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Exploring Subaltern Narratives in Neel Mukherjee's Novel *A State of Freedom*

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Abstract— *This paper studies Neel Mukherjee's novel A State of Freedom (2017) through the lenses of Subaltern Studies, postcolonial theory. It argues that Mukherjee's fragmented narrative centers the lives of marginalized characters—such as Milly, Lakshman, Renu, and Ramlal—to critique the structural constraints on India's 'subaltern' populations. Each section of the novel foregrounds a different subaltern subject, challenging conventional narrative hierarchies. Through interconnected storylines, Mukherjee illustrates how caste, class, gender and globalizing neoliberal forces converge to deny dignity and agency, aligning with Gramsci's notion of subaltern fragmentation and Spivak's question 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. The analysis draws on theorists including Ranajit Guha (Subaltern historiography), Edward Said and Dipesh Chakrabarty (colonial legacies), and feminist scholars (Crenshaw's intersectionality, Mohanty on "Third World women", and Scott on everyday resistance).*

Keywords— ***subaltern studies, postcolonial theory, intersectional marginalization, marginalization, Neel Mukherjee, A State of Freedom.***

I. INTRODUCTION

The voices of the subaltern often exist in the archive of alternative voices. Alternative voices, historically marginalised and silenced by dominant socio-political structures, have consistently found modes of expression through literature (Talapatra 1). Often concealed beneath the surface of what is perceived as historical progress, these voices have persisted since antiquity, frequently assuming the form of oral or folk traditions. Yet, owing to their predominantly undocumented nature, such expressions are frequently rendered invisible, lost in the interstices of time. These articulations vary significantly across communities and geographies, manifesting in diverse forms and idioms. As Indranath Choudhuri notes in 'Traditions of Folk in Literature', these alternative traditions are subsumed within the concept of loka, which he posits in a complementary relationship with shastra (elite): "the loka (folk) and shastra (elite) are complementary" (4). Within the Indian context, the confluence of these two epistemological streams enables a more nuanced understanding of the breadth and complexity of Indian aesthetic and discursive traditions. However, the conceptualisation of the 'subaltern' is not restricted to the Indian socio-cultural milieu alone. Analogous articulations of suppressed voices have emerged across global contexts throughout history. For instance, the fourteenth-century Marathi poetry of Chokhamela and Eknath reflects the experiences of the lower castes in medieval India, while the American slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries similarly convey the subjugated experiences of African American individuals. Since the condition of oppression is not temporally or spatially bound, the narrative expressions that arise from such experiences similarly transcend historical and geographic specificity. Literary scholars and theorists have frequently sought to recover these neglected and marginalised voices. George Manuel and Michael Posluns' *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* (1974), which advocates for the rights of Indigenous peoples and their claims to self-determination, introduced the Four Worlds theory. This theory identifies the Fourth World as encompassing the marginalised

populations within the First, Second, and Third Worlds. Nonetheless, it was the Subaltern Studies collective that first provided a sustained theoretical engagement with such voices, offering a Marxist framework to interrogate their socio-political significance and to foreground the structural conditions of their exclusion.

The term subaltern denotes those segments of society whose voices, actions, and existence have been systematically marginalised and omitted from official historical documentation. These subaltern articulations do not contribute to dominant discourses and are consequently excluded from mainstream historiography. For instance, in the context of nations and nationalisms, official records typically foreground elitist nationalist ideologies and movements, while the contributions of marginalised indigenous populations are relegated to the periphery. As a result, such voices are eclipsed and rendered invisible by hegemonic narratives.

The subaltern is not a monolithic category but is constituted through multiple intersecting markers of identity, including race, class, caste, ethnicity, and religion. It conceptualises identity as inherently pluralistic, fluid, and heterogeneous. In *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971), Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) characterises subaltern classes as those segments of civil society that "are not unified and cannot unite" unless they can become a "State," suggesting that these groups can only assert their historical agency once they attain political power (52). According to Gramsci, the history of the subaltern is embedded within the broader history of civil society and is therefore intrinsically linked to the history of the state. Nevertheless, their existence remains latent within the collective records of official historiography.

