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The Conversational Quality of Literature: An Interview with Neel Mukherjee

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Abstract: Neel Mukherjee, author of *A Life Apart* (2008), *The Lives of Others* (2014), and *A State of Freedom* (2018), talks about his education, his favourite books, and his career as a reviewer and novelist. He also discusses some of the issues explored in his novels, such as capitalism and the predicament of the have-nots, as well as his literary influences.

Keywords: Dalit, literary influences, Neel Mukherjee, Indian literature, *A Life Apart*, *The Lives of Others*, *A State of Freedom*

Neel Mukherjee was born in Calcutta in 1970. He now lives in London but spends several months a year in the United States where he teaches creative writing at Harvard University. His first novel, published as *Past Continuous* (2008) in India and *A Life Apart* the same year in the United Kingdom, won the Vodafone-Crossword Book Prize (*ex aequo* with Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*) in 2009. His second novel, *The Lives of Others* (2014), was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and won the Royal Society of Literature's Encore Award, and his third, *A State of Freedom* (2018), has immediately garnered international acclaim. The following interview was recorded in London over two sessions in January 2017 and January 2018.[1]

Can you say something about your intellectual make-up, your education? I saw that you studied the Renaissance and wrote an article on Horace.

Mukherjee: Yes, it is my only academic article. Once upon a time, I wanted to be an academic, and some of the professors who taught

me, such as Supriya Chaudhuri and Helen Cooper, are early modern scholars. It's a complicated story: initially I wanted to be a filmmaker, but I had also applied to the United States to read molecular biology and film studies; I even got into the Dartmouth molecular biology program and the Columbia film program. I was on the waiting list for financial aid, and I could not have gone without financial aid, but they did not come down to my name, so I could not go. Plan B was to attend a filmmaking school in India, the FTII [Film and Television Institute of India] in Pune, but for that you needed to be a graduate. I thought, "I like reading literature; let me go and study literature, then I can go to film school after that." I applied to Jadavpur University because it was close to home (I am lazy and I did not want to go to Presidency College, which was very far away). I got a place there and in the second year some of my professors caught hold of me and said, "You must apply to Oxbridge." So I think that was the time when my focus changed and I started shifting over to wanting to be an academic. And since I had been trained by Renaissance scholars, I thought I wanted to be a sixteenth-century scholar; this is very much the influence of Supriya Chaudhuri in my life. So I applied, I got lucky, I received a scholarship, and I came to study in Oxford. I did a second B.A. there, by which time the filmmaking thing had been forgotten: I really wanted to become a sixteenth-century scholar by then. I finished my second B.A. and then I got a studentship in a college in Cambridge, where I started on a Ph.D.

What was your Ph.D. about?

Mukherjee: It was late sixteenth-century cultural history. I worked on a set of people who went to settle in Ireland towards the last two or three decades of Queen Elizabeth's reign, from the 1570s, so I looked at people such as Edmund Spenser and Walter Raleigh and Lodowick Bryskett. It was actually a Ph.D. on Spenser and I looked at the use he made of the genre of complaint (or, more accurately, the *mode* of complaint). Fairly early on, however, I realized that I did not really want to pursue academia, but that was the only way

I could stay on in Britain, and I did not want to go back to India. So, being a good Indian boy, I finished my Ph.D. and then I left Cambridge and came to London. But even then, fiction writing was not something that I had thought about. I went to a creative writing school on a whim. I was thirty years old at the time, so quite late to the writing game by contemporary standards. I was just exploring an avenue and I did not know what would come at the end of it. I started writing what became *Past Continuous* or *A Life Apart* at the University of East Anglia in the creative writing school there. That's how it came about. So you can say that I came to writing because I failed in everything else! It was a series of failures: failure to be a molecular biologist, failure to be a filmmaker, failure to be an academic, and now I am waiting for my writing career to fail as well, and then I'll move on to something else like circus magician . . .

Then you made quite a name with literary reviews.

Mukherjee: Yes, well, maybe not quite a name, but it was a way of earning money. You know, my first novel was turned down by every single publisher in Britain, then every single publisher in America, and I had to do something to eat and pay the bills.

What happened then?

