



Locating the “uncanny” in Neel Mukherjee’s *A Life Apart*

Mr. Niku Chetia

Assistant Professor,

Department of English,

Rangapara College (Autonomous).

nikuchetia99@gmail.com

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Abstract:

Neel Mukherjee’s *A Life Apart* is a novel about Ritwik’s transnational transit from Calcutta to London. He migrates to the West, laden with the hope that it would detach and liberate him from the childhood trauma and problems of his life in Calcutta. The paper attempts to investigate how childhood trauma remains inextricably tethered to his new space in the First World nation. Taking the theoretical framework of Homi Bhabha’s “unhomeliness” and Sigmund Freud’s “uncanny” as the entry point, the paper locates the uncanny in the character’s sheer incomprehensibility of his surroundings and situations that unfold through a close reading of the text. The paper endeavours to locate the uncanny in the fictional writing of Ritwik, which possesses an uncanny isomorphism with his life in England.

Keywords: uncanny, unhomeliness, trauma, immigration, identity.

Introduction

The novel *A Life Apart* by Neel Mukherjee was originally published as *Past Continuous*. Often categorised as a postcolonial and diasporic fiction, the novel exquisitely portrays the life of immigrants dealing with the issues of assimilation. Trauma is another pertinent aspect dealt with in the novel through the character of Ritwik Ghosh. The protagonist faces cultural displacement after moving to a First World nation. However, the novel subverts the idea that transitional transit is always about liberation. The novel *A Life Apart* essentially delineates the narrative of a homosexual protagonist named Ritwik, who departs from his home in Calcutta to venture into Cambridge University and subsequently into London. Throughout this journey, he experiences an affinity for the underworld and develops a sexual addiction, engaging in public solicitation in London. While residing in London, Ritwik recalls the abuse he endured from his mother during childhood and uncovers parallel experiences of trauma from his friend Sarah. At a crucial juncture in the narrative, Ritwik is framed as a rebel who refuses to perform *mukhagni*, the traditional Hindu funerary ritual, for his father.

As postcolonial literature writes back to the colonial nation, the novel is characterised by the literary technique of metafiction. Ritwik revives a minor character from Rabindranath Tagore’s novel, *The Home and The World*, and looks into the partition of Bengal from the perspective of an English woman who is trapped under the crossfire of anti-colonial ideology and the colonial ideology. Ritwik’s intertextual act of writing a novel about a British woman named Miss Gilby introduces further layers of complexity to the text. Miss Gilby’s efforts to instruct a Bengali woman, Bimala, in piano and English prior to Indian independence juxtapose the displacement in Ritwik’s own life. Miss Gilby struggles to negotiate with the anti-colonial mindset of Mr Nikhilesh Roy Chowdhury and finds herself alienated from the

emerging Indian identity. Nevertheless, the physical migration from India to London never engenders a psychological detachment from his origins. Ritwik’s impetus for migration stems from the illusory belief that geographic relocation would completely exorcise his childhood trauma and existential crises.

Taking Ritwik’s psychological distress into consideration, this paper argues that Ritwik’s life is uncanny. His life aligns with the character of Coppélius who remains enigmatic in E.T.A. Hoffmann's “Sandman” exemplified by Freud. It endeavours to unearth elements in the story that are seemingly analogous to the character of Coppélius in Ritwik’s life. The paper contends that Ritwik ends up in a state of repetition compulsion, a prominent hallmark of the uncanny, during his stay in London, wherein he grapples with poverty and revisits his childhood trauma. It further argues that the unhomeliness, as conceptualised by Bhabha, is visible throughout the novel.

Concept of Uncanny- Freud

The concept of the “uncanny” originates from the psychoanalytic writings of Sigmund Freud. In his seminal 1919 essay titled "The Uncanny," Freud conducts a historical and etymological analysis of the German word *unheimlich*, which translates to "uncanny" in English. He conceptualises the uncanny not merely as that which is dreaded or feared, but specifically as a phenomenon that elicits profound anxiety. The term *unheimlich* is rooted in the German language, where its baseline counter-term, *heimlich*, initially encompassed two divergent meanings: one signifying that which is familiar or homelike, and the other denoting that which is concealed or secret. These contradictory definitions ultimately converged, rendering *unheimlich* a deeply ambivalent concept. Consequently, *unheimlich* manifests as a psychological state wherein something that should remain hidden and private is unexpectedly

revealed, making the familiar suddenly appear dangerous, incomprehensible, and strange (Svenaeus 240).

