



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, Bhadrakok, Cruelty, Postcolonial, Bengali Literature.

I. Introduction: The City and Its Others

Calcutta - or Kolkata, as it was renamed in 2001 - has always been a city that makes the question of the Other impossible to avoid. Its streets have historically pressed together, with brutal proximity, the extravagant wealth of the bhadralok and the crushing poverty of the migrant labourer, the paternalist comfort of the joint-family mansion and the desperate improvisation of the jhupri. It is a city in which the distance between a life of privilege and a life of destitution can be measured in metres, and yet that proximity has rarely translated into genuine understanding across the class divide. Neel Mukherjee's second novel, *The Lives of Others* (2014), takes precisely this geography - physical, social, moral - as its subject. In a novel of searing ambition and emotional force, Mukherjee asks what it means to truly imagine the life of another person, particularly when that other person is separated from you by the vast and seemingly impassable gulf of class.

The Lives of Others is set in Calcutta and rural West Bengal between 1967 and 1970, one of the most turbulent periods in the history of independent India. The Naxalite uprising - a Maoist-inspired agrarian revolution that began in the village of Naxalbari in 1967 - was reshaping the political landscape of the state, as peasants, sharecroppers, and tribal peoples rose against the structural violence of landlordism and money-lending. Meanwhile, in Calcutta itself, the professional and mercantile classes were navigating the anxieties of a post-independence economy in decline, their certainties eroding even as their habits of privilege remained entrenched. Into this charged historical moment Mukherjee places the Ghosh family: three generations of an upper-middle-class Bengali clan living together in their Basanta Bose Road mansion, their internal conflicts - petty rivalries, destructive secrets, collapsing finances - mirroring the larger fractures of the society around them.

The novel's dual narrative structure is its most powerful formal device. One strand follows the Ghosh family's domestic drama in the third person, rendering with Victorian density and psychological precision the texture of bourgeois Bengali life. The other strand consists of the letters and diary entries of Supratik Ghosh, the family's eldest grandson, who has left home to join the Naxalite movement in rural Medinipur. These two strands are typeset in different fonts, signalling from the outset that they inhabit different moral and epistemological registers. The interplay between them - the ironic juxtaposition of domestic pettiness and political violence, of bourgeois self-absorption and revolutionary self-sacrifice - is the engine that drives the novel's moral argument.

This paper reads *The Lives of Others* through the lens of empathy: its possibility, its limits, and the consequences of its failure. Drawing on Martha Nussbaum's philosophical account of empathetic imagination and its relationship to justice, Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of class distinction and the naturalisation of hierarchy, and postcolonial scholarship on the bhadralok, the paper argues that the novel constructs a profound moral and political inquiry into whether those born into privilege can truly imagine the lives of those they exploit - and what is lost, individually and collectively, when they cannot.

II. The Ghosh Mansion as Social Microcosm: Hierarchy, Habit, and Moral Blindness

The Ghosh family home on Basanta Bose Road is one of the most fully realised settings in recent Indian fiction. It is a four-storeyed house in which the allocation of floors corresponds precisely to the allocation of status: the aging patriarch Prafullanath and his wife Charubala occupy the upper floors, their married sons and their families inhabit the middle floors, and the lower reaches of the house are given over to servants and those family members who have forfeited their claims to respectability. This spatial ordering is not merely a descriptive detail; it is the novel's central structural metaphor. The house externalises the social hierarchy that governs the family's inner life, making visible the invisible architecture of class and status that determines who is seen, who is heard, and whose suffering matters.

Prafullanath Ghosh is, or was, a man of genuine entrepreneurial energy - the founder of a paper-making business that built the family's prosperity. But by the time the novel opens, he is a diminished figure: his health ruined, his business faltering after bad investments, his authority hollowed out by age and failure. Around him, the second generation of Ghosh sons - Adinath, Bholanath, Priyo, Somnath, and Prafulla - have proved incapable of sustaining the enterprise their father built. They are consumed instead by their rivalries with one another and with their wives, by their small schemes and large vanities, by the comfortable habits of a class that has confused the privileges of its position with the merits of its character.