In the European context, the subaltern has traditionally been identified with the working class or the impoverished. Gramsci proposed a methodological framework for studying subaltern groups, focusing on their formation through economic production, their affiliations with dominant groups, their transformations, and their attempts to assert autonomy. He observed that dominant groups exert continuous ideological influence over subaltern groups through hegemonic practices, while the latter, in response, attempt to reconfigure these dominant ideologies by incorporating their own claims. This reciprocal relationship engenders a dynamic process of "decomposition, renovation and neo-formation" (Gramsci 202), imbuing subaltern groups with an amorphous, porous character subject to on-going transformation. Gramsci ultimately acknowledges the complexity inherent in tracing the collective history of subaltern parties, which would necessitate a detailed examination of both the effects of subaltern agency on dominant groups and vice versa. Subaltern Studies, as a theoretical framework, thus centres on the experiences of the marginalised and dispossessed, and is deeply informed by Marxist ideology. Karl Marx famously categorised society into two antagonistic classes: the bourgeoisie, who control the means of production, and the proletariat, defined as wage labourers. Gramsci's classification of subaltern groups parallels the Marxist notion of the proletariat, especially in his assertion that subaltern history is "necessarily fragmented and episodic" (55), suggesting an inherent discontinuity in its narration. Mainstream historiography, which constructs a narrative of linear societal progress, often effaces these gaps, presenting an illusion of uninterrupted continuity that erases the diversity and fragmentation intrinsic to subaltern experience. While the Marxist identification of the subaltern through class dynamics may be adequate in the European context, such a framework proves marginally inadequate in the non-European—particularly Indian—context. In the Indian context, subalternity is not confined to class oppression but intersects with a plurality of factors, including race, caste, gender, religion and ethnicity. As a result, the subaltern in the Indian context is not a unified class-based category but a complex and heterogeneous formation. Subaltern Studies in India, therefore, extends beyond Gramsci's original formulation, encompassing a broader spectrum of human and cultural identities.

Postcolonial studies have further redefined subalternity by locating it within the experiences of colonised peoples. Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) critiques the Eurocentric construction of the Orient, arguing that the Orient is a cultural fabrication of the Western imagination, produced through ideological discourses that justified colonial domination. Said describes the Orient as a conceptual invention—imbued with a fabricated history and cultural identity—crafted to serve the epistemic and political needs of the West. This construction systematically excludes the voices and realities of native populations, rendering them voiceless subjects governed by those who claim to know them better than they know themselves. Drawing on Michel Foucault, Said asserts that knowledge is inextricably tied to power, and that accepted forms of knowledge emerge from established systems of power. As he notes, Western knowledge of the Orient "grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstice of repetitions and commentaries" (91). This system of representation generates and perpetuates a binary logic of difference, wherein the Orient is constituted as the 'Other' of the West. Reiterated through layers of textual repetition, such representations come to be legitimised as

authoritative knowledge, thereby forming the epistemic foundation for the West's understanding—and subjugation—of the Orient. Said's theoretical insights are indebted to both Gramsci and Frantz Fanon. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon approaches the question of decolonisation from a psychoanalytic perspective, positing it as an inherently violent process. He argues that colonial power structures endure even after the end of formal colonisation, particularly through the colonised intellectuals who inherit and internalise the values and ideologies of the coloniser. For Fanon, the coloniser imposes moral and aesthetic norms upon the native, thereby dehumanising them and representing them as the antithesis of civilised, Christian European values. In this process, the native is deprived of self-representation and is spoken for by the coloniser, rendering them subaltern. Fanon further contends that during decolonisation, the coloniser initiates a superficial "dialogue" with the colonised intellectuals, while the broader indigenous population is perceived as a homogenous, indistinct mass devoid of individuality (44). These colonised intellectuals, having internalised the values of the coloniser, go on to replicate those values in the postcolonial nation-state, thus perpetuating elite dominance rather than representing the interests of the masses. Consequently, postcolonial histories often replicate the bourgeois discourses of the colonial regime, further marginalising the subaltern population.

