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## Economics is Life, Life is Economics: The Rhetoric of Agency in a Scathing, Compassionate Quarrel with the World in Neel Mukherjee's *Choice*

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### Abstract

**Aims:** *This paper examines how Choice interrogates agency, freedom, and economic determinism within neoliberal modernity. Drawing upon Donald N. McCloskey's idea of economics as a rhetorical and ideological discourse, the study explores how Mukherjee critiques liberal assumptions regarding rationality, development, and individual choice through fragmented postmodern narratives shaped by capitalism, migration, race, and class inequality.*

**Methodology:** *The study adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach based on close textual reading. It selectively engages with theories of postmodernism, neoliberalism, and postcolonialism through thinkers such as Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, David Harvey, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The analysis focuses on fragmentation, paranoia, intertextuality, and pastiche in the novel.*

**Outcome:** *The paper argues that the novel exposes the illusion of autonomous agency under neoliberal capitalism. Mukherjee demonstrates that individual choices are deeply conditioned by structures of class, race, geography, and institutional power. The fragmented narrative destabilizes grand narratives of progress and development while revealing the human cost of economic rationality.*

**Conclusion and Suggestions:** *The study concludes that Choice transforms economics into an ethical and philosophical question concerning dignity, freedom, and inequality. Further research may explore broader postmodern and postcolonial dimensions of neoliberal anxiety in contemporary South Asian fiction.*

\***Correspondence:** Motahar Hossain, [motahar.hssn@gmail.com](mailto:motahar.hssn@gmail.com) © (2026) All rights are reserved with the author (s) published by CaveMark Publications. This is an Open Access Article distributed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any form or medium, provided that the original work is appropriately cited or acknowledged. This paper is available online at [www.literaryherm.org](http://www.literaryherm.org), and CaveMark Publications, India, published it.

Donald N McCloskey of the University of Iowa is a renowned figure for treating Economics not only like other social sciences but rather describing it under the rhetorical discipline using analogy and metaphor: something closer to what a fiction is rather than a science based on regression. Whenever an interest is observed in the literary canon to indulge in keywords; such as development, inclusion, authority; the inevitable question of conscious choice is automatically touched upon. The suggestion McCloskey makes in *The Rhetoric of Economics* that economic arguments are not merely matters of numbers, regressions and policies made on those variables is echoed in Mukherjee's *Choice*. The stories of this novel, besides being attached to a common thread of choice, reflect human lives on a material scale. The conflicts of the lives of the protagonists, as real as they get in the postmodern world—both the orient and the occident, build on the corpus of the debate: how entangled agency is with economy and how far is the idea of development from the idea of independence. Although he starts with the most engaging story that sends the reader looking for what went wrong and where did it happen in the human history that we gradually lost grip over our development in the most neo-liberal sense in the most privileged part of the world, in the end Mukherjee dares to question through a compelling picture of a less economically fortunate rural Bengal: *whose development is it anyway?*

The present study, however, draws from the overarching debate of economics in human life in the backdrop of a world which is market oriented but is based on a close reading of Mukherjee's *Choice* as a postmodern text. The goal of the study is to establish the postmodern elements in the novel as agents unsettling the calm of a reader who looks for order, singularity and consistency by design. However, the paper does not indulge in comprehensive theoretical debate with major postmodern thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, or Jean Baudrillard in depth. Rather its limitations stay confined to intertextuality, paranoia and pastiche that in this book are not subtle in any sense. They play their visible parts when Mukherjee presents this metafictional triptych dealing with art, sympathy and charity. It collapses into a single frame revealing the absurdity of the true nature of ethical choice and illusion under global capitalism. By exploring the postmodern elements this study aims to figure out the fluid worth of the novel

in asking the pointed questions regarding human agency and its existence in a society of regressive economists who believe *economics is life and life is economics*.

