



MAPPING THE POWER-DISOURSE IN NEEL MUKHERJEE'S "THE LIVES OF OTHERS"

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ABSTRACT

The issue of power has been an important concern of philosophers and sociologists alike. Despite the divergent views of theorists on power, it is a fact universally acknowledged that power is not confined to a single, unitary source; it is rather multidimensional in origin and organization, production and execution. Philosophers like Michel Foucault intended to examine how power operates in day-to-day interactions between people and institutions. Foucault, in particular, clarified the interdependence and interrelationship of power and discourse. Using the Foucauldian parameters, this article seeks to find out how the various networks of power-discourse operating through the lives of various characters, are explicated in Neel Mukherjee's Booker-shortlisted fictional work *The Lives of Others*.

KEYWORDS: Discourse, Networks, Power

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Power is everywhere; not because it englobes everything, but because it comes from everywhere- (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 93).

Two traditionally contrasting and confusing ways of using the word 'power' have been the 'power to' and 'power over' paradigms. Critics have explained that these two ways ultimately lead to two different fields of conceptualizing and analyzing power. However, the different models of the role of power are not our concern, this article lays bare the varied manifestations of the role and rule of power in society, the manifestations which come to constitute its 'discourse': "What gives power its hold, what makes it accepted, is quite simply the fact that it does weigh like a force, which says no, but that it runs through, and produces things, it induces pleasures, it forms knowledge, it produces discourses; it must be considered as a productive network which runs through the entire social body..."(Foucault, *Power, Truth*, 35-6). In fact, Foucault conceptualizes discourse as being related

more to knowledge, materiality and power than merely to its language. That is why he studies discourse as a discipline, both in the scholarly sense (of science, medicine, or psychiatry etc.) and in the sense of disciplinary institution (like prison, hospital etc.). If discourse is a process of formation and constraint, production and exclusion; the power-discourse certainly implies a process of production and systematized execution.

Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* anatomizes the soul of a nation in a time of turbulence by exploring the genre of family saga. Throughout the novel one can find the wide web of power-discourse encompassing almost all the spheres of ordinary lives. In fact, power plays a major role in our society by means of prominent and dominant networks. That is why Foucault sees power as more of a means of exertion, rather than of possession. The strategy or mode of execution of power is not one-dimensional; resulting in the fact that there are always a set of power-relations

dispersed and disseminated throughout the society: "I am not referring to Power with a capital P, dominating and imposing its rationality upon the totality of the social body. In fact, there are power relations. They are multiple; they have different forms, they can be in play in family relations, or within an institution, or an administration" (Foucault, *Critical Theory*, 38). These multifarious networks of power dominate, influence, and give shape to the 'lives of others' in Neel Mukherjee's novel.

Political ideology forms the core of the ideological network operating in the story. Supratik's Presidency years are very much influenced by the political ideology of the surging communist activities in Bengal, proclaiming its presence through spirited slogans. Ironically enough, Supratik later discovers the banality of this so-called communist ideology which advocates the revolution of the landless peasants on the one hand, while, on the other, expecting the peasants "to stay within the boundaries set by them" (*The Lives of Others* 100). As a result, life does never change, the world moves on as before: "All this hurling of bombs, burning of trams, headlines in newspapers—to what avail? The condition of the people remained unchanged. Life carried on as before, restored to its status quo..." (*The Lives of Others* 37). The sad realization of this hypocrisy and the vote-bank calculus lying at the heart of power calculation drives Supratik to come under the influence of the Maoist ideology, influencing next generation revolutionaries like Sabita Kumari who desperately attempt to take revenge on what they look upon as the megalomaniac machinery of the government that has cruelly crushed the lives of 'others' to the core:

The same story—forest-tribes banished after their land was sold by the state to mining companies; those meant to protect you turned into your attackers. Imagine coming home one day to find that your parents were waiting with knives to slaughter you. That is what the Maoists said when the tribes escaped into the forests to protect themselves from the military police. They had a choice: to be snuffed out overnight by the world or take on the world

and wrest something from it; not very much, just a little, just to survive and live like a human, not an animal. This is the hope the Maoists offered...

