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Darkening of the Self: The Role of Trauma in the Construction of Identity in Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others*

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Abstract:

The lack of identity and to search a new one has arisen to become one of the significant issues of trauma studies. My paper examines the role of identity which creates the traumatic psyche of an individual as exemplified in *The Lives of Others* of Neel Mukherjee. The novel is an account of a very disturbing time in the history of west Bengal during the Naxalite period. The impact of the movement on individual psyche caught in the vortex of the unrest created fissured selves. Supratik who belongs to a well-to-do bourgeois family leaves home to establish his identity as a Naxal activist, the 'other'. Taking recourse in Maoist ideology, he aspires to become as 'other' through violence. But he is disillusioned to realize that he is the 'other' even among the Others. The life-long futile search of identity ends only at the death of Supratik. My present paper proposes to explore different dimensions of trauma; how the aspiration to form an altogether different identity is born out of trauma and also how the search for an individual identity again leads one to encounter trauma.

Keywords:

Identity; ideology; alienation; memory; bourgeois; trauma.

Neel Mukherjee's ambitious novel *The Lives of Others* is a telling tale of a disturbing time which is marked by the political unrest, resulting in the Naxalite movement of 1960s in West Bengal. The narration veers from grand, luxuriant Calcutta to the dingy, dirty, poverty-ridden villages of West Bengal. Centering around the large and relatively wealthy Ghosh family the novel minutely captures the stale dehumanized 'lives of others', the workless, hapless and hopeless destitute village dwellers. A.S. Byatt has opined while reviewing the novel in *The Guardian*:

One of Mukherjee's great gifts is precisely his capacity to imagine the lives of others. He can move from inside one head to inside another in a conversation or conflict and take the reader with him. He isn't really an omniscient narrator, there is no authorial voice- just an imagination that is more than adequate to its task. (Byatt)

Along with his adept description of the lives of others, Mukherjee's insightful depiction to portray the life of Supratik is striking and laudable. In spite of being born and brought up in a wealthy family, he leaves home to embrace the Maoist ideology by becoming a Naxalite. In his life-long odyssey Supratik, the protagonist of the novel is characterized

by his insatiable hunger for an individual identity that finally leads him to encounter trauma.

At present times, trauma study has received a conspicuous attention in academic firmament. The proliferation of interest in trauma studies can be linked with the publications of some seminal texts such as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing of Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992), Cathy Caruth's edited collections *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and her monograph *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996). Other noteworthy names of this field are Mark Freeman, Kali Tal, Michael Rothberg. The term 'trauma theory' appears first in Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*. But in order to locate the gradual development of trauma theory one should go back in 1880s when the study of hysteria at a Paris hospital began with French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. The named person was also closely acquainted with Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet, the other two big names in the study of hysteria. Freud while treating the cases of hysteria of his patients developed the concept of 'belatedness'. According to Freud the repressed memory comes repetitively later and causes a memory disorder. He with his Viennese physician colleague Joseph Breuer wrote a book called *Studies on Hysteria* where he discussed about many aspects of hysteria. But Cathy Caruth first has given it a theoretical pattern. In this regard Michelle Balaev has commented: "A theoretical trend was introduced by scholars like Cathy Caruth who pioneered a psychoanalytic post structural approach that suggests that trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language." (Balaev 1). Though, indubitably trauma studies owe much to Freud, Lacan and Paul de Man it is Cathy Caruth who has shaped the trauma studies in its present fashion and fascination. Since 1990s trauma studies has acquired significant bents. A la Balaev, there are a number of ways to classify the different approaches that utilize the alternative trauma models. Trauma theory has evolved differently in concomitance of the changing psychological definitions of trauma. Thus, psychoanalytical, semiotic, rhetorical and social aspects of trauma theory are now in vogue and in fashion. However, some issues remain equally crucial and functional in the pluralistic models of trauma theory. Referentiality is one of the crux issues of trauma studies. Thomas Elsaesser has explained that the traumatic event has the status of a (suspended) origin in the production of a representation bracketed or suspended because marked by the absence or traces. The 'traces' means references through which a subject can gradually recollect a memory. To a traumatic person the traumatic incident is perceived as 'an event without a witness' and this absence of witnessing derives from the unassimilable or unknowable nature of the traumatic event. In Caruth's introduction of *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, this referentiality of a traumatic event is emphasized. This lack of referentiality affects the individual autonomy and responsibility. It produces psychical dissociation from the self. The subject cannot associate the traumatic incident with the motion of events that precede the incident or follow it since trauma is frozen in time. Herman has asserted: "Traumatic event

