

Mapping Marginalised Temporalities: A Chronotopic Reading of Neel Mukherjee's *A State of Freedom*

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Abstract -

Within the framework of the chronotope of Bakhtin, this paper explores Neel Mukherjee's *A State of Freedom*, focusing on the metaphorical interplay of the junkyard (the concealed, marginalised past) and the foreyard (the apparent, normative present). The multicultural characters featured in the novel (both the city elites and migrants living in the country) and its disordered plot structure create a literary space in which different temporalities and spatialities intersect. These crossroads are glimpses of synchronicity, the moments when the past and the present, the center and the periphery, the tradition and modernity can be united and reveal their interdependence. Applying the concept of chronotope presented by Bakhtin, where the spatial and the temporal are merged into a solid artistic form, this analysis shows how *A State of Freedom* establishes the opposition between the two realms of the consumer-infused foreyard and the memory-laden junkyard that remains mostly unseen. The villages, urban apartments, and building sites in which the book takes place are significant settings where personal and social histories merge and become concrete, not mere picturesque backdrops. Using flashbacks, shifting views and switching between social and physical worlds, the story by Mukherjee exposes the issues of erasure. This provides an emphasis on difference and going back to the backyard as a repository of lost knowledge and lifestyles. In conclusion, the author claims that in *A State of Freedom*, there is an intensive reflection on the concomitancy and disassociation of time and space in modern India, which demonstrates that the elements of synchronicity can be used to enhance the inhumanity of marginalisation and the alternative of salvation.

Keywords: Chronotope, Synchronicity, Marginalisation, Spatiality and Temporality, Memory and Modernity

Introduction:

The novel *A State of Freedom* signifies the movements and life in twenty-first-century India. Having a piecemeal narrative, the novel narrates about a multifaceted number of individuals who undergo different degrees of mobility. It is a portrayal of an NRI who comes to India as a tourist, an urban elite, internal migrants, and tribal labourers who are fighting to make ends meet. Migration is the pivotal feature of the novel according to which the author creates a mediation of the changing tendencies in contemporary life. In India, migration is a common phenomenon that has been experienced over the decades. Besides compelled movement, this is also motivated by economic desire. The novel examines the narratives of progress that are constructed as cities become increasingly populated by migrants. This is the indication of the topicality of spatial and temporal experiences, which condition how characters can negotiate identity and place. The chronotope outlined by Bakhtin helps to gain insight into the mobilisation of the narrative time and space, which helps to reveal the invisible causes of displacement. The chronotope helps in making sense of how the novel stages encounters of the past and present. It dislodges the strains between the foreyard and the junkyard, foreyard is equated with ambition, and the junkyard suggests amnesia about past lives. Basing his argument on the fact that *A State of Freedom* makes use of chronotopic structures to dramatise the similarities of various worlds. The discussion demonstrates that the developmental story around India depends on the forgetting of the marginalised pasts. The fragmented structure of rural and urban spaces that form the novel provides the literary space where the theme of displacement is not just a theme but a principle of story structuring.

Literature Review:

Neel Mukherjee's *A State of Freedom* (2017) has been critically received as an experiment with form, a novel which unapologetically highlights the class violence in India, and as an element of the Indian English novel of the present day. Early critics applauded the polyphonic nature of the novel and its eschewal of sentimental resolution, usually comparing it

to either *A Fine Balance* (1995) by Rohinton Mistry or *Into Their Labours* trilogy (1991) by John Berger in terms of its ability to contrast lives that never intimately come into contact. The text has been analysed through the prism of precarity, neoliberal governmentality, and post-Partition, post-developmentalism afterlives in more enduring scholarly literature. The novel presents the stages in the form of a cartography of expulsion, where the migrant bodies are the waste product of the Indian growth narrative. Although these studies help clarify the socio-economic dynamics that bring about displacement, they give comparatively less emphasis on specific spatiotemporal formations in which Mukherjee dramatises inequality.

A theoretical study of mobility and expulsion gives the necessary background. The new mobilities paradigm developed by Sheller and Urry (2006) and *Expulsions* by Saskia Sassen (2014) are macro-level descriptions of the manner in which global and national regimes produce the existence of different mobilities and constrained life chances, which evidently frame the trajectories of Lakshman, Milly, and the workers at the construction site. In South Asian studies, scholars of labour migration and agrarian crisis (Shah and Lerche, 2018; Pattenden, 2017) have written about the caste-tainted, cyclical, and frequently violent flows from village to city that Mukherjee fictionalises. Such sociological explanations are a useful historicisation of the stagnant or residual time that sticks to the rural chronotopes of the novel.

The notion of the chronotope as advanced by Bakhtin in the first article, *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel* (1981), has been fruitfully applied in postcolonial and global literatures in the recent 20 years (Bemong et al., 2010). The critics have demonstrated how colonial and postcolonial discourses create a hybrid, fragmented, or heterotopic chronotope, interrupting the linear, progressive time of European realism. Mrinalini Chakravorty (2014) has applied chronotopic analysis in the Indian context, where the presence of various temporalities (pre-modern, colonial, nationalist, and neoliberal) exists in the same national space. The chronotopic motif of ruination as defined by Chakravorty would particularly apply to the junkyard that fills the novel by Mukherjee.