(*The Lives of Others* 502-3)

The inordinate impact of ideological framework on an individual is pervasive in the life of the leading character Supratik. After his heated argument with Suranjan over the latter's heroin-addiction, Supratik attempts to interpret such addiction in terms of the criticism of capitalist ideology: "How typical of an exemplary specimen of the petite bourgeoisie to get hooked on a destructive drug that is an import from the decadent, evil, capitalist West" (*The Lives of Others* 459). The Maoist ideology tries to decipher the capitalist ideology and relate it to the grand design of history; but, interestingly enough, Supratik's attempt to completely understand or to be certain of his interpretation is not successful: "Or is that only an illusion? Could that too be subsumed under the paradigms that had already been set down in the key texts?" (*The Lives of Others* 460). These 'key texts' form the design of discourse, or to be more precise, the dominant discourse of power. Such ideological 'aporia' explains why the narrator later says that ideology quite inevitably demands the rational recognition of the "gaps and the errors and the abridgement" (*The Lives of Others* 471).

The contiguity of the economic network to the power discourse manifests itself in the 'PROLOGUE' which describes the tragic extinction of Nitai Das's family. The relation of the ideological framework to the economic network becomes clear when Supratik confirms that he and his comrades started living the lives of 'others' in Majgeria chiefly because "this was the hamlet where Nitai Das killed his family—his wife, his son, his two daughters—and then swallowed poison last year in May" (*The Lives of Others* 104). People like Nitai Das who work as sharecroppers or as wage-laborers are always easy victims of the monopolistic moneylenders and landowners in what the novel describes as the 'time-honoured way' (*The Lives of Others* 125). Kanu explains to Supratik how the landlords and moneylenders extract lucrative benefits from droughts, starvation and crop-failure by showing this type of *force majeure* as excuses to lower the wages

of the laborers and even denying them the daily meal for working on their land: "Bad times, they say, we can't afford to pay you so much or feed you" (*The Lives of Others* 125). These poor peasants know it well that the rich landlords and moneylenders hoard food grain in their barns and warehouses to secretly send it out to the cities to sell in the black market at a huge profit. Kanu's narration reminds Supratik of the food riots in Calcutta and also of one childhood memory of the famine of '43 and he fully grasps the mode of oppressive operation of the invisible network of production and exploitation in the lives of these 'invisible people' (*The Lives of Others* 126). Such recurring events of history have thus become part of the discourse of power resulting in the fact that the people whose core "consisted of a constant wrestling with dearth and want and above all, hunger" (*The Lives of Others* 199), have always remained mere cogs in the big and unknowable social machine called power: "The great magnetism was still at work: power spoke to and connected only with power; the government and its laws were for the benefit of the landlords, the powerful and the wealthy. Their interests were aligned: they looked out for each other; therefore they would always be looking after each other. That great circularity again" (*The Lives of Others* 199).

The third major network of power in the story is the military network. Supratik discovers in Majgeria how the police are protecting men like Basudeb Roy in transferring rice to Calcutta and various other states where it will be sold at an excessively high price. Supratik instantly realizes the role of the repressive state apparatus called police in maintaining state-power: "Little, if anything, could be hidden from the eyes of the state and its biggest instrument of control and repression, the police" (*The Lives of Others* 153). The expressions 'eyes of the state' and 'instrument of control and repression' justify Althusser's assertion that "the (Repressive) State Apparatus functions massively and predominantly by repression (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology" (Althusser 173). The police, as an indispensable machinery of state-power, is ever-obedient to the authority and government:

They were the guard dogs of government: they were let loose on a state's own people every time there was a move towards greater equality or fairness or justice, and they obliged without fail. Every time. They had no morality, no principles; only a slavish obedience to whoever paid them any money...Throughout history, in every single nation in the world, this class of paid servant of the state has turned against its own people, terrorized them, beaten and tortured them, unleashed untold misery and repression...