Mukherjee: The manuscript sat under the bed for five or six years, then it came out in India—the version called *Past Continuous*—and I gave a copy of it to a friend who is a publisher here in the UK [an independent then called Constable & Robinson but now part of Hachette] and he published me. He brought it out in 2010 and then things started changing for me. I have had a very difficult road to being published. But most writers seem to have had a difficult road to being published; it hasn't been easy for anyone, except for Zadie Smith. Or, maybe it was easy for Amitav Ghosh . . .

Yes, he sold the rights for The Circle of Reason *(1986) before he even finished writing it. But that was soon after the publication of* Midnight's Children *(1981) and publishers were probably trying to replicate the success of Salman Rushdie's novel.*

Mukherjee: I remember when I was an undergraduate in Jadavpur University—I was nineteen years old when I read *The Circle of Reason*; I clearly remember the buzz in college. He was our big discovery. I remember reading *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines* (1988) back to back, one quickly after the other: we were all tremendously excited about him. My book came out more than twenty years after that, by which time the climate had changed.

In your reviews you never criticise any books; you are always very positive.

Mukherjee: You should read my earlier reviews! I only did hatchet jobs. I was so vicious. Then I started to change when I realized how books coverage kept getting cut, and books pages of mainstream newspapers kept shrinking, so that there is very little review coverage for books left in Britain now. Over the last fifteen years or so, the coverage has shrunk so much that it is difficult for books to get reviewed. I made a decision about eight years ago that if a book is being reviewed, then it is worth saying good things about it—otherwise, what's the point? It is so easy to write negative things about a book; it is much more challenging to write interestingly and intelligently about the good things. I find it obligatory, a feeling of being almost honour-bound, that if I am reviewing a book I should try and emphasise the good things to the reader of the review.

You point out what readers will like in the book.

Mukherjee: Yes, exactly. The literary review scene is now no longer a part of a bigger literary-critical conversation, [and is] instead an alignment of newspapers, the market, the publishing houses, the PR industry, the prize industry, the celebrity industry, and so on. That business of talking about books intellectually has totally faded from the mainstream. Reviews have become more market-emphasised, and the only positive agency a reviewer can have in these circumstances is to draw a book to the readers' attention so that they think, "That sounds interesting; I'm going to buy a copy." Often you discover things that you feel really incredibly passionate about and you want the whole world to read them, such as the

German writer Jenny Erpenbeck, whom I think of as the most brilliant European writer of my generation. I feel passionately about her work and I feel everyone should read her books. I have just discovered an American writer, who is seventy-two or seventy-three years old, and she is not known at all in the UK—her name is Joy Williams, and I think she is probably the greatest short-story writer in the English language alive now. In my opinion, she is a greater short-story writer than Alice Munro or John Cheever, and I think the whole world should read her books. I asked to review the UK edition of her selected short stories, *The Visiting Privilege*, and I wrote about it passionately because I really feel there is something amazing in it waiting to be discovered by everyone. Whereas if I write a negative review five people will laugh, I will make an enemy of one or two people, and it becomes a very English kind of self-defeating game. I no longer want to be part of that (and I'm full of shame that I was once).

One of the books that you did not review, to my surprise, was The Lowland *(2013) by Jhumpa Lahiri.*

Mukherjee: I have reviewed her books before. I reviewed *The Namesake* (2003), for example, and I gave it a very good notice, but that year, when *The Lowland* came out, I had just finished *The Lives of Others* and I was in the middle of editing it, and when I reach the end of writing a book, my reading somehow stops. If you notice, in 2016 I reviewed about five books; I couldn't take anything on.

I thought you might be interested in her depiction of the Naxalite movement.

Mukherjee: Actually, I didn't think her primary focus in the book was the Naxalite movement. I feel she did not engage with it very much . . .

. . . unlike Mahasweta Devi?

Mukherjee: Oh yes, I think *Hajar Churashir Maa* (1974) is an astonishing account of the Naxalite movement. On the other hand, the strengths of *The Lowland* are elsewhere—not in the depiction

of the Naxalite movement; I think that Lahiri uses it as a kind of steppingstone to get somewhere else, but she is not interested in the movement per se, as I am, or Mahasweta Devi was.

Reading your reviews, one sees what a voracious reader you are; you always mention lots of novels.

Mukherjee: Thank you. Yes, you have to do that. I think of literature as a conversation between the living and the dead—more importantly, with the dead. I still remember the charge that I felt reading the opening line of Stephen Greenblatt's book, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988): "I began with a desire to speak with the dead." My hair stands on end when I think about it. I think that's what literature is—a desire to speak with the dead. I feel it is impossible to understand a book if you do not see where in the larger map of writing it is positioned.