The women of the household - the daughters-in-law, and Chhaya, the family's unmarried daughter - occupy a particularly constrained social position. Chhaya is, in many ways, the novel's most devastating portrait of what the class system does to those who cannot

meet its standards of acceptability. Her dark skin and unconventional features have rendered her unmarriageable in the social logic of the family's world, and she has compensated for her exclusion from the dominant economy of female value by becoming a ruthless enforcer of household hierarchy - cruel to servants, contemptuous of the vulnerable, devoted to the petty satisfactions of social power over those even more marginal than herself. Her cruelty is not presented as innate but as structural: it is what the system produces when it excludes a person from its primary rewards while leaving her just enough power to exercise dominion over others.

The servants of the Ghosh household are rendered with particular care and moral attentiveness. They are the novel's "others" in the most literal sense - people whose lives, feelings, and sufferings are almost entirely invisible to the family they serve. Mukherjee insists on making them visible, giving them interior lives, desires, and dignities that the Ghosh family is constitutionally unable to perceive. This formal insistence on the humanity of those whom the class system renders invisible is one of the novel's most important political gestures. It enacts, at the level of narrative technique, precisely the kind of imaginative empathy that the characters within the novel so consistently fail to exercise.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus in *Outline of a theory of Practice* (1972) is relevant here. For Bourdieu, habitus describes the system of durable dispositions - ways of thinking, feeling, perceiving, and acting - that are inculcated by one's social position and that in turn reproduce that position as natural and inevitable. The Ghosh family's inability to see their servants and workers as fully human is not a moral failure in the simple sense; it is, in Bourdieu's terms, a function of habitus - of the deeply ingrained perceptual categories that their class position has produced in them. Mukherjee's novel can be read as an extended critique of this Bourdieuan habitus - as an attempt to make visible what the habitus of the bhadralok systematically conceals.

III. Supratik and the Naxalite Conscience: Revolutionary Empathy and Its Contradictions

Against the bourgeois self-enclosure of the Ghosh household, Mukherjee sets the revolutionary journey of Supratik - and it is in this counterpoint that the novel's most searching inquiry into empathy unfolds. Supratik is, in many ways, a classic figure of the radical intelligentsia: a young man of privilege whose education has given him the analytical tools to understand the structural injustices that his class perpetuates, and whose moral imagination has led him to reject the comfortable complicity of remaining within that class. His decision to leave the Basanta Bose Road house and join the Naxalite movement in rural Medinipur is, at one level, the most dramatic act of imaginative empathy in the novel - a literal crossing of the class boundary, an attempt to inhabit the world of those whom his family has exploited.

But Mukherjee is too morally serious a novelist to present this act as uncomplicated or triumphant. The letters and diary entries that constitute Supratik's narrative strand are characterised by a painful, honest self-examination that is entirely absent from the consciousness of the rest of the Ghosh family. Supratik knows, and says explicitly, that his decision to join the revolution is not free from self-interest - that it is partly an attempt to escape the claustrophobia of the family home, partly a response to a personal shame and grief that the letters slowly reveal. He is a revolutionary with a divided consciousness, and Mukherjee is careful to honour both sides of that division: the genuine moral seriousness of his commitment to the peasant cause, and the complicated personal motivations that are entangled with it.

The rural Bengal that Supratik enters is rendered with the same unflinching exactitude as the Ghosh household. Mukherjee describes the grinding poverty of the sharecroppers, the systematic violence of the landlord-moneylender nexus, the physical devastation of famine and

drought, with a documentary precision that is both aesthetically powerful and morally purposeful. The farmers and tribals whom Supratik encounters are not presented as abstractions or as types - as the undifferentiated poor - but as individuals with specific histories, specific desires, specific forms of dignity and suffering. This individuation is itself an act of empathetic imagination, and it is what gives the rural sections of the novel their extraordinary moral weight.

The novel's prologue - which stands apart from both narrative strands and is set in 1966 - performs a particularly powerful version of this empathetic individuation. It tells the story of Nitai Das, a sharecropper driven to the murder of his children and his own suicide after his landlord refuses, season after season, to provide the emergency assistance that the custom of their relationship demands. Mukherjee renders Nitai's consciousness with devastating intimacy - his love for his children, his desperation, his sense of complete and total abandonment by every human and divine agency. The prologue refuses to allow the reader the comfortable distance that statistics or abstractions would provide; it insists on the specificity and irreducible humanity of one man's suffering.