Although this prolific literature exists, a sustained analysis of *A State of Freedom* through the perspective of a strictly chronotopic location has not been conducted, and criticism has not yet fully explained the symbolic and structural antithesis between the space of the visible and aspirational in neoliberal India and the space of the obscured and abandoned others. Although the novel has a garbage aesthetic, the mapping concerning the foreyard (apartments, malls, hotels) and the junkyard (village ruins, construction-site shanties, animal and human waste) is not conducted systematically. Equally, how the fragmented form of the novel itself works as a meta-chronotope, generating temporal moments of so-called synchronicities between what otherwise would be incommensurable worlds, has not been theorised. This article fills this gap by enlisting a larger Bakhtinian paradigm to unveil how Mukherjee creates space-time arrangements that become the medium by which structural violence and the potential of moral acknowledgement stage.

Research Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in literary analysis. It uses Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope theory as the primary analytical framework. An interpretive approach enables close attention to narrative form and representational strategies across the novel's five interlinked sections. A text-centred design emphasizes the identification of dominant and minor chronotopes. It maps the character trajectories and studies the relationship between narrative structure and the socio-historical conditions of contemporary India.

Analysis

The concept of the chronotope of narrative art has been theoretically conceptualised by Mikhail Bakhtin, in which time and space are thrown together. Instead of time and space being two distinct items, Bakhtin introduces the concepts of their interdependence on one another in forming meaning. Chronotopes are those centres of the narrative events, those units of thought by which the characters get to know the world. They not only provide physical space or historical position but also a way of existence and consciousness (Bakhtin, 1981). Generally, in migration stories such as *A State of Freedom*, the role of chronotopes in displaying the unceasing fluctuation of identity and tension between the traditions and unstable modernities is crucial. The movements have their own chronotopic logic, which is manifested in the form of roads and train trips. The spaces are transformed into areas where time seems to be in a compressed state, suspended state, or accelerated state, as well as areas where identities are acquired (Bemong et al., 2010).

The metaphorical contrast between the foreyard and the junkyard is one of the interpretive frames of this paper, which can be interpreted metaphorically as a twofold chronotope with the two realities in India. Although Mukherjee does not directly mention this, these words describe the dynamics of visibility and invisibility symbolically in which the novel is laid out. The foreyard is a manifestation of a chronotope of the visible present: urban apartments, gated complexes, restaurants, malls, and other environments that are linked to aspiration, security, and consumption. The time of the characters who live in this chronotope, like the academically bright NRI coming back to India, is based on the temporality of progress, planning, and self-creation. Time is linear, goal-orientated and future-orientated. In comparison, the junkyard is an allegory of the concealed or abandoned pasts, the esoteric past of rural pauperdom, displacement, generational instability, and non-memorial. The characters, such as Lakshman, the street performer who wants to have a better life, and Milly, the girl who leaves a tribal village to become a domestic worker, exist on the margins of the story and the society. Their times are cyclical, repetitive, and repressed by structural limitations (Chakravorty, 2014).

A State of Freedom is written in five different yet loosely linked stories, each of which revolves around another character. This disintegration is not only stylistic but entirely chronotopic: every story fragment constructs its temporal-spatial realm, its timescale, and its social pace. The discontinuous form gives the sense of the fragmented Indian social environment, where some have upward mobility, and many are immobile or have a downward trajectory. This format, according to a recent interpretation of the subaltern histories in the novel, recreates the discontinuous, fragmented form of subaltern history where oppressed life does not easily fit into the narratives imposed by elites. It corresponds with an expanded Bakhtinian notion in which the heterogeneity of postcolonial times is underlined by the chronotopic fragmentation, an alternative to the hegemonic narrative of economic growth.

The village in the novel acts as a chronotope carrying historical weight, continuity, and entrapment. Its time beat seems to be immobile, defined by the poverty of the generations and low economic prospects. Apartments in the urban areas provide comfort, aspiration, and safety chronotope. They incorporate the spatial logic of modernity: locked up, sterile, surveilled, and orderly. The construction site may be the most dynamic and violent chronotope in the novel. It combines physical threat, financial exposure, and time incompleteness. The employees reside in temporary structures, and their lives are bound by exploitative shifts of labour. Roads, highways, and journeys represent movement with no destination. Such travels synthesize the material and symbolic displacement; the road is a representation of hope, fear, vulnerability, and change (Shah & Lerche, 2018; Pattenden, 2017).