overwhelms the ordinary human adaptation to life. Unlike common place misfortunes traumatic events generally involves threats to life or bodily integrity or a close encounter with violence and death.” (Herman 33). Trauma has also been deciphered as ‘foreign body’ for the self’s futile strenuous effort to invade the foreign landscape of traumatic psyche. The person himself becomes alien to his own self. An ‘other’ is created; the identity of the ‘self’ is put in question. The ‘other’ roams about frolicking in the ‘self’ and pervades throughout the self, resulting in an unmitigated gloomy horrifying space. Supratik, the adamant revolutionary, the votary of ideology of *The Lives of Others* suffers the inscrutable feeling of alienation and separation.

To borrow Anita Desai’s words ‘ferocious, unsparing and brutally honest’ novel, *The Lives of Others* is a ‘searing, savage and deeply moving’ (to quote Amitav Ghosh) documentation of a time of turmoil in the history of West Bengal. Apart from showing the tumultuous time of 1960s the novel records the lives of three generations of Ghosh family. Prafullanath, the living head of the family established the paper mill business in his wife’s name Charubala. But prosperity of the family is now well off that is symbolized by the ‘tattered, yellowed calendar’ of Charu Paper & Sons looking at which he spends his time with a deep sigh. His elder son, Adinath is now in charge of the company and is assisted by his ‘mejovai’, Priyonath. Their other living brother Bholanath is owner of a book company. The only sister, Chhaya who is unmarried because of her dark complexion spends her days ‘looking into the gloom of the heartless mirror’. The characters who complete the Ghosh family are Somnath (the dead brother), Sandhya, Purnima, Kalyani, Purba, Baisakhi, Arunima, Sona. At one point almost all the characters, but one share an identical trait which is the typical stereotyped bourgeois mentality; they all are ‘bhadrolok’. Supratik, the elder son of Adinath is the exception. He is influenced by Maoist ideology and becomes a Naxal in course of time. The novel is an account of the journey of Supratik. The change in his attitude was perceived by his mother:

Over the last year he (Supratik) has lost so much weight that the shadow he casts, in a light, is nothing more than a thin line. She can swear that his eyes have grown bigger ... his bony face, all sharp angles and a luxuriant black beard, they make him look like a starving mystic, a Naga sanyasi on banks of the Ganga in Gomukh. He has certainly grown as quiet and uncommunicative.

.... Why has he become like a furtive ghost? How can one’s own son, her flesh and blood, nurtured in her wombs for nine months, become such a stranger? Who is he? (Mukherjee, 29-30)

This sudden uncommunicative nature of Supratik is a testimony of his trauma. This reticence is nothing but incessant questioning with his own self about his identity. ‘Who is he?’ - the question not only is of her mother, but also Supratik himself has confronted the question time and again and the confrontation never ever ends throughout his life. It is obvious that in Basanta Bose road he suffers from an inexplicable feeling of alienation and separation. He cannot associate himself anymore with the milieu of

Ghosh family; a sense of 'dissociation' penetrates his psyche and perturbs the memory of his constructed identity. This alienation from his dearer and nearer ones has emerged out of his unconditional surrender to the communist ideology. He tries to forget his bourgeois self and embrace the revolutionary ethics and ideals of the chairman, Mao. He strives to establish his own individual identity free from the stained touch of bourgeois mentality. Thus the constructed grand narrative of his family faces the onslaught of another grand narrative that is ideology of Mao. In this respect Norman K. Denzin's take on narrative is profoundly significant. He has pointed out: "We live in narrative's moment. ... Everything we study is contained within a storied, or narrative, representation." (Andrews et al, xi). So, it can be said that the first 'narrative' has taught him to inhabit the codes and conducts of an upper-class family whereas the other one inflicts an urge to question social order and customs and makes one capable of reversing the hierarchy. Thus, there is a clash of 'narratives' in Supratik's psychological space. He cannot forget the narrative which has storied his self. But, he abhors to be a part of the story told by a shackled society. It leads him to encounter an identity crisis. 'Who is he?' comes to the fore and permeates his entire 'unknown' self. He tries desperately to create his own individual identity. This lack of identity causes a damage to his psyche creating the hole through which trauma invades and permeates thoroughly. The memory haunts him down. In this predicament, Supratik searches solace by trying to establish his new identity as a Naxalite rebel, as an 'other'.