Martha Nussbaum's philosophical account of empathy and its relationship to justice is relevant here. In *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (1995) and *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001), Nussbaum argues that the literary imagination - the capacity to inhabit other lives through narrative - is not merely an aesthetic pleasure but a moral and civic necessity. She contends that the ability to imagine the suffering of others is a precondition for just social arrangements. Mukherjee's novel enacts this argument at the level of form: by insisting on the interior lives of servants, sharecroppers, and the marginalised, the novel performs the very act of empathetic imagination that it thematises.

Yet the novel is equally attentive to the limits and contradictions of empathy - particularly revolutionary empathy. Supratik's commitment to the Naxalite cause leads him not only to acts of solidarity and sacrifice but also to acts of political violence. The novel does not shy away from the moral complexity of this violence. It does not vindicate it, but neither does it simply condemn it. Instead, it poses the question that haunts all political violence: when structural violence is so total and so entrenched that it forecloses all other remedies, what are the moral limits of resistance? The novel is, as one reviewer noted, a sophisticated meditation on suffering that invites empathy for characters who embrace violent ideologies as a result of injustice without ever vindicating the horrific violence they commit.

IV. The Bhadrakok and Its Discontents: Class, Culture, and the Bengali Middle Class

To understand the specific form that class privilege and moral blindness take in *The Lives of Others*, it is necessary to understand the bhadrakok - the Bengali "respectable people" who constituted the professional and mercantile middle class of colonial and post-colonial Calcutta. The bhadrakok were a product of colonial modernity: their emergence as a distinct social formation was enabled by the opportunities that colonial rule opened up for Western-educated Bengalis, opportunities in the professions, in administration, and in commerce. They developed a distinctive culture - intellectual, artistic, self-consciously modern but deeply invested in the markers of respectability - that set them apart from both the European colonisers above them and the labouring poor below.

The bhadrakok's relationship to social justice has always been deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, the bhadrakok produced many of Bengal's greatest social reformers, intellectuals, and political activists. On the other hand, the bhadrakok were - and are - a class whose prosperity depended on the exploitation of those below them: the servants, the mill workers, the sharecroppers, the tribals whose labour sustained the comfort of the Basanta Bose Road households. The tension between the bhadrakok's self-image as a progressive, enlightened class

and the structural realities of its economic position is one of the central subjects of *The Lives of Others*.

Mukherjee is himself a product of the bhadralok - born and raised in Calcutta before moving to London - and his novel is, among other things, a reckoning with the class that formed him. The Ghosh family is both a sympathetically rendered and a devastatingly indicted portrait of the bhadralok at its worst: the self-deception, the petty cruelty, the inability to see beyond the boundaries of its own comfort, the investment in respectability that substitutes for genuine ethical reflection. The novel does not caricature the Ghosh family; it understands them from within, renders them with the full complexity of their inner lives, and precisely because of this intimacy of understanding, its indictment is all the more devastating.

The relationship between the Ghosh family and their servants is the novel's sharpest illustration of the bhadralok's moral blindness. The servants are almost entirely invisible to the family as human beings. They are noticed when they make mistakes, when they are needed, when their presence is inconvenient; they are not noticed as people with interior lives, with sufferings and joys of their own. Mukherjee's narrative technique - the insistence on rendering the servants' perspectives - is a formal protest against this invisibility, an insistence that the novel's gaze will not replicate the moral blindness that it anatomises.

The novel's treatment of the family's business conflicts is also illuminating. The Ghosh paper mill is experiencing labour unrest, as workers demand better wages and conditions. The family's response is one of reflexive hostility - they see the workers' demands not as expressions of legitimate grievance but as threats to an order that they regard as natural and just. Bholanath, the scheming middle son who manages the mill's day-to-day operations, approaches the labour disputes with a mixture of contempt and calculation that is entirely typical of the bhadralok at its most self-serving. He cannot imagine that the workers might have genuine grounds for complaint, because to do so would require acknowledging that the family's prosperity is built on the underpayment and overwork of people who have no alternative but to accept those conditions.

V. Empathy, Literature, and the Moral Imagination: What the Novel Demands

The Lives of Others makes extraordinary demands on its reader's empathetic imagination. It asks the reader to inhabit, in succession, perspectives that are radically different from one another: the aging patriarch's confused grief, the daughter-in-law's suppressed rage, the revolutionary's anguished idealism, the sharecropper's total desperation. These perspectives are not ranked in any simple moral hierarchy - they are all rendered with genuine attention and care, even when the characters who inhabit them are deeply flawed or morally compromised. The effect is to produce, in the reader, precisely the kind of empathetic exercise that the characters within the novel are so consistently unable to perform for one another.