A scholarly attitude . . .

Mukherjee: Yes, I suppose it is. Every new book changes what has come before it, and then what comes after it will change that piece of work as well. I find it difficult to review just one book in isolation. It is good to know what else the writer has done, and it's even better to know where the book fits in the map of current writing or similar writing. For example, [J. M. Coetzee's] *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), a book I teach in one of my courses: it's impossible to make sense of the book if you haven't read the Gospels. Besides, you know how Coetzee changes the game every time he writes a book. He has used straightforward realism, in the Lukácsian sense of the term—Coetzee would disagree that he writes straightforward realism, and I agree that he does not, but a book like *Disgrace* (1999) is a very realist book. Then there is something approaching a fable in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980); the very strangely-framed work of ethics that is *The Lives of Animals* (1999); *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) and *Slow Man* (2005) are sort of philosophical novels; then his extraordinary trilogy—*Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002), and *Summertime* (2009)—can be seen very productively

within the world of autofiction. So to ignore the dense allusiveness and the play with forms and modes is to miss a lot about *The Childhood of Jesus*. Although in the end it is its own thing, I feel that you get more out of the book if you know his use of these forms in his earlier writing.

To me there is a lot of the mathematician in the way Coetzee writes. The way logical elements combine is like minus-times-plus-equals-minus . . . I had that feeling reading Waiting for the Barbarians.

Mukherjee: I see; there is something interesting in what you say. You know that he is a trained linguist? He worked for IBM on the interface of computer systems and linguistics, and even possibly on artificial intelligence (I may be getting the last bit wrong), and surely his intellectual interests are not a million miles away from logic and mathematics. So you are not at all wrong, but maybe that holds truer for a philosophical novel such as *Elizabeth Costello*. But do you get the impression that a novel such as *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) or *Disgrace* or even the novels about his own life—*Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*—do you feel those are also mathematical?

No, not exactly; actually, I thought more of Foe *(1986) or* Waiting for the Barbarians. *They keep swapping things and signs, like when you move elements of an equation from left to right and vice versa. Do you ever think in mathematical terms when you write?*

Mukherjee: Yes, I do like books that people call cerebral. I don't deny that I find them very moving as well. I find [Jorge Luis] Borges and [Vladimir] Nabokov very moving writers, actually, and I love their work. I don't know if it is my love for mathematics that makes me love these writers or if it is my love for these writers that makes me love mathematics.

I read that you were studying mathematics.

Mukherjee: I am still studying mathematics, and seven years down the line, I still have not managed to finish my degree, I am ashamed to

say. It has become very difficult now, both in terms of content and the time I can—and should—devote to it, and I keep putting it off. I have a few more years to go to finish my degree, but I'd like to do it; otherwise, you know, it would be such a waste of effort.

You have just said that you appreciate Ghosh's books, but reading The Lives of Others*, I sometimes felt that you were somehow rewriting* The Shadow Lines*, that it reads as a counter-narrative to* The Shadow Lines*. Amitav Ghosh is always praising the family as a unit and makes it central in his novels, whereas you appear very critical of familial bonds. In* Past Continuous *you write that family is primarily an economic unit and the primary unit of exploitation. I also wonder where you stand in relation to traditional Bengali bhadralok culture—for instance, Rabindranath Tagore.*

Mukherjee: This is a very long and dense question. I will try to delimit the answer or I'll go on forever. First of all, *The Shadow Lines* was not on my mind when I was writing *The Lives of Others*. I mean, that book is part of my writerly soul, [and] we were writing about a similar time, similar milieu, so obviously some kind of historical and cultural similarities would automatically exist, but I did not have *The Shadow Lines* as a model in my head against which I would write my book, so when you call the book "anti-*Shadow Lines*" I had not consciously set out to create an opposition novel to *The Shadow Lines*. That was not in my head. If anything, my bigger conversation was with [Thomas] Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901), which is also a family novel. But there were also micro-conversations going on within the novel with other books; some of them are with Bengali literature—for example, with Mahasweta Devi, and with Sunil Gangopadhyay's early novel *Days and Nights in the Forest* (1968), which was made into an amazing film by Satyajit Ray (1970). (Digression: it was one of Ray's own favourite works, in which he used a simple Mozartian sonata form to structure the film. I used the principle of counterpoint for my first novel because I find the use of musical structures in books very, very interesting and intellectually very appealing.) But, you know, being Indian there's no getting away from family. In a