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon extends beyond the Marxist notion of the proletariat by introducing the concept of the lumpenproletariat—a term Marx used to describe the most impoverished and disenfranchised segments of society, often deemed politically irrelevant. Fanon revalorises this group, which includes non-industrial workers, peasants, and indigenous populations, as a radical force untainted by colonial ideology. He argues that this class represents "one of the most spontaneous and the most radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people" (129), capable of resisting and overturning colonial structures. These communities, often unrecognised and undocumented, embody the subaltern condition. Their histories—such as those represented in India by numerous peasant uprisings and tribal insurgencies—testify to forms of resistance that unfolded independently of elite leadership and remain largely excluded from dominant historical narratives.

European interpretations of subaltern uprisings have often understood such movements as "pre-political," largely influenced by the ideas of E. J. Hobsbawm. In *Primitive Rebels* (1959), Hobsbawm describes poor men and women from peasant backgrounds as rebels who resist authority not because of any clear political or nationalist agenda, but because they reflect the general concerns of the masses. In the chapter titled "The Social Bandit," he argues that the concept of "bandit" is significant for social historians, since banditry represents "a rather primitive form of organized social protest," and he refers to Robin Hood as a typical figure." (13) However, Hobsbawm does not consider this form of resistance to be truly political. Ranajit Guha challenges this Western notion of the subaltern in his introduction to *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983). He points out that traditional historiography tends to see peasant rebels only as historical figures, not as individuals who consciously participated in rebellion with their own reasoning and agency. This view sees the subaltern as lacking understanding, beliefs, or organisational capacity—as mere "simpletons." Guha strongly disagrees with this perception. Drawing on the history of peasant uprisings in India during the 19th and 20th centuries, he argues that to truly understand the peasant-rebel, one must recognise them as thinking individuals who had their own interpretations of their conditions and a desire to change the status quo. This acknowledgement grants the subaltern both subjectivity and a distinct form of political consciousness. Guha disputes the idea that peasant uprisings such as the 1831 rebellion led by Titumir in Bengal were merely "purely spontaneous" events in colonial Indian history (4). He states that this view is not only "elitist as well as erroneous" (4), but also ignores Gramsci's insight that no historical event is entirely spontaneous. Guha argues that even when mass uprisings appear unorganised, they carry their own political meaning. He critiques Hobsbawm's notion of "pre-political" rebels, insisting that militant rural uprisings against exploitative semi-feudal structures in colonial India were deeply political. In his preface to *Subaltern Studies*, Volume I, Guha defines the "subaltern" as someone who is subordinated or oppressed within South Asian society. This subordination can come from caste, class, gender, age, social position, or other aspects of identity. Elitist history erases the individual identities of these people by subsuming them into a unified narrative structured around elite ideologies. Giving individual voices and identities to these people is central to uncovering the subaltern. However, distinguishing who belongs to the subaltern class is a challenge. Individuals may belong to both elite and subaltern groups depending on the context. Colonial India's semi-feudal structure created a porous society. Groups like poor rural gentry, struggling landlords, wealthy peasants, and upper-middle-class peasants might be considered elite in one local context and subaltern in another. This fluidity continues in post-Independence India

as well. For example, someone seen as elite in a village might still be subaltern in an urban setting.

'Subaltern' identities are often obscured by a lack of proper documentation and the overlapping influences of caste, class, ethnicity, and race. In *Subaltern Studies II* (1983), Guha notes that when the subaltern is recorded in history, the portrayal often fits into one of three types of discourse: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary documentation comes directly from official sources and is characterised by its immediacy. Secondary documentation draws on and alters primary sources, shaping them for public consumption. Tertiary documentation is further removed from the original event and presents it with an air of detached authority. These layers of representation determine how the subaltern is viewed and researched. An example of how subaltern voices are often marginalised can be seen in the case of Jhalkaribai (1830–58), a warrior of the kori caste and companion of Rani Lakshmibai during the 1857 rebellion. While many accounts focus on Lakshmibai's heroism, Jhalkaribai's crucial role—posing as the queen to allow her escape—has long been overlooked. Her contributions were only recognised in the late 20th century, culminating in a 2001 commemorative stamp. In *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics* (2006), Badri Narayan discusses how Dalit communities celebrate Jhalkaribai as a source of pride, noting that "they also celebrate Jhalkaribai Jayanti each year to enhance their self-respect and elevate the status of their caste" (119). Interestingly, even Lakshmibai herself has been considered a subaltern figure in some readings, particularly through the lens of gender. Her participation in battle, a domain typically reserved for men, challenges patriarchal norms and represents a form of gender-based subalternity.