This formal strategy is inseparable from the novel's moral argument. Mukherjee is not simply telling a story about the failure of empathy; he is constructing a narrative form that models and demands an alternative. By insisting on the interior lives of those whom the class system renders invisible - the servants, the sharecroppers, the marginalised daughter - the novel practises what it preaches. It performs the imaginative act of crossing the class boundary, of attending to lives that are structurally excluded from the attention of the privileged.

Nussbaum's argument that the literary imagination is a school for empathy is directly relevant here. In her reading, the novel as a form is uniquely suited to the cultivation of empathetic imagination because it allows the reader to inhabit other perspectives from the inside - not merely to observe the suffering of others but to feel, however imperfectly and

provisionally, something of what they feel. *The Lives of Others* is an exceptionally self-conscious exercise of this capacity: it uses every resource of narrative fiction - free indirect discourse, close third-person narration, the epistolary form of Supratik's letters - to bring the reader as close as possible to perspectives that are not their own.

But Mukherjee is also attentive to the limits of this literary empathy. The novel does not claim that reading fiction produces genuine understanding across class lines, or that the reader who feels sympathy for Nitai Das is thereby absolved of complicity in the structures that produce his suffering. On the contrary, the novel's relentlessly bleak portrayal of the consequences of structural exploitation insists that literary sympathy is not sufficient, that what is required is structural change, the dismantling of the economic and social arrangements that make the suffering possible in the first place.

This tension - between the cultivated empathy that literature can produce and the structural transformation that justice demands - is one of the novel's most productive and unresolved energies. It is a tension that Supratik embodies with particular acuity. He is a figure who has been formed by literature, by the intellectual culture of the bhadralok, and who has found in that culture both the moral resources to recognise injustice and the analytical tools to understand its structural causes. But he has also recognised that sympathy without action is a form of complicity, and that genuine solidarity with the oppressed requires something more than imagining their lives - it requires risking one's own.

VI. Cruelty as Structure: From Domestic Violence to Political Terror

One of the most morally striking features of *The Lives of Others* is the way in which it presents cruelty not as an individual pathology but as a structural feature of the class system it anatomises. The novel is full of cruelty - cruelty of the powerful to the powerless, cruelty of the humiliated to those even more marginalised than themselves, cruelty that is so habitual and so naturalised that those who practise it often cannot even perceive it as cruelty. Mukherjee is relentless in his insistence that this cruelty is not aberrant but systemic - that it is what the structure of class hierarchy inevitably produces.

The domestic cruelties of the Ghosh household are rendered with a precision that is almost unbearable. The cruelty of Chhaya to servants and to family members who have offended her; the cruelties of the sisters-in-law to one another in their competition for the patriarch's favour; the casual cruelties of the men to the women who depend on them - these are not presented as the exceptional actions of unusually malicious individuals but as the ordinary currency of a system that distributes power unequally and then watches as those with power exercise it over those without. The novel understands cruelty as a relational phenomenon - as something produced by the structure of unequal relationships, not by the innate badness of the individuals who inhabit those relationships.

The treatment of Chhaya is particularly instructive in this regard. She is the novel's most openly cruel character, and the narrative is unflinching in its portrayal of the satisfaction she takes in humiliating those weaker than herself. But Mukherjee is equally unflinching in tracing the origins of her cruelty: in the violence done to her by a social system that has defined her as undesirable, unmarriageable, and therefore as a burden and embarrassment to her family. Her cruelty is the cruelty of the injured - the cruelty of someone who has been subjected to a form of structural violence so total that it has foreclosed most of the ordinary possibilities of a dignified human life, and who responds by exercising whatever residual power she can find.

The cruelty in the novel's rural sections is of a different order - the systematic, organised violence of landlords and moneylenders who have reduced their tenants and debtors to a condition of absolute dependency. This is the cruelty that drives Nitai Das to murder his

children and take his own life; this is the cruelty that Supratik witnesses and against which he directs the revolutionary violence of the Naxalite movement. But the landlords and moneylenders of rural Medinipur are not monsters; they are, in their own estimation, simply rational actors pursuing their interests within a system that permits and encourages their behaviour.