The Neo-liberal assumptions about choice, authority, well-being, rationality and agency are addressed in a setting that is postmodern in its core. The study seeks to draw out the lines of economics that run like a subterranean river through the entire length of Mukherjee's work *Choice*. Inside the stories there echo some of the pertinent questions regarding human capability to take control of their lives and get rid of the absurdities of consumerism. Although the study does not ignore the possibility that Mukherjee is having a go at his own tribe with humorous punches at the corporate publishing industry, the uneasiness of his mouthpiece Ayush is aimed at his larger life that revolves around wanting to do good for the world. The Entrepreneurial self is at the centre of this struggle but in all the stories the humans find themselves in situations they never knew how they came to be. Mukherjee shows the tragedy of a failure that the Neo-liberal belief of a pristine data driven theory faces when taken out of the pages and slammed against few lives across the globe— from London to hamlet in India. This study argues that the uncanny between economic backwardness and affluence shown in the novel carries the essence of human helplessness to an invisible paranoia which is postmodern in itself. The marriage of two colliding worlds i.e. neoliberalism and postmodernism serves as the core tension in all the stories and Mukherjee is artfully far from providing a boring answer to any of it.

*Choice* consists of three loosely knit stories that are marked by a single colour: the colour of individual burden and the choices people make to do good—to themselves and their world. The first story offers an elite lens of one London-based publisher at war with his husband over economics which the latter thinks is only regression and the logical way to look at life. They are both Neo-liberals. Ayush is hyper sensitive against the killings of animals for the benefit of the market and Luke thinks of the market as the self-driving rational mechanism. Both of them come from a society that has the privilege of not indulging in making ends meet and their choices are directed towards making the world a better place as the former works in publishing and the latter as an economist

resolved to let the market act as an agency for the more resourceful. The structure of the entire novel divided into three different stories and not a unified whole alone makes it a postmodern setting. It is still a setting unified as all of the stories are mentioned in the plot of the first story. However, the uneasiness Ayush finds himself in is flanked by his lack of choice. On the one hand his job is repulsive. At times his entire body refuses to cooperate with the mediocrity of the publishing industry. He understands that just like any other industry publishing is also a market itself, but fails to accept its incapability to discern the value of a good piece of writing. On the other hand, he is at war with his own kind at home as well. He has been with his husband for twenty-five years and his personal and professional fatigue are still invisible to the others. Although Luke wants to help him with whatever he guessed Ayush was struggling with, it was futile to Ayush as he thought no external intervention could replace what he believed needed to come from a conscious individual choice to fix the broken world. This reflects in his act of showing his little kids a violent film to make the point that killing for meat is not as fun as they might have thought. The kids are shaken to the core and Ayush's choice is radical.

He kept his voice low and stayed meticulously busy in the smallest of tasks. The repetitive arguments with his husband make him so repulsive that he wants to press down on a wine glass he has been cleaning so it breaks and the shards bloody his palm. He feels alienated because of his brown skin at his workplace as well as at a family function at Luke's. The situation that Ayush finds himself in was further complicated by his realisation that they have lost sight of the turn where they went wrong as humanity— a convenient yet well-articulated paranoia where the real hand behind the hurt remains invisible— a postmodern manipulation of the characters by unseen powers.

Luke sees human beings as predictable and his beliefs regarding market supremacy and human agency are rooted in the neoliberal idea that markets are natural regulators of human progress. While discussing his ideas against Ayush's conviction Luke becomes the mouth-piece for the likes of Karl Polanyi. Polanyi was an economic anthropologist from Austria who gave counterarguments against the capitalists who feared world-war-scale conflicts in the absence of an

authoritarian elitist regime. However, he believed in the usefulness of the Neoliberals becoming authoritarian Just as Luke who looked extremely upset to have lost the control over his money when Ayush spent £200k against his will.

David Harvey in his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* quotes him:

There are, he noted, two kinds of freedom, one good and the other bad. Among the latter he listed ‘the freedom to exploit one’s fellows, or the freedom to make inordinate gains without commensurable service to the community, the freedom to keep technological inventions from being used for public benefit, or the freedom to profit from public calamities secretly engineered for private advantage’. But, Polanyi continued, ‘the market economy under which these freedoms thrive also produced freedoms we prize highly. Freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, freedom of meeting, freedom of association, freedom to choose one’s own job’.