way, family is still so much at the centre of everyone's existence, unlike in liberal First World democracies where the notion of family has become very attenuated. I mean, of course, family is still very strong in southern Europe, for example, but in northern Europe, Scandinavia, England, and North America, I think that particular notion and practice of family for cultural or historical and economic reasons simply do not exert the kind of pull, or have that kind of centrality or force, that they have to an Indian person. In fact, you could think of the novel form as inextricable from the family unit in some way. It is difficult to think of a novel that is not a novel about a family, I think: *War and Peace* (1869) is a family novel, *Anna Karenina* (1877) is a family novel, *The Leopard* (1958) is a family novel, *American Pastoral* (1997) is a family novel. . . . So, when you start thinking, there is no getting away from that idea. The unit of [the] family interests me anthropologically.

As for Tagore, I do not know what to say about him. The first thing to say about him, in this particular context, is that he was a dreadful novelist. He was an extraordinary poet and a *very* good essayist; he was a prolific songwriter (and I think the songs are, just occasionally, much better read as poetry than heard). His facility for making poetry was infinite and boundless and, you know, being Bengali, he is part of my DNA, so it is very difficult to speak about him in any kind of objective way, but he has not been any kind of guiding principle for me as far as the writing of novels is concerned. I find that his output in the novel form is quite weak. But he was an amazing short-story writer, by the way, just extraordinary.

Why did you single out Miss Gilby for Ritwik's novel in A Life Apart*? Or why did Ritwik? The two of you may have had different reasons . . .*

Mukherjee: I don't know whether Miss Gilby stays in my head from Tagore's novel *Gharey Bairey* (*The Home and the World*) (1916), where she appears in only half a page of the book very early on, like page eight or ten or something, and then never returns. In the novel she is just a name, while in Ray's film she becomes a

character, although a very small walk-on character; Ray gives her tri-dimensionality. I think that the performance by Jennifer Kapoor in the film is so astonishing—she burns up the screen for the two minutes that she's there; she's so charismatic and extraordinary. Actually I have forgotten why I decided on Miss Gilby; I really don't remember why. I thought, "Let me complicate Ritwik's narrative by bringing someone else's story in." I felt that the two stories spoke to each other very well: they were both about immigrants, they were both about strangers in strange lands trying to find their footing, and they both can't escape the burdens of history, so in some ways they are mirror images of each other, and I like that chiastic arrangement of the two narratives: an Englishwoman in India and an Indian in England. That X figure is aesthetically pleasing to me.

And also Miss Gilby is somehow queer; she has stronger ties with Violet Cameron than with anyone else.

Mukherjee: Yes, someone pointed that out to me. I must say that it wasn't uppermost in my head, but then, you know, texts have their own minds, and you are never quite in control of them. You are the second person who has pointed this out to me, and I am surprised more people haven't picked up on that queer edge of Miss Gilby.

But surely you realize that rewriting a master narrative is read as a political stance. I mean, usually you expect postcolonial writers to rewrite Western narratives, so this comes as a bit of a surprise. People will perceive it as counter-writing an icon of Bengali literature.

Mukherjee: Yes, I suppose so. You know, when you are young you are foolishly brave and foolhardy and you step in where angels fear to tread. You have the nerve to do all this kind of stuff. Yes, we were talking of literature as a conversation with the dead, and part of the book was a conversation with Bengali nationalism and some literary and political things within India, but in my second novel I was having a conversation with the history of revolution in India,

but also with a European novel, *Buddenbrooks*, [and] with certain theories of the political origins of the novel form.

I am interested in the research that went into A Life Apart. *Did you do any particular research on the life of migrants? The pages on the strawberry picking are very vivid.*

Mukherjee: Yes, of course, I did some research for it. A lot of the time people seem not to give enough weight to the fact, or they just forget, that one of the things novelists do is sit at home and squeeze their eyes tight shut and imagine other people's lives—what the details of their lives must be like. So the research only takes you up to the door of the room, [and] then you have to open it and enter the room yourself. So, about strawberry picking, I have actually forgotten what the research was, but I remember going straight to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in this country [the UK] and requesting her to give me data and send me PDFs and files and stuff, which she did! But, apart from that, I do not remember much. I remember morning after morning I went and stood in that place in West London, in Willesden, where the men all line up, then lorries come and pick them up to do work on construction sites and in fields. But it's true everywhere, you know—it happens in India, not with immigrants, but with migrant workers, so with internal migration.