This structural understanding of cruelty connects the novel's domestic and political registers in a way that is one of its most intellectually significant achievements. The cruelty of the Ghosh household and the cruelty of the rural landlords are expressions of the same underlying social logic - a logic that distributes human beings into a hierarchy of worth and then treats those at the bottom as means rather than ends. In this sense, the novel's formal decision to interweave the domestic and the political is not merely a structural device but a moral argument: it insists on the continuity between the micro-politics of the family home and the macro-politics of agrarian revolt.

VII. The Limits of Empathy: When Imagination Fails

If *The Lives of Others* holds out the possibility of genuine empathetic imagination - exemplified, however imperfectly, by Supratik's crossing of the class boundary - it is equally insistent on the ways in which that imagination fails and on the human cost of its failure. The novel is populated by characters who are, in various ways and for various reasons, unable to imagine the inner lives of those different from themselves, and it traces the consequences of this imaginative failure with unflinching clarity.

The most devastating form of this failure is what we might call the failure of recognition - the inability to see another person as a person at all, rather than as a function, a type, or an instrument. This failure pervades the Ghosh family's relationship to their servants and workers, and it pervades the relationships of rural landlords to their tenants. It is a failure in which the cognitive and the moral are inseparable: the inability to perceive another's humanity is simultaneously an ethical failure and a social one.

Mukherjee makes this failure of recognition concrete and specific, rather than abstract. He shows it operating in the small, everyday transactions of the household: in the way servants are spoken to, in the assumptions made about their motivations, in the casual disregard for their physical wellbeing, in the complete absence of curiosity about their inner lives. These are not dramatic moments of cruelty; they are the ordinary texture of a relationship structured by radical inequality, and their very ordinariness is what makes them so damning. The novel insists that the failure of empathy is not primarily a matter of dramatic acts of violence, but of the thousand small failures of recognition that constitute the daily reality of class-inflected social life.

The novel also explores the failure of empathy within the family itself - the ways in which the members of the Ghosh household fail to see each other with genuine clarity, substituting instead the fixed roles and categories that family life imposes. The daughters-in-law do not see each other as individuals but as rivals in a zero-sum competition for the patriarch's favour. The sons do not see their wives as people with needs and inner lives of their own but as domestic functionaries and extensions of their own social status.

There is a profound irony in the novel's title that becomes clearer as the narrative progresses. "The lives of others" is, ostensibly, the lives of those outside the family - the poor, the marginalised, the revolutionary peasants whom Supratik goes to join. But as the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that the family members are also, to each other, "others" whose lives they cannot or will not imagine. The domestic sphere that ought to be the primary site of

intimacy and mutual recognition is revealed as a space of radical mutual opacity - a space in which people live together for decades without ever truly seeing or understanding each other.

VIII. Calcutta as Conscience: The City in the Novel

Calcutta in *The Lives of Others* is more than a setting; it is a moral landscape, a city whose specific history and geography embody the contradictions that the novel explores. It is a city that was, at the time of the novel's action, simultaneously the cultural capital of India and the site of extraordinary material deprivation; a city in which the grand houses of the bhadralok and the desperation of the slums occupied the same urban space; a city in which the most sophisticated political and intellectual culture in the subcontinent coexisted with some of the most brutal forms of class exploitation.

Mukherjee's Calcutta is rendered with the same density of detail that characterises his portraits of the Ghosh household and the rural landscape. He captures the particular texture of the city in the late 1960s: the political ferment, the cultural energy, the sense of an entire social order under strain. The city is not merely a backdrop to the personal dramas of the Ghosh family; it is an active participant in those dramas, the medium through which the larger social forces reshaping India manifest themselves in the lives of individuals.

The Ghosh family's relationship to Calcutta is one of the novel's subtler themes. They inhabit the city, but they do not, in any meaningful sense, know it. Their world is bounded by their household, their social circle, their commercial interests - and it is a world from which the vast majority of Calcutta's population is excluded. The city's poor, its labourers, its migrants - the people who constitute the majority of its actual inhabitants - are as invisible to the Ghosh family as their own servants, present in the margins of awareness but never admitted to the centre of consciousness.

Supratik's departure from this enclosed world - his journey from the Basanta Bose Road house into the rural hinterland of West Bengal - is also, in a sense, a journey into the city's unconscious: into the social realities that the comfortable world of the bhadralok systematically conceals from itself. When he returns to Calcutta toward the end of the novel, it is as a changed man - someone who has seen what the city's prosperity is built on and who can no longer inhabit the family home's comfortable fictions. His return precipitates the final unravelling of the Ghosh household, as the realities that the family has worked so hard to keep at bay finally force their way in.

