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**Imagining the Other in Calcutta: Empathy, Cruelty, and Class in Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others***

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**Abstract**

Neel Mukherjee's Booker-shortlisted novel, *The Lives of Others* (2014) is a relentless, morally unflinching examination of what happens when an entire social class fails to imagine the humanity of those beneath it. Set in Calcutta during the politically convulsive late 1960s and early 1970s, the novel interweaves the domestic drama of the upper-middle-class Ghosh family with the revolutionary journey of young Supratik, who abandons the family's privilege to join the Naxalite agrarian uprising. This paper argues that the novel's central preoccupation is the failure and possibility of empathy across the boundaries of class -that Mukherjee uses the twin narrative strands of bourgeois domesticity and peasant revolt to dramatise the devastating human cost of treating others as means rather than ends, as instruments rather than subjects. Drawing on Martha Nussbaum's philosophy of empathetic imagination, Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of class distinction, and postcolonial critiques of the Bengali bhadralok, the paper reads *The Lives of Others* as a profound moral and political inquiry into whether those born into privilege can truly imagine the lives of those they exploit - and what the consequences are when they cannot.

**Keywords:** Empathy, class, Calcutta, Naxalite Movement, Bhadraklok, Cruelty, Postcolonial, Bengali Literature.