The same thing occurs in Italy; migrants work in agriculture or on construction sites. On another level you must have also done research on birds and botany.

Mukherjee: Yes, but that was entirely library research; I had completely forgotten about the bird side of the book! Yes, I am interested in birds and in plants and in botany very much. One tries to get one's intellectual interests into a book, if one can, and I thought the birds thing fitted very well: creatures of flight. One definition of an immigrant is "a creature of flight," so I thought that would give a metaphorical underpinning to the novel. It is very hard to talk about it retrospectively now, because once the book is finished

it exists in the world and I can only speak as a reader now, but god knows what was going through my head at the time! But I remember very well my bird book, actually. I was visiting a friend who was teaching at Yale at the time, and the Beinecke Library had an exhibition of Audubon's *Birds of America*, first edition [1838]. They are the most beautiful books that I have ever seen in my entire life. They had them on display and I was so struck by it that, years later, I imagined the bird suite in the Dorchester Hotel on Park Lane in London, which does not have a bird suite at all. If anyone who owns or runs the Dorchester read it, he would be horrified!

How was Past Continuous *received in India?*

Mukherjee: It got some good reviews and it got some bad reviews.

It won you the Vodafone-Crossword Prize . . .

Mukherjee: Yes, I shared it with Amitav's *Sea of Poppies* (2008). I think that if I had just won it alone, the book would not have got as much mileage as it did. I think Amitav's electricity rubbed off on me. As for your question, there were some very negative reviews and some very positive reviews; nothing in-between, really. In fact, the first review that came out was very negative; my first ever review, can you imagine? It said the book is going nowhere: it has no plot, no story, it's just pointless, the prose is affected, etc. etc. But then it also had some wonderful reviews; it had a review in *India Today*, which picked up on Tagore and the rewriting of *Gharey Bairey*. So, a mixed reception, I would say.

And The Lives of Others*?*

Mukherjee: *The Lives of Others* too: a mixed reception.

Can it be that Bengali readers do not want to be represented the way you portray them?

Mukherjee: My bad reviews were not necessarily written by Bengali reviewers. One reviewer in a very prominent newspaper, *Livemint*, found the book misogynistic.

That's surprising.

Mukherjee: Yes, what can one do? Because the women in the book have very strong vocal powers and they often shout at one another . . . so the book is misogynistic. Another prominent review, by a Bengali hack, if I read the review correctly, claims that I am trying to write for Westerners. This is the standard problem with Indian criticism: the dictum that if one wants to write for Indians, one should write in an Indian language. But then only ten people would read me in the language I wrote in, so this thing is so caught up in the politics of resentment that it is not even worth going into now. I don't understand the logical or philosophical basis of that argument, that to write an authentically Indian book you have to write in an Indian language, preferably an Indian language that is not English—which is officially an Indian language, by the way—so that only the people you write about can read it. If I wrote in Bengali, only Bengalis would be able to read me, not anybody else in India, so they are not making an argument for a pan-Indian readership at all; rather, they are making a much more regionalist argument. Whenever I want to read the work by a Maharashtrian or Telugu writer, I have to read it translated into English—or into Bengali, for that matter. The attack against Indian writers writing in English, particularly writers who live abroad, stems from other sources. Funnily, Vikram Seth or Arundhati Roy do not have to field these problems.

A Bengali friend I spoke with yesterday told me he found it strange that you added a glossary to The Lives of Others. *Actually, I enjoyed reading it.*

Mukherjee: I think a glossary is such a political act as well. That's why I was trying to do the glossary in a different way; the glossary is written in an entirely different voice and it's not just a functional glossary. I mean the glossary to be read almost as a standalone thing, something that you can occasionally dip into, and I hope it's funny and ironic. I wanted it to do its own thing rather than just be a functional dictionary for people who do not understand Bengali expressions.

As a writer, do you think or feel that you belong to a different generation than novelists like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, or Anita Desai? Do you feel that you, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, and Aravind Adiga, for example, are generationally different?