The most dominant, disturbing chronotope in *A State of Freedom* is perhaps that of garbage itself, as a material and symbolic substance that disintegrates the boundary between foreyard and junkyard and demonstrates their deadly dependency. In the second story, made by one unnamed narrator, one sees the following: "And rubble, garbage everywhere inseparable with the people and the animals and the buildings and the stores (p 104)". Such a sentence is a chronotopic compression in its dramatic, devastating manner: space (the Indian city) and time (the present of neoliberalism) are merged into one image of indistinguishability. The same refuse submerges the human bodies, the bodies of animals, the consumer objects, and the architecture. Garbage does not happen accidentally or simply come into existence as a description, but, as Mrinalini Chakravorty (2014) considers a chronotope of ruination, it is the location where the past does not exist as a heritage but gets expelled as garbage and refuses to fade away. Garbage is the final entrance gateway- the porous borderline-between the visible, sanitised foreyard whose inhabitants are the elite and the junkyard that is hidden, which junkyard the foreyard is constructed on. The fact that trash cannot be separated out of humans and animals and structures and shops is dramatised by the inhuman symbiotic relationship between the shining malls and apartments of the rich and the rubbish lives and materials they are trying to get away from. Quite on the contrary, the junkyard is the ontological base of the foreyard per se. This can be thought of as an echo of the subaltern critique of neoliberal urbanisation, in which waste is used to represent the caste-tainted expulsion of the excluded.

The worst manifestation of the logic of time in the junkyard lies in the life of the dispossessed. The time is perceived as pure by Lakshman, who tries to escape the poverty of village life by training a dancing bear, as he must destroy the routine: all his life turns into the repetition of a few things, but now in different places (p 105). In this Mukherjee plays out what Bakhtin, in his theory of the idyll and folkloric time, refers to as the cyclical, which must be biographical temporality time without event, without future, without development. However, it is not a pastoral cycle; it is the mechanical repetition that was brought about by the force of what Saskia Sassen (2014) entitles systemic expulsion, the expulsion out of land,

livelihood, and history. Their destinies are never truly spatial mobility but a hideous parody of the same: the same exploitation repeated tens of thousands of times along highways and inner-city streets. Once exalted in Western literature as a place of freedom and self-discovery, the road, in India, is a place of precarious stasis, in a circular form, of the suspended (Pattenden, 2017). This is the experience of the time of those having been condemned to the junkyard; this time becomes a kind of residual motley waste of the past, a leftover, refuse, like the trash about them. This statement reminds us of the subaltern life as disorganised and discontinuous, being caught in the coercive modernity without a revolutionary discontinuity.

It is against this flattening of time that there are recurring instances of subjective insurrection through the novel. In the third story, Milly, a domestic worker, a battered woman, and a migrant from one of the tribal villages, hears her employers dismiss her: ‘The lives of people like us are nothing. Yes, perhaps her life can be nothing to others, but to her? Wasn’t it something to her? Everything?’ (p 173). This interior monologue is a very brief, yet volcanic experience of Bakhtinian synchronicity, the clash of two chronotopes that cannot be measured in the same way in the same physical space (the apartment of the middle class). The linear, cumulative time (progress, development, aspiration) of the foreyard needs the reduction of some lives to nothing ontologically to justify itself. The biographical time, memory, and irreducible singularity that Milly compromises are reintroduced to a space that structurally rejects them when Milly makes her counter-assertion, saying that her life is everything to her. In his terms used by Bakhtin, it is a moment of eventness (sobytie): the junkyard unexpectedly swerves into the foreyard, compelling an ethical collision, however momentary and not recognised by the employers. This scene corresponds to Spivak’s interrogation of subaltern talk, in which mediated voices such as Milly reclaim the power of the interstices, which challenges the erasure of elites.

There is a complete political force to the chronotopic strategy by Mukherjee, which is seen through these three quotations. ‘Garbage’ is not an empty phrase, but the material element with the help of which the past is thrown away but still sticks to the present. The time of the expelled is that of repetitive cyclical lived time. And the rebellious insistence that presumably nothing life can do and every act is the greatest chronotopic job that the novel does: it terms space-time temporarily in such a way that the extinguished may be perceived, heard, and remembered. Finally, the junkyard does not completely stand behind the foreyard or under the fore-yard; it is within it, and it cannot be separated, as is the rubbish that adheres to people, animals, structures, and stores. By employing such constellations, not only does *A State of Freedom* reveal how appalling marginalisation can be, but it also demonstrates the things that can be recognised and rescued, applying the work of Bakhtin to the temporalities of neoliberal India in shatters.

Conclusion:

Through its fragmented structure, shifting perspectives, and rich spatial–temporal configurations, *A State of Freedom* enacts a chronotopic examination of displacement in modern India. The metaphors used in the novel, the foreyard and junkyard, bring us to light the moral and new structural framework of a society based upon inverse presence and destruction. The imbalance in mobility and modernity is brought out in chronotopes of villages, apartments, construction sites, journeys and settlements. The notion of Bakhtin enables us to observe that displacement is not merely spatial, but it is also quite temporal. Participants of the foreyard have linear development, whereas those shifted to the junkyard have cyclical or suspended time. But their worlds are connected to each other, rely on each other and bring each other into existence. After all, the novel by Mukherjee represents an in-depth reflection on the dichotomous and disjointed chronotopes that characterizes modern-day India. It unveils how moments of synchronicity, short collisions of time worlds, can be used to clarify both the violent nature of the structure behind the inability to move to a new place and the new ability to recuperate, remember, and acknowledge.

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