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## **The Collapse of the House of Ghosh: Family, Politics, and Decay in Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others***

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes Neel Mukherjee's Man Booker Prize-shortlisted novel, *The Lives of Others* (2014), exploring how the text intertwines domestic space with political history. Set against the backdrop of the late 1960s Naxalite movement in West Bengal, the novel uses the financial and moral deterioration of a wealthy, multi-generational Calcutta family the Ghosh's to mirror the broader sociopolitical fractures of the era. Through a close reading of the family dynamic, the paper examines the suffocating internal hierarchy of the domestic sphere and how it functions as a micro-society built on systemic exploitation. Furthermore, by tracing the ideological trajectory of the eldest grandson, Supratik, the study investigates the moral complications of political idealism, demonstrating how radical activism can inadvertently harden into violence and cruelty. Finally, the paper analyzes Mukherjee's unique narrative style, particularly his use of contrasting sensory details and a dual narrative structure, which forces readers to confront the moral blind spots of class privilege. Ultimately, this paper argues that *The Lives of Others* serves as a powerful critique of socio-economic inequality, illustrating the tragic consequences that occur when the elite attempt to isolate themselves from the systemic suffering of marginalized communities.

**Keywords:** Neel Mukherjee, *The Lives of Others*, Naxalite Movement, Postcolonial Literature, Class Privilege, Bourgeois Decay, Idealism.

### **Introduction**

When Neel Mukherjee's second novel, *The Lives of Others*, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2014, it was recognized as a massive achievement in contemporary postcolonial literature. Set in Calcutta (now Kolkata) during the turbulent late 1960s, the novel provides a brilliant, unfiltered look at a society on the verge of a revolution. While many historical novels focus either entirely on political events or entirely on family dramas, Mukherjee masterfully blends the two.

This paper explores how Mukherjee uses a single, wealthy family the Ghosh's to mirror the wider political breakdown of West Bengal during the Naxalite movement. By analyzing the tension between the comfortable world of the rich and the violent reality of the poor, the novel

shows how wealth can blind people to human suffering, and how extreme idealism can lead to tragedy. Today, the book remains a powerful warning about inequality and the high cost of trying to change the world by force.

### **The Historical Landscape: The Rise of the Naxalites**

To fully understand the novel, one must understand the real history that drives it. In May 1967, a small peasant uprising took place in a village called Naxalbari in West Bengal. Led by radical communist leaders like Charu Majumdar, the movement argued that India's independence from Britain in 1947 had only helped the rich. The poor farmers, peasants, and tribal communities were still being exploited by wealthy landlords (*zamindars*) and a corrupt capitalist system.

The rebellion spread rapidly from the countryside into the universities of Calcutta. Brilliant young students, deeply moved by the poverty they saw around them, dropped out of prestigious colleges to join the armed struggle. They believed that the only way to create a fair society was to completely destroy the existing system through violent revolution. Mukherjee places his novel right in the center of this historical firestorm, capturing the hope, anger, and terror of the era.

### **The Domestic Sphere: The Suffocating Multi**

#### **Generational House**

While the streets of Calcutta are filled with protests, the Ghosh family lives in a massive, four-story house on Basanta Bose Road. At first glance, this house represents the ideal traditional Indian joint family. It is ruled by the aging patriarch, Prafulla Nath, who built the family's wealth through a paper mill business. Under his roof live his wife, his four sons, their wives, and his grandchildren.

However, Mukherjee quickly reveals that this grand house is not a place of safety, but a prison of quiet cruelty and bitterness. Without using overly complex language, the author paints a vivid picture of everyday domestic warfare: The War of the Daughters-in-Law:

The women in the house, particularly Purba and Chhaya, are locked in constant competition over food, money, jewelry, and the favor of the matriarch. The Hierarchy of Worth: A person's value in the household is strictly tied to how much money they bring in. Sons who work hard at the mill are praised, while those with less financial success or mental health struggles are quietly pushed to the margins. The Poison of Secrets: From hidden addictions to financial fraud, the family members actively lie to one another to maintain their social standing. The house functions as a micro-society. The exploitation, greed, and unfair rules found inside the Ghosh home are the exact same evils that the Naxalites are trying to fight on a national level.