(Harvey 36)

Luke wishes to control his destiny through meticulous planning where he still believes in the agency but not in the way Ayush does. We hear Polanyi again in Ayush as Harvey reflects– “As Polanyi might have put it, neoliberalism confers rights and freedoms on those ‘whose income, leisure and security need no enhancing’, leaving a pittance for the rest of us. How is it, then, that ‘the rest of us’ have so easily acquiesced in this state of affairs" (Harvey 38)? Therefore, the question: *whose development is it anyway?*

Luke is more optimistic. Ayush never wanted kids on account of his belief that the world is becoming too hostile for the graceful survival of future kids. Luke won the battle for kids and they surrogate a Thai mother. Luke did consultancy on the side and the earnings went to a fund for the kids’ elite education in the future. When Ayush gives £200k from that fund to three different climate change charities Luke loses his mind. Ayush refuses to believe that their children have a future so more money saved to Ayush is nothing less than petty consumerism where they consume and waste more than they need. For Luke it is a calculated investment which is disrupted by Ayush who thinks it is taking things for granted. Charity does not have an effect on society. It makes “zero difference. Zero. Nada” (Mukherjee 97).

Postmodern subversion that destroys the sense of agency that both of these men think they have over their future and the world is disrupted by Mukherjee himself. The characters are not independent. They come from Mukherjee's own world. The second story is also borrowed from Ayush's story. Emily exists in a manuscript that Ayush is handling for publication. The characters lack independent agency in their existence itself. Then again this loss of agency compels Mukherjee to address the issue of the narrator himself— what gives him the right to tell the story of his own characters— to which he speaks through Emily at the end of the second story when she protests Rohan's verdict that Selim's story was not her story to write, with— “No. No, it's mine. It is my story too.” (Mukherjee 200)

Ayush exists as a character inside the corporate complex that Mukherjee seems to despise and Emily exists in a story of MN Opie who is a mystery to even the industry itself. This nested doll structure destroys all the determiners of agency and lifts up the illusive veil from individual choice. Then there is no way to discern the validity of Mukherjee's concern that human agency is an illusion as the stories don't share the same reality. Their worlds are not parallel to any of the others, rather they are mere results of intertextuality which is why Ayush's attempt to secure a moral ground or righteousness is exposed as an expression of solipsistic privilege when put to compare with the poverty and guilt in the stories that follow, especially that of the rural family whose lives got upended by the arrival of a cow. Ayush feels manipulated by an invisible force in his job and in his home. He feels his emancipation as a human being is challenged. His skin colour sticks him out like a sore thumb around him:

He has never been able to shake off the feeling that he is their diversity box, ticked - the rest of the company is almost entirely white; all extraordinarily well-intentioned, of course, but stably, unchangingly white. The very few people there belong to the junior ranks of IT and HR, none in editorial, apart from Ayush, or in management. (Mukherjee 9)

He is meek when it comes to confronting people at his work place regarding his discomforts as if he has sold his soul to the devil, something he must have

forgotten how it came to be and now he is too afraid to even let anyone find out the signs of his revulsion:

Ayush runs out of the meeting to go to the toilets, shuts himself in a cubicle, and throws up. Afterwards, he spends twelve minutes scrupulously wiping, first the top-edge of the toilet bowl, the seat, the seat cover, then worrying that some of that acrid toast-mulch must have splashed outside, the floor, in circles of increasing radius around the squat stand of the toilet bowl. (Mukherjee 16)

Like a criminal he cleans up the evidence so carefully that when police arrive the scene appears tidy and without a trace of any crime. His only outburst is in the form of a cerebral outrage that takes place inside his head when he feels a sudden rush that subsides gradually once finished as he sits rigidly on his chair with a clenched jaw. In doing so the unity between what is real and what is fantasy in his world is also intentionally and artfully compromised for the reader. He imagines that he bursts out in a meeting against racism, or warning a young writer about the malpractices taking place inside the walls of this industry but the reader is allowed to know that it is all in his head only in the end of it. Paranoia is visible as Ayush restrains from speaking those ‘fantasies’ out loud as if an invisible force is pulling him back and it makes the postmodern subversion in the text more appealing.