Supratik leaves home to become one of the 'others'; to live like other, to think like other, in short to breathe in the other. The 'other' becomes his coveted goal. An apparent answer to the question 'who is he?' is found by Supratik. He flees to live the life of others and to attain a new identity. In the farewell letter he expressed his view upon his wish:

Ma, I feel exhausted with consuming, with taking and grabbing and using. I so bloated that I feel I cannot breathe anymore. I living to find some air, some place where I shall be able to purge myself, push back against the life given me and make my own. I feel I live in a borrowed house. It's time to find my own.
(Mukherjee, 61)

While spending his days as a Naxalite revolutionary rebel with the yokels like Kanu, Bijli, Bir et al he wrote letters to Purba. This narration of Supratik functions with significance to reveal the despair and helplessness of his days as an activist revolutionary. The narration is used as a tool to disclose the traumatic psyche of Supratik. Mark Denizen has opined in this respect:

The self is psychosocial, narrative production. There is no dualism between self and society. Material social conditions, discourses and narrative practices interweave to shape the self and its many identities... this is why narrative is a prime concern of social science today. (Andrews, xi)

So the narration of Supratik is loaded with seminal issues. It is Supratik's only individual space where he can acquiesce his feeling, his resentment and disenchantments. This narration helps to find out the trauma of Supratik. From his first letter it is understood that he realizes how different he is from the 'other'. He has no knowledge about the life of others; their lifestyle, needs, wishes are completely beyond reach of Supratik. He has been living in 'the cushioned vacuum created by my (his) grandfather's temporary boom of minor-mode prosperity'. (Mukherjee, 63-64). His other roving revolutionary companions are Samir and Dhiren. The later belongs to a proletariat family and Samir too is not a member of the bourgeois background. Supratik gives space the harrowing harassing words of Dhiren who flippantly mocks him for being a 'through-and-through-city boy' who can't even put a name to the Shimul tree. He was gradually beginning to find out with a shocking realization that he is an outcast in the herd. With astonishment he remembers that even his comrades think that 'he is from a different world altogether' having 'a certain kind of background'. He was perplexed at the horrifying revelation that the bridge will never be eradicated: "Did I imagine it or was there really a slight distance between my friends and me, a small, cold gap that could never be bridged." (Mukherjee, 96). This distant attitude of his friends has caused many sleepless nights and the incessant echo of alienation which has haunted him down and has bruised his psyche with a sense of morbid repetition. Once again Supratik is humiliated as a prey of 'dissociation'. Not only his comrades, but also the villagers treat him as an outsider and hence the appellation 'babu'. Kanu when asked to call him only by name he involuntarily adds a 'babu' after his name. This has grieved him a lot. He has come here to become one of them, not to be called a 'babu' meaning a higher position with an air of superiority. He was ashamed of this difference from them. His body also rejects the support to his mentality and revolts in its own way. His hands became sore after using sickle at field to assist Kanu. While he was suffering a lot from scalp-splitting sun Kanu seemed absolutely indifferent to the sun. All these gradually lead to an absolute estrangement from the persons with whom he aspired to be united. The sense of alienation and separation reverberates through the entire self of Supratik:

Besides, I feel ashamed to admit to feeling the bite of those hardships: really, a middle-class cream-doll, that's what I am. It hurts to acknowledge this...

What use did it serve to emphasise the unbridgeable gap between the lives of these people and the people of our kind?... It was the reinforcement of the separation between 'us and them'. (Mukherjee, 240-241)

He wanted to achieve an identity by being an extremist revolutionary. But what he experiences being one and living among the others the advent of the same old gloomy feeling of separation and alienation. A big question mark is again tagged to his self. He also rues the fact of facing the remnants of his previous bourgeois self. He cannot forget his past the more he wants to forget the more it haunts him. The trace of the imperfect past remains. The space is haunted, the landscape is scared, always, with a memory, a

trace remains. A trace remains defiantly, sometimes hinting sometimes pressing sometimes roaring but always insisting in its ubiquitous return. Supratik's psyche is maimed at one hand by the traces of his imperfect past and on the other by the present solitude. He becomes a man of no man's land where he is all alone by himself. He neither can forget the traces of past nor he can concentrate the traumatic on goings of present:

Does that mean that the world is where ever one is? Is that not the most accurate and strict test of all definitions of self-centeredness? Does that mean that there is no escape from the self? After chanting to ourselves millions of times, change yourself, change the world, is this the outcome-failure? (Mukherjee, 241)