### **Supratik and the Trajectory of Idealism**

The bridge between the private world of the Ghosh's and the public world of the revolution is Supratik, Prafulla Nath's eldest grandson. Supratik is a brilliant college student who becomes deeply ashamed of his family's wealth. He looks at the luxury around him and realizes it is funded by paying low wages to poor factory workers.

Driven by a fierce desire for equality, Supratik secretly leaves home and moves to the remote villages of rural Bengal. His goal is to organize the peasants and spark a revolution. Mukherjee structures these sections using Supratik's personal journal entries and letters, giving the reader an intimate look at his psychological journey. However, Mukherjee does not romanticize the revolution. Supratik genuinely wants to do good, but his journey highlights the tragic flaws of extreme political passion. In the villages, he discovers that the peasants do not always want a violent war; they simply want enough food to survive. As the movement grows more radical, Supratik becomes involved in acts of extreme violence, including execution and betrayal. His idealism slowly hardens into cruelty, showing that when a movement values an abstract idea over real human lives, it inevitably loses its moral center.

### **The Blindness of Privilege and Economic Decay**

While Supratik is away fighting in the mud, the rest of the Ghosh family remains trapped in a state of deep denial. They are so consumed by their petty internal arguments that they fail to see the world changing around them. Their wealth acts as a thick wall, keeping reality out. When labor strikes begin to shut down their paper mill, the family views the workers not as desperate human beings asking for fair wages, but as ungrateful enemies. This brings us to one of the book's major themes: the inevitability of decay. Prafulla Nath's business model is outdated and built on exploitation. As the Naxalite movement gains traction, regular workers refuse to be mistreated anymore. The paper mill collapses financially, and with it, the family's status dissolves. Mukherjee uses physical deterioration to mirror this financial ruin. The once-grand four-story house begins to fall apart paint peels, pipes leak, and rooms are shut down. The family is forced to sell their jewelry and cut back on meals. By the end of the novel, the old capitalist order that protected them is thoroughly broken, proving that privilege cannot protect anyone from the wheels of history.

### **Narrative Style and Human Complexity**

What makes *The Lives of Others* an extraordinary literary work is its refusal to simplify human nature. Mukherjee does not write a black-and-white story where the rich are completely evil and the revolutionaries are completely good. Instead, he shows that everyone is deeply flawed, yet deeply human. The novel's writing style is incredibly detailed and sensory. Mukherjee describes the delicious, multi-course meals served during the family's good days with the same intense detail that he uses to describe the brutal, horrific torture scenes in the police stations later in the book. This contrast is deliberate. It forces the reader to acknowledge that the comfort of the rich directly coexists with, and relies upon, the suffering of the poor.

The dual structure of the book alternating between the cold, distant overview of the family's collapse and the passionate, first-person voice of Supratik creates a powerful reading experience. It forces us to empathize with a

family we might otherwise dislike, and to question a young rebel we might otherwise admire.

"The title itself, *The Lives of Others*, serves as the ultimate moral question of the book: To what extent are we responsible for the suffering of people outside our own immediate circle?"

### **Conclusion**

Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* is a brilliant and heartbreaking exploration of a pivotal moment in Indian history. Through the rise and fall of the Ghosh family, the novel illustrates that the political world and our private lives are deeply connected. We cannot isolate ourselves in walls of wealth and pretend that the poverty outside does not matter.

Ultimately, the book offers no easy answers or happy endings. Supratik's violent idealism ends in tragedy, and the Ghosh family's blind greed ends in ruin. Decades after the 1960s, as the gap between the ultra-rich and the poor continues to widen across the globe, Mukherjee's novel remains deeply relevant. It stands as a modern masterpiece, capturing a specific historical era while speaking directly to timeless human struggles regarding justice, family, and the search for a better world.

### **Citation**

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