Pastiche as an element of choice in this metafiction blends diverse discourses and realities. As far as Fredric Jameson’s understanding of Postmodernism goes it is the expression of late capitalism and therefore paranoia, depthlessness and historical incoherence are not just artistic choices, they are symptoms of global capitalism itself. Jameson writes:

The conception of postmodernism outlined here is a historical rather than a merely stylistic one. I cannot stress too greatly the radical distinction between a view for which the postmodern is one (optional) style among many others available, and one which seeks to grasp it as the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism: the two approaches in fact generate two very different ways of conceptualizing the phenomenon as a whole, on the one hand moral judgements (about which it is indifferent

whether they are positive or negative), and on the other a genuinely dialectical attempt to think our present of time in History. (Jameson 45) Mukherjee's characters in this novel suffer from not knowing the exact source of their alienation. Besides, his choice not to have a coherent singular story is further validated by his fragmented narrative transitions achieved by choosing to blend worlds traditionally separated by class, discourse and cultural value. He juxtaposes spheres of lives such as people of colours and high browed Whites, philosophically sophisticated writers and precarious lives shaped by migration and systemic insecurity, economists' supremacy that they owe to data, outcome, productivity etc and rural Bengali peasants struggling to maintain bodily security. With this choice the cultural hierarchy collapses and we see again in the second story how Emily's intellectual sophistication shaped by liberal traditions unfold themselves and her privilege against the backdrop of an impoverished migrant whose struggles are rooted in survival under structural inequality. It reinforces Mukherjee's exercise that it is probably impossible to separate philosophical freedom from economic disparity. Luke's belief that *economics is life and life is economics* is further validated.

In the third story set in an unbelievably backward Bengal the reader is reminded of Jean Francois Lyotard's postmodern "incredulity toward metanarratives." Lyotard viewed universal truths like development, progress, emancipation of identity, rationality with skepticism. He writes in *Postmodern Condition*: Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it" (Lyotard xxiv). He explains his skepticism– "The ruling class is and will continue to be the class of decision makers. Even now it is no longer composed of the traditional political class, but of a composite layer of corporate leaders, high-level administrators, and the heads of the major professional, labor, political, and religious organizations" (Lyotard 14).

A poor family in rural Bengal is given a cow by some economists who wish to measure if economic uplift takes place or not. On a technical level this story should belong to a technocratic discourse in the language of developmental

economics with data, productivity, outcome, welfare etc. as metrics. Mukherjee places it in the language of a lived emotional metric of poverty and its reality making it tied to human aspiration, dignity, survival, anxiety and human vulnerability—things economics lack the framework to measure in numbers. This is ideologically important for Mukherjee’s work as it collapses the distinctions between intellectual theory and lived reality. The subaltern existence when juxtaposed against the elite discourse makes one almost hear in the faintest final words of Pulak— *whose development is it anyway* as the mob finishes him off in the dead of a night on the charge of smuggling a cow across the India Bangladesh border. At his final moment Pulak disturbs the reality for the reader as they see him hallucinate: “Suddenly, as if in answer to the question of where the cow is, the wall of people parts. At the end of it is a vague pale shape, but Pulak cannot put a name to what it is. He’s still searching for the name, so familiar yet still so elusive, right on the tip of his tongue, when the paleness devours everything” (Mukherjee 310). An educated guess for the word Pulak was looking for could be ‘development’ but the bigger question is yet even more elusive: *whose development is it anyway?* as the economists never paid a price with their lives for this experiment.