Mukherjee: Strangely enough, I haven't thought of that actually, whether I belong to a different generation. No, I don't. I don't feel I have to tackle different things or in a different way. Part of it may have something to do with the media and that creation they call the "new India." By "new India" they mean post-liberalization India, but Amitav Ghosh or Anita Desai can choose to write about that as much as Aravind or I do. I have written about this "new India" in *A State of Freedom*, but it is not billed as that kind of book. I feel the only generational divide between us is not in the kind of material that we handle or the lens that we bring to bear on our material or the subject, but simply in biological age.

Have you never thought that previous generations of writers had the option of choosing any subject they liked, whereas subsequent generations had to adapt to what remains?

Mukherjee: I think one comes to think of a generational divide when a writer has become obsolete or is not writing or being read anymore. I think there is a great generational divide between, say, me and Nayantara Sahgal, or Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, or Mulk Raj Anand. But I don't feel that about writers who are still active and really plugged into India in the way Rushdie and Ghosh are. Besides, Rushdie has always been a much more international writer, and Amitav, too. So, no, I do not feel a generational break with them.

What about R. K. Narayan?

Mukherjee: Oh, yes, with Narayan, yes certainly. I absolutely love his work. I would like to write about him one day. I recently reread *Swami and Friends* (1935) . . .

It was a nightmare for him to publish that book!

Mukherjee: Really?

Once he was on the point of throwing it into the river in desperation.

Mukherjee: I have been thinking about him for a while. Maybe I should take some time to read his collected works and write a short essay on him. You have given me an idea!

I was wondering whether you had sometimes had Narayan in mind when you wrote A State of Freedom*? I felt that the character of Lakshman was akin to some of Malgudi's characters.*

Mukherjee: No, I did not consciously have Narayan in mind, but I think this is the way in which influences work, away from the conscious functions one is aware of. Narayan may have gone into some part of my brain to which I have no access, and the influence works, unknown to me, from there. So, for instance, I have always loved Samuel Beckett, but no one can find the imprint of Beckett on my work because I do not write like Beckett; I do not even try to. I simply like him enormously. And yet a Beckett scholar recently pointed out that the relationship between Lakshman and Raju is very Beckettian. I had never thought of that, but he is right: maybe someone else, the critic, or a reader, has to point it out. So now you are saying that there is some of Narayan's influence in Lakshman; well, possibly, is all I can say.

The compositional principle of A State of Freedom *seems to me more sophisticated than the previous novels. Can we say that it leaves counterpoint for another form—fugue, for example?*

Mukherjee: I have never thought of it. Indeed, fugue is built on the contrapuntal principle; I would love that it was thought of as a fugue. A fugue with five voices, and ideas and themes being picked up and repeated. I love creating this internal system full of echoes, repetitions, and linkages [that] work according to those musical principles. It would be wonderful to think of it as a fugue.

You said that every novel is a kind of conversation with the dead: with whom is A State of Freedom *conversing?*

Mukherjee: V. S. Naipaul, for sure. Not only formally, but also thematically. My novel talks about displacement, exile, and unbelonging. My migrant workers are all on the move; they all have left one place to try and find a better life elsewhere. Certainly there are conversations with other texts: Daniel Gunn pointed out Beckett, you have just pointed out Narayan . . . there must be others I do not know of yet. But that is what good criticism is for. I always have only a partial understanding of my own text. It does not belong to me; it belongs to the readers.

How do you use the word "freedom" in your novel? Apparently the characters have very little freedom to make any choice.

Mukherjee: I was trying to think of the choice palettes that are available to the very poor in India. Most economic theories are underpinned by the notion of choice, and decision-making is crucial. Obviously the spectrum of choices available to you or me is very different from that available to someone like Lakshman or Milly, but a common basic act of striving towards less constraint in life defines the human condition in some ways. The characters in *A State of Freedom* are always trying to negotiate for more freedom, if only the freedom to have a meal. How else do you think about freedom if not through constraints? I was trying to look at people who are severely constrained and yet are defined by the urge to have fewer constraints in life, trying to see what their particular conditions of freedom are like and where their striving might lead. Often exercising your (limited) choice or pushing against constraints to have more freedom or a bigger choice palette might prove to be a good thing and beneficial, as in the case of Milly, but sometimes not: in the case of Lakshman the outcomes are terrible; you can ruin yourself through pursuing such choices, however limited they are. So yes, I did not mean the title to be so ironic, actually. A lot of reviewers have taken it as a sick joke, but I was trying to be very earnest and serious about the title, because the concept of freedom is not a monolithic one across human classes and cultural backgrounds. Take Americans, for instance: they think that if they are offered

anything less than forty versions of cereal at the supermarket they are not being given enough choice. But look at someone like Milly: for her to have two meals a day is her ideal of freedom.

