

Neel Mukherjee, *In a State of Freedom*, Vintage Publishing, 2017.

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Neel Mukherjee's new novel confirms him as one of the most interesting voices from South Asia in the new century. The title recalls that of a book by V.S. Naipaul: *In a Free State* (1971). In fact, Mukherjee's book bears a resemblance to Naipaul's in that it is a collection of diverse stories and in that it explores the limits that poverty imposes on individual freedom. Mukherjee's stories are somehow interlaced, some minor characters in one tale becoming the protagonist of another. In this, it recalls the "Inserts" in Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*, which abruptly interrupted the main narrative to focus on the lives of passers-by or walk-on figures.

After *Life Apart* and *The Lives of Others*, the 47-years-old Bengali author is out with a number of new others' "lives", which belong to the have-nots of what is often called new India; the people to whom globalization and the GDP increase have made no difference. Neel Mukherjee's stories revolve around impoverished peasants or villagers, who, even to this day, experience physical hunger— "the pangs of hunger are great pangs, it's a burning. God gave us stomach to punish us" one character remarks. Hunger pushes them out of their villages and into the metropolis, turning them into *mazdoors* (bricklayers) or domestic helps, in fact servants who can be beaten by their employers for breaking a cup, or be sent on endless errands under the scorching sun by way of punishment. One character works her fingers to the bone in order to pay for the education of a relative who studies in Germany, another one for her children, another still believes that he can grow rich by teaching a bear cub to dance, thus becoming a very clumsy *Kalandar*, as violent as he is desperate. One girl, whose story echoes an episode at the end of *The Lives of the Others*, becomes a Naxalite, leaving her village for the jungle. Diverse as the lives of these people can be, they all share the same impossibility to actually make a choice. They cannot use the liberty that the Constitution theoretically grants them.

The drama connected to these lives is that they are anything but exceptional, they represent millions and yet they go unnoticed and uncared for by the middle-class for whom they work and with whom they hardly ever speak. Their invisibility is such that they do not gain admission to hospitals, or that police officers can rape women with impunity. As Soni, the village girl turned Naxalite, explains to her childhood friend: "the lives of people like us are nothing".

A mechanism akin to what postcolonial theory calls cultural denigration is at work within the Indian society. The problem with cultural denigration does not consist so much in that the colonizers believe that their own race and culture is superior to that of the colonized, the real problem starts when the colonized believe it too. The problems with subalterns, Mukherjee seems to suggest, is similar: since the affluent, lawmaker, police-protected middle-class considers the lives of the have-nots as nil, they too end up believing it themselves. The brightest albeit rare moments of this otherwise rather pessimistic narrative come exactly when people become conscious of their own lives as important, at least to themselves. This is

where the narrative is most compelling, the moments, albeit rare, where the characters are actually able to imagine a brighter future.

Neel Mukherjee is an urban, sophisticated and cosmopolite intellectual from Calcutta, much like the NRI protagonists of the first two chapters. Hence, he does not denounce a situation that he has experienced first-hand, like Dalit or Adivasi writers would do. Still, his fiction does something equally important: it shows to the readers, especially middle-class ones, a fair way to open their eyes onto the subalterns. This is no obvious task. Often middle class novelists who describe characters belonging to an underprivileged group fall prey to a sense of guilt, which somehow encroaches on the text. The characters become either too flat or too sophisticated, often even heroic, so that they lose their realism. Mukherjee's characters, on the contrary, are taken at a low angle, as if they were not from a distinct, different class, but simply fellow men and women going through a difficult time. Better still, their difference from the likes of the writer is acknowledged, but abstracted from a personal power relation. Although it is clear that the novel is inspired by millions of such lives, subalterns as individuals do not disappear, nor are they dwarfed by a patronizing look, or magnified like heroes. They are viewed with sympathy, and sometimes made slightly laughable, but above all portrayed in their shortcomings and achievements, spiritual depth and meanness. Some of the women in the novel appear to lead heroic lives, joining the Naxalites or working for the welfare of some beloved relative. Yet their paths are not held up as examples to follow, and not even as viable solutions to the plight of subalterns. Indeed heroes and heroines hardly had a choice. They are "simply" strong characters, who have strong moments along with weaker ones in all their beautiful humanity. Although they bear the marks of centuries of exploitations, inhumane class discriminations, sheer fatigue, there is not the slightest hint that Mukherjee's subalterns are essentially different from the middle class. In the end, middle class readers cannot help thinking "there but for the grace of God", which feels all the more disquieting if rephrased secularly: "there but for the grace of statistics".