Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy were not really known for their liberal thinking until the old order was defeated by the new one, where Western Europe gained a homogeneity in this regard, otherwise only harboured in the deepest depths of hearts. When the West gained liberal uniformity, it came with a confidence in its own cultures that they could overcome the shortcomings on their way to build truly enlightened nations—a confidence according to many the Eastern countries lacked. They had

their own superiority established in the entire world. Regarded as the pre-eminent developed people with their own unified language and culture, the West set the pace for development in general to the rest of the world. Whatever the shortcomings they had, they were confident they had the ability to overcome them. This is why the cultural nationalism of Italy, despite being an illiberal country, made them progressive and close to liberal. Mazzini believed in a shared culture and had confidence in their contributory capabilities towards a nationalistic pool where different cultures could come together, contributing to the betterment and enlightenment of the nation. This might not be strictly a nationalistic endeavour, but his cultural nationalism can and did effortlessly lead to a political nationalism. The cultural nationalism that the Eastern world aspired to was never liberal and they cannot be so. The cultural nationalism of Mazzini in Fascist Italy, when adopted in the East, became a hurdle for the East to achieve a unified and strictly national pride for many reasons.

The argument in the space of discourse is also of the sort that rejects liberalism from the very core of both the East and the West. The hostility in rejecting foreign influence and at the same time striving to live up to their standards of culture and civilisation makes the East necessarily and aptly illiberal. Plamenatz writes:

Eastern nationalism is also illiberal, not invariably but often. Leaders or rulers who take it upon themselves to create a nation or transform it, to provide it with skills, ideas, and values it did not have before, are impatient of opposition. Their task, they think, is urgent, and they will not tolerate obstructive criticism, taking it for granted that it is for them to decide when it is obstructive. (Kamenka 35)

The orators of this new order are also in some ways insurers of freedom and liberty. The subjects under them are free to think of a better life; they are encouraged to break free from the chains of old ways of thinking and entertaining ancestral authority upon them and seek better occupations and marry whoever they deem fit. In such ways they are liberal, but they are limited by their inability to criticise their rulers who may be a little authoritative, but they are so because they only wish good for them and hence, the liberators and not oppressors. This

empathetic look at the illiberal East is necessary action on the part of the West as imitation and submission were the only two choices left for the relatively backward East. The justifications for such consideration are many, including the industrial revolution which influenced the entire world but was rooted in the supremacy of the West. The weaker could not have secluded themselves from the rest of the world, especially after the revolution. China tried doing just that and failed utterly. They were being invaded repeatedly but believed in the supremacy of their culture over the Westerners. Therefore, unlike the Germans (Consider Herder's preaching that they should not hate the foreign. Instead, they must first accept what their own people can offer them and once that space is saturated, they should just internalise whatever good the alien cultures offered), their choice was utter rejection of the supremacy of the Western model as they saw themselves better than the invaders. The West can limit its influences and try to stay back from the matters of the East so that the imitation, however necessary and inevitable, is limited. The dilemma should be respected as is proposed by him. The danger of such nationalism is looming on the countries yet to be grounded in the developmental politics devised on their own, but the burden is not only on the East. He concludes:

I have no wish to make light of the dangers of this type of nationalism. But it is not enough to point them out, as Western critics of nationalism so often do, and to express distaste for them. We must see this nationalism as part of a social, intellectual, and moral revolution of which the aspirations to democracy and personal freedom are also products. (Kamenka: 36)

Mukherjee's *The State of Freedom* is a profound reflection on socio-economic structures of modern India that drip from the wounds of displacement, migration, and brutal control of the state on individual destinies. In *A State of Freedom*, Milly and Lakshman occupy clearly demarcated subaltern positions, their lives shaped by systemic forces that restrict access to power and self-representation—a universal struggle that speaks more to the Indian conscience. Just as intended by the orators of Indian liberalism in the colonised India who encouraged enlightenment more than awareness of rights, the novel critiques structural

inequalities while also interrogating the limits of recovering subaltern voices within literary discourse.

The novel is structured into five interconnected sections, where peripheral characters in one narrative become central figures in the next. This shifting focalisation destabilises conventional narrative hierarchies and foregrounds multiple subjectivities within a shared socio-political framework. This conscious choice to disrupt the spatial and temporal space is not meant for nonchalant statistics but is devised to speak to the soul that might renew the vow to become a Swadesi fighter looking into the self for improvement of the nation. Such a structure parallels Subaltern Studies' historiographical project of re-centring marginalised voices. As Ranajit Guha argues, history must recover the agency of those excluded from elite narratives (Guha, SS I); similarly, Mukherjee's narrative form reclaims subjectivity for the marginalised, emphasising fragmentation and discontinuity as intrinsic to subaltern experience.