Ideology which filled his pores with the dream of a new identity also has betrayed him. Supratik's disenchantment, utter despair is evident in his monograph. He realizes shockingly that he has grown disillusioned with the communist politics that is abound in 'self-interested, power-hungry corrupt' flunkies. Their only aim was to acquire power. Complementing this, the Maoist extremist activist blood-thirsty ideology gave him refuge to some extent. But Supratik seems to be absolutely disinterested at performing any violent act. When Dhiren, Samir and some of the villagers were blowing tangi upon the body of Senapati Supratik was at a loss about what to do. He was frozen as if he was cemented. Though he asserts boldly that 'only he who has dipped his hands in the class enemy's blood can be considered a true revolutionary' he himself has never taken an active part in killing the jotedaars. He only can have the passive feeling that he has murdered a class enemy. This oscillation between the actuality and the self-assertion is a testimony of his trauma suffering from which he neither can take part actively in the assassination, nor can he discard this aspect of Maoist principles.

If Supratik's life is examined thoroughly it will be evident that his life long journey is characterized by his continuous and intense encounter with trauma. His bourgeois background first causes trauma. The sense of otherness created by his own will compels him to escape into the life of 'others' where according to Supratik himself, he can build his own identity. But there too, he is the other. This feeling of being 'other' even among the 'others' shapes the traumatic psyche of the protagonist of *The Lives of Others*. Trauma, thus functions significantly to construct the identity which in the final analysis turns out to be an absence rather than a presence. In his quest for his cultural moorings, Supratik is ultimately left with an untethered selfhood. The novel finally could be seen as a deep gloomy scintillating account of Supratik's complex traumatic psyche.

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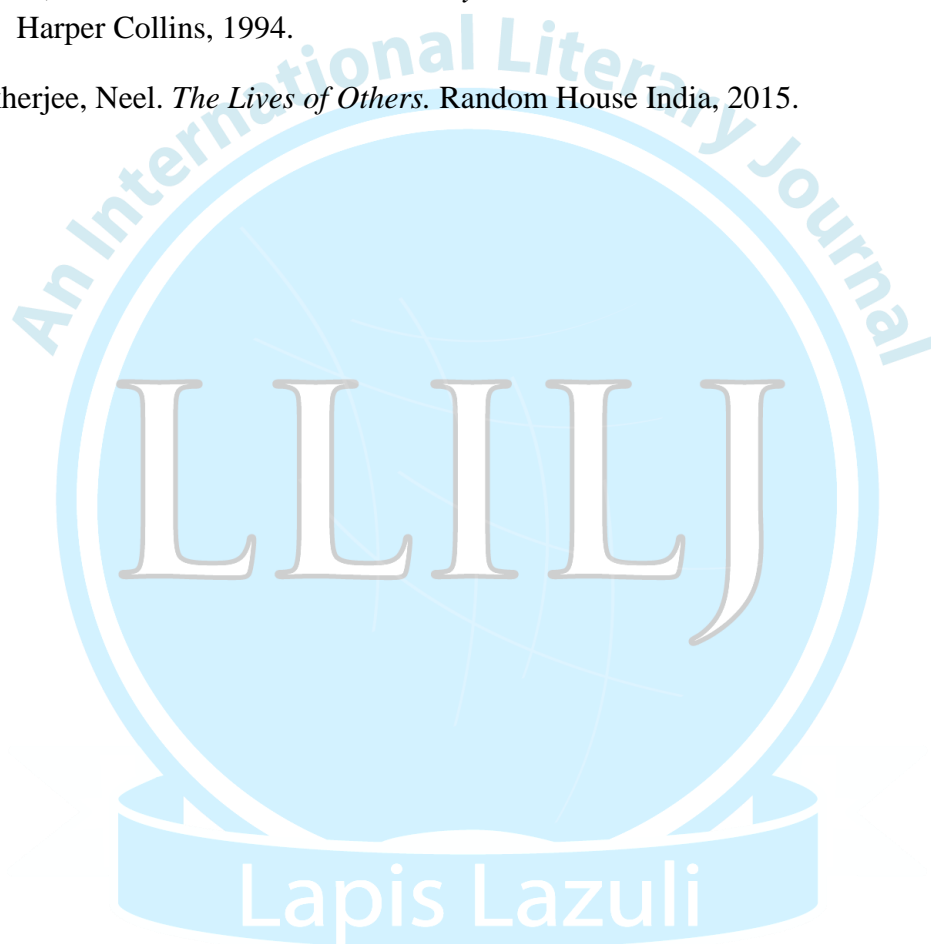
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