Economists have done enormous work on rational choice theory, for instance. A lot of Amartya Sen's work is devoted to the concept of choice. His idea of welfare is underpinned by it. All development economists I know are fundamentally working with notions of choice and constraint, and the decisions that the poor make: Why do the poor make certain decisions that would, rationally speaking, appear to go against their own interest? Why would a very poor farmer, who gets some money, go and spend it all on sugar? A lot of really interesting work has been done on choice, and it is something I have been thinking about, partly because I've had a great number of economists in my life. They have taught me to think about very interesting things. . . . So thinking about choice and the different choices that people make, which are not uniform across people, led me to think of what freedom entails for different classes of people.

Do you think that freedom of choice is overrated in the West?

Mukherjee: It can be—and has often been—taken to a ludicrous extreme, I think. It is very good that people are given choice—the very notion of democracy is dependent on choice—but I also think that these systems of governance can be captured, as democracy has been. The marriage of democracy and late capitalism has been disastrous. I think that interest groups have hijacked democracy for their purposes in various ways, so while I laud the underlying principle of choice, i.e., freedom, I think there are instances where actual, real freedom has been travestied. Besides, a large set of choices often makes people unhappy because they do not know what's best for them in that bewildering multitude.

I was thinking about the option of choosing a calling, a profession, which your characters cannot do. Whatever they become, they become so by chance rather than by choice, without even thinking much about it.

Mukherjee: Not always. Milly thinks a lot; she knows that she wants to educate her children, and she does. She has a very clear notion of what she wants. Of course, you may say it is through luck that she can manage her choices successfully, but that's true of all of us.

Even when they do something heroic, they do not seem to be thinking much about it. Even when Soni joins the Naxalites, she does not really make a decision.

Mukherjee: No, they would not be thinking rationally, but they feel that the situation is intolerable and want to change it for the better. They may be making a wrong choice, but there is still an amount of agency in the choice they are exercising.

In my book, Renu has a very profound understanding that she won't be able to change her life—I imply it, but I do not actually go there—but she can at least help someone else. And in a way, Milly does too: her children's lives are going to be better. After all, how far can we go into the first principles of choosing? We always choose within certain parameters; everyone's freedom is exercised only within a boundary of constraints.

On the whole, the novel is bitter, but there are optimistic points. I feel that the most optimistic part of the novel is when Milly muses about Soni telling her that our lives don't matter; she responds that our lives do not matter to others, but they still matter to us.

Mukherjee: Possibly. There is an echo of this thinking in the bleakest of the stories, the story of Lakshman and Raju: I think the end of this is positive, if not exactly optimistic. I refer to the last line, when Lakshman, for the first time, looks at the animal and asks himself the question, "What does the animal think?" That is a moment of empathy for him, the moment when he realizes that this creature may have a mind. I had to end the story at that point, when he suddenly becomes a moral being. He is such a terrible person, I think, but I also feel very sorry for him; I tried to write about him with sympathy and compassion. In the end he is offered some kind

of redemption in the form of a first step in acknowledging the existence of another mind.

What was the most difficult part to write for you?

Mukherjee: The beginning of Lakshman and Raju, when he finds the cub. But the section that needed most editorial work was Milly's story. Because Soni at the beginning was just a name and my editor said, "You have to make her into a character, and give her a life and a history so that readers can sympathize with her," so I gave Soni all that backstory.

So you were not planning to use Naxalites again right from the start?

Mukherjee: Actually, I was. I was going to use it for the Milly section, because there is a backstory to why the brother's hands get chopped off, but I have now kept that for the next book.

So you are saying it wasn't the Naxalites that did it?

Mukherjee: No, no, it was the Naxalites. The Maoists were deployed by contractors in the Jharkhand area to go and give him a beating. It is only one strand of the next book, which is also in sections.

Do you have a working title for the next book?

Mukherjee: Not yet.

Notes

1 This interview has been revised by Mukherjee; additional edits for clarity have been made by *ARIEL*.

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