(*The Lives of Others* 360)

When Inspector Saha comes to inform the Ghosh family of Madan's culpability, his behavior is extremely polite and he repeatedly refers to his being 'a personal favour to Adi-babu' (*The Lives of Others* 446). Within three months, however, the change in his attitude startles the entire family, when he slaps Supratik in front of everyone and declares, "The game's changing" (*The Lives of Others* 464). The military network exerts absolute domination and control in collusion with other machineries of power to serve and ensure combined interest: "The big landlords of the area, who had the police in their pockets, and most of the politicians too, had got together, both in public and in private, and used their combined power to pull the levers at the topmost level" (*The Lives of Others* 366). It is therefore quite natural that Sabita Kumari whose family was brutally exterminated for resisting the moneylender's attempt to take over their land, killed five officers at Ranchi police station; including those who had leered and shamelessly demanded sex when she had gone to complain, within two years of her joining the Maoist squad.

Last but not the least is the family network. The treatment that Purba receives in the Ghosh family is depressing and repressing. The miserable life of Purba and her children proves that the politics of exclusion operates even in the family: "Sona, electrically alive from the earliest time that he can remember to being excluded to the margins, from where he watched everyone else get their share while he only looked on in silence..." (*The Lives of Others* 27). Foucault repeatedly claims that power

should not be seen merely as something which represses, or censors or excludes. It is because power produces 'realities' and "domains of objects and rituals of truth"(Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*,174) that the narrative of power discourse in the novel does not end up in Sona's ritualistic marginalization, but proceeds to tell his glorious development into an internationally acclaimed mathematician.

Supratik's words to his mother, long before his departure from the family, reveals the relevance of the family network of exploitation: "Are you happy with the inequalities of our family? Of the power-on-top-ruling-people-below kind of hierarchy? Do you think it's right? Has the thought ever crossed your mind that the family is the primary unit of exploitation?"(*The Lives of Others* 79) It is because of this hierarchy that after Somnath's death, Charubala accuses the helpless Purba of being the cause of her son's death, and even abuses her by calling her 'ill-starred, evil' and 'burnt-faced woman'(*The Lives of Others* 417). Thus even under the seemingly stable family network prominent partiality and personal preference exist forever: "Not all family bonds are equal...just under the surface, the empty drama of equality is torqued to its very opposite by the forces of conflicting emotions and affinities"(*The Lives of Others* 105). Again, Madan, who came from Amlapali of Orissa in search of jobs, slowly become a member of the Ghosh family so much so that his own biological family seems to him to be 'something else'(*The Lives of Others* 493). Charubala always referred to Madan as "part of the family" or as "eldest son" (*The Lives of Others*). But the narrator does not forget to mention that Madan is still the 'other':

But despite all this apparent oneness between servant and master's children, an invisible membrane separating the two worlds never got breached. It was as if a supra-surveillant intelligence, invisible itself but ordering all and keeping everything within the design of things, which was meant to remain unchanging, ever so, was ceaselessly invigilating a flexible barrier that could be moved only so far and no further. (*The Lives of Others* 319)

Supratik himself is haunted by the questions whether he hatched the plan to have Madan-da framed for the burglary only because of the influence of the invisible hierarchy of class-division, because of the fact that a servant stealing is always more credible than any other member of the family.

Michel Foucault says that, "Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain...Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization" (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 98). The analysis of these various networks of power in Mukherjee's novel shows that "power is not an independent quality; it is an attribute of economic, social and political relations" (Brennan 71-2). These various relations constitute the very discourse of power in our society. The power discourse that the novel deconstructs is quite aptly summarized in Bappa-da's lecture to Suranjan, in the former's attempt to explain Marx:

All superstructures, including the family, rest on the base of one thing, and one thing only—economics. The family is the first and primary unit of oppression and exploitation...You take away economic security and the whole pack of cards collapses. Everyone is at each other's throats. All these bourgeois values that prop up society—love, duty, honour, respect—all rest on power-relations lubricated by economics. They are the gloss people put on the naked truth: self-interest. (*The Lives of Others* 247)

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