Postcolonial literature, primarily, engages with the representation of lives, times and events from the perspectives of the colonised. Subalternity in postcolonial literature is constituted by the representation of people who are marginalised - it engages in a fictional re-presentation of their points of view, their lives, and their stories. It explores how subalternity of individual or collective identity is constructed and perpetuated in postcolonial societies. In postcolonial literature, characters representing the people who are subalternised on the basis of caste, class, gender, ethnicity, race or an amalgamation of more than one such markers of identity, inhabit the plot as plausible marginalised presences at a given point of time. The narration sometimes involves references to the colonial phase in order to highlight the haplessness of the oppressed even in a politically independent nation. The individual lives of these characters emerge as voices of the subaltern waiting to be heard in the interstices of historical time. Their experiences, their joys and sorrows within the microcosm of their individual existence, enact the saga of silenced voices struggling against elitist homogenisation. As Homi Bhabha observes, 'these spheres of life are linked through an "in-between" temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at home, while producing an image of the world of history' (19).

II. SUBALTERN NARRATIVES IN *A STATE OF FREEDOM*

Neel Mukherjee is a prominent figure in contemporary Indian English literature, known for his nuanced exploration of socio-political themes, class struggle, and personal displacement. His critically acclaimed novel, *The Lives of Others* (2014), offers a complex portrayal of a Bengali joint family set against the historical backdrop of the Naxalite movement, reflecting his engagement with issues of political unrest and social hierarchy. Mukherjee's literary style is distinguished by its depth, intricate character development, and incisive socio-political commentary, positioning him as a significant voice in global Anglophone literature. Similarly, his novel, *A State of Freedom* (2017) provides a profound meditation on displacement, migration, and the socio-economic structures that govern individual destinies. Through a fragmented narrative, the novel examines the intersections of privilege and deprivation, exploring how aspirations for a better life often lead to unintended suffering. Set in India, yet engaging with global concerns, the novel dissects the human cost of social mobility and economic precarity, revealing the tensions between agency and subjugation in contemporary society. For instance, in the novel, Milly and Lakshman explicitly occupy subaltern positions, their struggles framed by systemic forces that deny them access to power and self-representation. By analysing these narratives through the lens of Subaltern Studies, this study will argue that Mukherjee critiques the structural limitations imposed on India's underprivileged populations while simultaneously problematizing the extent to which their voices can be fully recovered or represented within literary discourse.

A State of Freedom (2017) is structured into five distinct sections, each presenting an individual narrative that contributes to the overarching thematic cohesion of the text. These five stories are interlinked not through a linear plot progression but through a narrative technique wherein a character who appears as a minor or peripheral figure in one section emerges as the central protagonist in the subsequent one. This formal strategy not only reinforces the interconnectedness of disparate lives and experiences but also subverts conventional hierarchies of narrative