In the final moment the story almost becomes of Pulak instead of Sabita who sets out with her children to look for the missing cow. Pulak, without telling anyone in the family, took the cow which was getting difficult to maintain to sell on the other side of the border. When the family found the cow missing they went out exhausting the last amount of breath in looking for the cow. They called out the name of the cow hundreds of times but not even once any of them called out for Pulak whose absence went unnoticed in this crisis. However, the entire story is that of the family. The underlying assumption of the experiment the economists thought they were doing echoed Luke’s belief that the free market is the universal truth machine. Just as Luke wanted a better future for their kids Sabita and Pulak wanted that for their kids as well. The difference is ironic as the agency stayed with the upper class Luke where the poor Bengali family remained the mere recipients of, first, the cow they never wanted, and then the death of Pulak which he could not have imagined as he was a Hindu and not Muslim who are hated to

be the smugglers of cows. The economic gift collapses into a pure tragedy. The family could not bear the economic burden of providing food to the cow. The milk it produced could not be sold as the cheaper prices in the free market caught them off guard, so the milk started spoiling. When they tried to drink the excess the flatulence came then followed violent outbursts of their stomachs behind the bushes as the family went there one by one. Baudrillard's view of the society that functions on simulations rather than the actual thing or even the representation of it is echoed in this mishap. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, he observes:

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself - such is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection, that no longer even gives the event of death a chance. (Baudrillard 2)

The economists in the story of the rural Bengali family believe in the symbolic image of development which is a simulation in their datasheet. This hyperreal collapse slams the hyperreal simulation of global philanthropy as the result of the policies are messy and complicated, further scrambling the equation of unpredictable development.

The fiction of autonomy and human choice is not a subject of sympathy to Mukherjee in any of the stories. His second story through Emily's deducing emphasises that expanded choices amount to expanded freedom and Mukherjee sees her as one with the white saviour complex. Her act of enlightened choice becomes a cultural appropriation as Salim never had an escape from the help that was offered to him by his saviour from the West. Emily believes otherwise and thought that her choices were correct moral choices. The pastiche has a bitter taste and yet produces the effect of lifting up the veil from the ambiguity a little so the reader once again hears Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak speak her question: *Can the subaltern speak?*

Neel Mukherjee's *Choice* emerges as a deeply postmodern interrogation into the neoliberal faith in market, rationality and development. The question it addresses is that of agency. Through postmodern fragmented narratives, metafictional layering, paranoia, intertextuality and pastiche Mukherjee disrupts the comfort of a neoliberal believer who has faith in humanity's existence as autonomous subjects who can take independent decisions for their own benefits and change their fates in whichever direction they want. He rather presents lives caught within invisible forces of economics, racism, publishing corporates, migration, philanthropy and global capitalism. By showing the pictures Mukherjee questions the very notion of freedom which is supposed to be stable and unconditional. The study treats economics as the fundamental grammar for the metanarrative that shapes authority instead of treating it like a backdrop to the analysis of a literary piece. Mukherjee's narrative echoes Donald N. McCloskey's proposition that economics exceeds numerical calculations and has the intention of entering into the domain of metaphor, ideology and storytelling. The conflicts we see in the triptych between Ayush and Luke, Emily and Salim and Sabita and the developmental economists uncovers the fact that neoliberalism constructs an illusion of agency while simultaneously building structures to prevent genuine freedom. The inequality amongst class and geography is revealed as opposed to a show of liberation.

The postmodern elements in the novel intensifies this critique. Intertextuality disfigures narrative authority while metafiction questions the legitimacy of true representation instead of high-horsed philanthropy that nobody asked for. Paranoia exposes hidden operatives in the domains of institutions controlling power and flow of wealth. Pastiche collapses the frames of distinction between subaltern bodily survival and elite intellectual discourse. The novel's own structure rips open the symbolism of a fractured world struggling to exist in the same plains of reality. Here the coexistence of coherence and moral clarity appears impossible. Mukherjee keeps away from providing a convenient answer to any of the uneasiness the reader must have developed in their heads upon reading the stories and it is artful and tasteful considering the unequal world he comes from.

The study has several limitations that are primarily based on its closed scope within one primary text. It does not deal extensively with economic empirical theories. Studies based on the broader aspects of postmodernism other than paranoia, intertextuality, and pastiche may help grab a better sense of the arguments made in the present study. The discussion around subalternity remains limited and, therefore, broader postcolonial debate may further enhance the picture. Neoliberal anxiety could not be fully examined and intense inquiries into more contemporary South Asian fiction may improve the understanding in this field. The economic theories discussed in the study are for symbolic references and not to be treated as rigorous methodological studies.

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