Critics have noted the novel's debt to the Victorian tradition of the social novel - to Dickens, Eliot, and Tolstoy in their ambition to render a whole society through the intersection of individual lives. The New York Times likened Mukherjee to Tolstoy in his ability to bring to life a diverse and expansive set of characters and to sharply evoke their interior worlds. This comparison is apt, but Mukherjee is not simply writing in the tradition of the Victorian social novel; he is inflecting that tradition with the specific historical experiences and social formations of post-independence Bengal, producing something that is both formally indebted to that tradition and substantively distinct from it.

IX. Moral Architecture of the Novel: Asking Unanswerable Questions

One of the most distinctive features of *The Lives of Others* is its refusal to provide easy answers to the difficult questions it raises. It does not tell us that Supratik's revolutionary violence is justified; it does not tell us that the Ghosh family's blindness is simply wickedness; it does not offer a political programme or a redemptive narrative. Instead, it insists on the full complexity of a world in which good intentions are entangled with bad structures, in which genuine moral commitment can lead to terrible acts, in which the desire for justice can be corrupted by the

desire for revenge or self-justification.

The novel's two epilogues - which offer contrasting perspectives on the consequences of the Ghosh family's collapse and Supratik's revolutionary engagement - are particularly instructive in this regard. Rather than resolving the tensions that the narrative has built up, they leave those tensions alive, refusing the consolation of a single authoritative perspective on what has happened and what it means. This formal openness is itself a moral statement: it insists that the questions the novel has raised are not ones to which fiction can provide definitive answers, but ones that must be continually posed and re-posed by all those who live within the social formations that the novel has anatomised.

The novel asks: Can we escape what is in our blood? How do we imagine our place amongst others in the world? Can that be reimagined? And at what cost? These questions do not receive definitive answers, but the narrative enacts a provisional response: it suggests that the imagination of others - genuine, sustained, uncomfortable empathetic attention to the lives of those different from oneself - is both possible and necessary; that it is possible to cross the class boundary, if only incompletely and at great personal cost; and that the failure to make this imaginative crossing is not a personal failing but a social catastrophe, one whose consequences are written across the landscape of Bengal.

The novel's moral architecture is, in this sense, deeply serious and deeply humane. It does not console, but it does illuminate. It does not provide solutions, but it poses the right questions - the questions that a society built on radical inequality, and the literature that seeks to understand that society, must not stop asking.

X. Conclusion: Imagination, Justice, and the Burden of Seeing

The Lives of Others is, in the end, a novel about the burden of seeing - about what it costs to genuinely perceive the humanity of those whom the social order has designated as invisible, and about what it costs, individually and collectively, when that perception fails. Mukherjee has written a novel that is formally demanding, emotionally gruelling, and morally serious in the most exacting sense: it refuses every form of consolation or simplification, insisting instead on the full, uncomfortable complexity of a world structured by radical inequality and the empathetic failures that inequality produces.

Set in Calcutta at a moment of extraordinary political and social upheaval, the novel uses the city and its surrounds as the stage for an inquiry that extends far beyond its specific historical moment. The questions it raises - about the relationship between class position and moral perception, about the possibility and limits of empathy across radical social difference, about the structural sources of cruelty and the conditions of genuine solidarity - are questions that remain urgently relevant in the twenty-first century, in Calcutta and everywhere else where the gap between the privileged and the dispossessed continues to produce the human suffering that Mukherjee's novel refuses to let us look away from.

That refusal is, finally, the novel's most important achievement. In a culture that provides endless mechanisms for avoiding the discomfort of genuine imaginative engagement with the lives of those different from ourselves, *The Lives of Others* insists on that engagement with an uncompromising moral force. It asks us to imagine Nitai Das, to imagine the servants of the Ghosh household, to imagine the tribal farmers of Medinipur - to inhabit, however briefly and imperfectly, lives that are radically different from the ones we know. And it suggests, with quiet but devastating persistence, that this act of imagination is not merely a literary pleasure but a moral necessity - that a world in which we truly see the lives of others, and take seriously what we see, would be a world in which the kind of suffering this novel records would be very much harder to sustain.

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