importance, thereby foregrounding multiple subjectivities within a shared socio-political context. This narrative structure aligns closely with the methodologies of Subaltern Studies, particularly in its effort to destabilize dominant perspectives and bring marginalized voices to the center of historical and literary discourse. By allowing minor characters—who often represent socially or economically disenfranchised positions—to assume the role of protagonists in successive sections, the novel performs a literary analogue of the historiographical practice advocated by Subaltern Studies scholars. Ranajit Guha, for instance, emphasizes the need to recover the agency of those relegated to the margins of elite-dominated history, arguing for a reconstitution of history from the perspective of the people (Guha, SS I). Similarly, the novel's shifting narrative focus reclaims subjectivity for those previously silenced or overlooked, highlighting the fragmented, layered, and often discontinuous experiences of subaltern individuals. This technique resists the homogenizing tendencies of mainstream historiography and affirms the heterogeneity and autonomy of subaltern lives. This narrative device is especially evident in the first part of the novel, which initiates the reader into a world of layered socio-economic realities through the experiences of a single character from a position of privilege. The juxtaposition of this character's internal crisis with his encounters with subaltern lives sets the thematic foundation for the novel's exploration of freedom, agency, and marginalization.

The novel articulates a central paradox: that of freedom being constitutionally guaranteed yet practically inaccessible for India's most disenfranchised communities. Each narrative arc presents a microcosmic view of the subaltern experience, detailing how systemic forces such as caste, class, gender, and ethnicity converge to obstruct access to dignity, autonomy, and upward mobility. Mukherjee echoes Antonio Gramsci's foundational ideas of the subaltern as historically silenced and politically unorganised groups, embedded within structures that prevent collective self-articulation. Gramsci's theory that subaltern classes are fragmented and incapable of achieving hegemonic unity without becoming the state itself becomes a crucial analytical lens to understand the discontinuity and incoherence in the lived experiences of Mukherjee's characters.

Milly's journey, from a tribal village in Jharkhand to virtual imprisonment in an urban household, encapsulates the layers of intersectional oppression that women face in patriarchal and capitalist societies. Her experience aligns with Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, where overlapping social identities intensify discrimination. Meanwhile, her friend Soni's turn towards Maoist rebellion offers a radical counterpoint, echoing Frantz Fanon's theory that revolutionary violence can be the last recourse for the utterly dispossessed. Fanon's emphasis in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) on the 'lumpenproletariat' as a potentially revolutionary force helps contextualise Soni's radicalisation. At the same time, her marginalisation, even within revolutionary structures, speaks to the persistent sidelining of subaltern women's agency.

Mukherjee's portrayal of Milly also underscores Gayatri Spivak's pivotal question in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' The answer, the novel suggests, is complicated: while the subaltern may express resistance through action, their voice is often mediated, distorted, or suppressed within dominant discourses. Milly's inner life, marked by yearning, defiance, and eventual escape, remains largely inaccessible to those around her, even when her suffering is visible. Her trajectory is emblematic of the epistemic violence described by Spivak, wherein the subaltern subject is deprived of a framework through which their consciousness can be recognised and articulated by hegemonic structures. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminist scholarship's tendency to homogenise the 'Third World woman' also finds resonance in Milly's portrayal, which avoids universalising her experiences and instead presents a deeply localised and context-sensitive narrative of struggle.

Renu's story, set within the domestic confines of an urban middle-class household, complements this narrative by showcasing more subtle forms of agency. Her sacrifices for her nephew Dulal, her deliberate underperformance in household tasks, and her open expression of dissatisfaction are quiet but potent assertions of selfhood. James C. Scott's concept of "everyday forms of resistance" is particularly relevant here, as Renu challenges power not through overt rebellion but through a complex negotiation of servitude and dignity. Yet, her eventual dismissal underscores the fragility of subaltern agency when it clashes with the expectations of the elite. Spivak's contention that the subaltern is often excluded from representation in ways that compound marginalisation is embodied in Renu's fate—even her moments of resistance are filtered through a middle-class narrator whose understanding remains partial.

Lakshman's narrative, marked by poverty, superstition, and illegal bear-dancing, foregrounds the animalistic metaphors often associated with subaltern existence. His relationship with Raju the bear blurs the line between human and non-human subalternity, drawing attention to shared experiences of exploitation and voicelessness. The

brutal training of Raju becomes a mirror for Lakshman's own subjection to economic desperation. Michel Foucault's notion of disciplinary power is evident in the regulation of both bodies—human and animal—by systemic imperatives. Donna Haraway's insights in *When Species Meet* (2008) allow for an expanded view of subalternity that includes non-human beings, who, like their human counterparts, are subjected to violent regimes of control for the benefit of dominant classes.