The novel articulates a central paradox that freedom is constitutionally guaranteed yet materially inaccessible. Systemic forces—caste, class, gender, and ethnicity—operate cumulatively to restrict mobility and dignity. When orators of British-ruled India such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Ramesh Chunder Dutt, Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar focused on enlightenment that could save India from the Western fate of division along the line of Christianity, their greatest strategy was to avoid the deep discussion of the conflict between science and religion. The goal is still to be achieved, and the tradition of India keeps the zeal alive when the inequalities poked by its fictions are not the results of ideology but rather of malpractices.

Milly's trajectory, from a tribal village to urban servitude, reveals intersecting structures of oppression. Her experience resonates with Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, where overlapping identities intensify marginalisation. In contrast, Soni's turn to Maoist rebellion recalls Frantz Fanon's argument that violence may emerge as a response to absolute dispossession, though her continued marginalisation underscores the gendered limits of such resistance. Bayly's lost opportunity, as remarked by Rothermund, to see Gandhi's non-violent resistance as liberal is reiterated by Mukherjee.

Mukherjee's portrayal of Milly engages directly with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question: Can the subaltern speak? The novel suggests that while resistance is enacted, articulation remains mediated and often suppressed. Milly's interiority remains largely inaccessible, exemplifying epistemic violence.

Renu's narrative foregrounds subtle forms of resistance and reminds us of non-violent resistance. Her sacrifices for Dulal, her deliberate negligence in her work, and her loud expressions of dissatisfaction are potent with Gandhian resistance based on quiet and strong self-assertion, though her eventual dismissal reveals the precarity of such agency. Her story further illustrates Spivak's argument that subaltern resistance is often filtered through dominant interpretive frameworks. Lakshman's life, marked by poverty and exploitation, extends subalternity into the non-human through his relationship with the bear, Raju. The parallel suffering of man and animal reflects Michel Foucault's notion of disciplinary power, while Donna Haraway enables an expanded understanding of subalternity that includes non-human subjects subjected to regimes of control.

Ramlal's narrative offers a stark critique of neoliberal development. His migration and death exemplify the expendability of labour within capitalist structures, recalling Karl Marx's concept of the proletariat and Dipesh Chakrabarty's analysis of coercive modernity. His erasure reflects Guha's observation that subaltern histories persist only in fragments. Formally, the novel's fragmented structure resists linearity, mirroring the discontinuous nature of subaltern histories. This aligns with both Gramscian and Subaltern Studies frameworks while echoing Edward Said's insight into the relationship between power, knowledge, and narrative form. The novel critiques the promises of neoliberal progress, exposing how development reproduces structures of inequality. Mukherjee offers no resolution; instead, he foregrounds survival, endurance, and limited resistance. The subaltern remains partially visible yet structurally unheard, leaving the question of freedom unresolved.

While the liberal tradition in India—shaped by figures such as Raja Rammohan Roy and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar—foregrounded moral introspection and collective ethical responsibility, Mukherjee's narrative reveals the persistent gap between ideological promise and lived reality—the junkyard.

The novel's subaltern figures, caught within structures of systemic inequality, embody the limits of a liberalism that guarantees freedom in principle but withholds it in practice.

By deploying a fragmented narrative form and shifting focalisation, Mukherjee not only aligns with the methodological concerns of Subaltern Studies but also reconfigures the discourse of visibility and voice. The foreyard–junkyard dichotomy ultimately signifies more than spatial division; it becomes an ethical critique of a nation that continues to negotiate its liberal identity amidst enduring hierarchies. In doing so, the novel does not reject Indian liberalism outright but calls for its rearticulation—one that meaningfully accommodates the dignity, agency, and lived experiences of those historically relegated to its margins.

This study is focused on showing that *A State of Freedom* serves as a critical site where the contradictions of Indian liberal thought are both exposed and re-examined. The exposure is not an example of negative liberty but is echoed through the constructive liberalism that stems from the traditions of the country that re-illuminates the mind that is about to settle for the real and eventually forfeits its right to imagine a Tagore's Motherland.

The above reading of Mukherjee not only critiques neoliberal India but it also opens up the discourse of Indian liberalism to an ethically and internally evolving ground rather than a derivative import from the superior West. The study painstakingly refrains from pretending to be a recovery of what was good in the past but tries to mediate between that and what is. The study consciously keeps the wisdom of the Dutch philosopher Frank Ankersmit that organisation of knowledge is a form itself and thus adds to the ontology or the existing knowledge. Mukherjee's novel is not a mere recollection of what Indian Liberalism and agency presently is but it adds to it further that the project of Indian liberalism remains unfinished, demanding continual ethical engagement with those who persist at its margins.

The study is limited and the scope is also bounded by Anglophone ontology. It, therefore, would be beneficial to explore other writers of English such as Arvind Adiga and Rohinton Mistry. Further research on non-Anglophone Indian literatures to test whether similar subaltern representations emerge can

also be of great value. In the end it should be realised by every heart in the country just as Mukherjee's novel implicitly tries to revive Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore's liberalism that such works are reminders of incomplete realisation of the idea of freedom and thus serve as an ethical archive of the nation's unfinished promises.

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