The first part of the novel, from the perspective of a Westernised Indian father, initiates readers into the tension between privilege and marginality. His encounter with beggars, vendors, and the death of a construction worker reveals how subaltern lives intersect with elite realities, often as haunting presences that disrupt the comfort of bourgeois existence. These moments underscore Spivak's assertion that subalterns are not entirely absent but are present in ways that unsettle and challenge dominant narratives, even when they are denied direct voice. They also resonate with Indranath Choudhuri's concept of the "loka," or folk traditions, as essential to understanding cultural expressions sidelined by the dominant "shastra" or elite discourses.

Ramlal's tragic story, which culminates in his death due to work-related illness, is perhaps the most searing indictment of India's development narrative. His migration from village to city for survival echoes Dipesh Chakrabarty's reflections on the coercive conditions of capitalist modernity. Ramlal is not simply a labourer; he is the embodiment of Marx's proletariat, whose life and death are dictated by the demands of capital. His anonymity and disposability reflect Ranajit Guha's observation that subaltern histories are often fragmented and erased, recorded only in the margins of elite historiography. Guha's methodological interventions in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* (1983) also prompt us to recognise Ramlal's and others' muted acts of resistance not as apolitical but as meaningful assertions of agency within limited scopes.

Mukherjee's fragmented narrative structure is itself a political statement. By eschewing linear storytelling and shifting focalisation among seemingly unrelated characters, the novel mimics the disjointed, episodic nature of subaltern history as described by Gramsci and Guha. This literary form resists the homogenising tendencies of traditional historiography, allowing for a multiplicity of voices and experiences that are often sidelined. Each section of the novel interconnects subtly, reinforcing the idea that lives deemed peripheral are deeply enmeshed within the socio-political fabric, however invisible they may seem. It also reflects Edward Said's Foucauldian insight that power and knowledge operate through textual repetition and silencing, where the narrative form becomes a site of ideological reproduction and contestation.

Importantly, *A State of Freedom* (2017) also critiques the neoliberal promises of economic mobility. The novel reveals how the rhetoric of development and globalisation often masks continued patterns of exploitation. For many characters, particularly the rural poor, the lure of urban prosperity leads not to emancipation but to newer forms of bondage—servitude, informal labour, homelessness, and death. This disillusionment reflects a postcolonial critique of the state, which, as Fanon argues, often inherits and perpetuates the structural inequities of colonial regimes. George Manuel and Michael Posluns' concept of the "Fourth World" becomes particularly salient here, identifying groups like India's internal migrants and tribal communities as global marginalised populations excluded from dominant paradigms of progress.

Throughout the novel, the question of whether the subaltern can ever achieve true freedom remains unresolved. What is clear, however, is that Mukherjee offers no simplistic resolutions or redemptive arcs. His characters do not escape their circumstances through heroism or fortune; instead, they embody the enduring human capacity to survive, resist, and, occasionally, to hope. The novel's power lies in its unflinching portrayal of the ordinary and the overlooked, compelling readers to confront the ethical and political implications of their invisibility.

III. CONCLUSION

A State of Freedom (2017) is a compelling narrative that bridges the gap between literary fiction and political critique. It draws from and contributes to the theoretical corpus of Subaltern Studies and postcolonial thought, illustrating how fiction can serve as a form of historiographical intervention. Mukherjee does not merely represent the subaltern; he interrogates the very possibility of such representation. In doing so, he echoes Spivak's challenge to rethink the structures of knowledge production and urges readers to acknowledge the limits of empathy, understanding, and voice.

Thus, the novel does not offer a conclusive definition of freedom, nor does it claim to fully recover subaltern voices. Instead, it situates itself in the interstices—the spaces between privilege and deprivation, speech and silence, visibility and erasure. Within these spaces, Mukherjee crafts a narrative that is as much about listening as it is about telling, inviting us to reflect on whose stories get told, by whom, and at what cost.

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