Uncanny- Ritwik and Coppelius

Ritwik’s trajectory parallels that of Nathaniel, a student in E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story "The Sandman," which Sigmund Freud famously analyses in his essay. Freud’s postulation of the uncanny, exemplified by the demonic lawyer Coppelius, stems from the terrifying childhood tales told to Nathaniel about the Sandman, a mythical figure who gouges out children's eyes. This ubiquitous fear of ocular deprivation is precisely what renders the character of Coppelius uncanny. Crucially, while Nathaniel falls in love with Olympia, an automated doll, Freud argues that this inanimate object is not the primary source of the uncanny in the narrative. Similarly, Ritwik’s life is inflected by trauma and tragedy, driven by his pervasive dread of abuse and destitution. This psychological distress is further augmented by textual references to the oppressive climate of Calcutta, which acts as a source of physical and existential discomfort.

Ritwik’s life in London is essentially uncanny. His high hopes of material gain, a life of comfort and alienation from a traumatic space are illusory as he faces socio-economic disillusionment in London. The incomprehensible reality generates a cognitive dissonance and nurtures an epistemic uncertainty of whether life in London is actually better than life in Calcutta. This brings us to the analysis of “uncanny” in the story “The Sandman”, where the doppelganger effect prompts Coppelius’ assumption of three different identities i.e. the Sandman, the lawyer and the optician blurs the distinction between the characters and confuses his understanding of whether they are the same or different entities. In the end, the uncanny does emerge from a feeling of uncertainty where the reality is not comprehensible at first sight.

Repetition Compulsion

Another aspect of the uncanny is the return to the same situation repetitively and involuntarily. This involuntary repetition, Freud explains, has the power to overrule the pleasure principle. *Repetition compulsion* occurs when repetition is not in control. Freud elucidates this through an uncanny experience in one of his visits to a small town in Italy, where he finds himself at an undesired place again and again. The involuntary return to the street brings a feeling of uneasiness and uncanniness; a situation similar to what Ritwik faces in the novel. He unknowingly falls into the same troubles which he faces in India. Initially he thought that he could dispense with poverty in England, but in reality he faces a severe crunch of money for which he engages in prostitution. Ritwik’s act of writing the novel is a repetition compulsion and has an uncanny isomorphism with his life in England. The fictional writing involuntarily mirrors his own troublesome life. The trajectory of Miss Gilby’s life in pre-independence India and her engagement with the Indian society is after all an imaginary recreation of Ritwik’s mind. Although he wants to dispense with the Indian setting, he ends up writing about Zamindars, the parties of pre-independence era, *andarmahal*, and the independence movement. Ritwik never fully detaches himself from what he despises. The character Gilby witnesses the Swadeshi movement from close quarters and is cognizant of the existence of hatred towards white people. Nevertheless, she continues her stay in India, trying to execute her duties. Gilby becomes “a stranger in a family of strangers” (Mukherjee 362). This revelation is succeeded by an attack on Gilby by the supporters of the independence movement. Prima facie, the text suggests Gilby had no ostensible motive to disrupt the movement or render it inert. Ritwik’s trajectory has a striking convergence with Gilby’s life. Being an outsider living in London, Ritwik does not express any nefarious objective, yet he is later attacked and killed. Psychologically, Ritwik revisits the underlying context which makes him an outsider in the foreign land.

The uncanny isomorphism is also structured through Anne's dementia and Ritwik's manuscript. Ritwik wants to flee from his past geographically by moving to London and writing his manuscript. However, the story in Ritwik's manuscript and the flashes of memory of Anne are isomorphic. This isomorphism emerges from the colonial haunting which Gilby and Cameron experience. The physical space of Anne and his home in Calcutta is isomorphic. The former is a dusty space which Ritwik never fancied when he left India and the latter is a claustrophobic space filled with trauma. Ritwik experiences the former space unexpectedly in London and relives the past, which makes it essentially uncanny.

The novel portrays the traumatic childhood of Ritwik. Trauma has a strong relation with the uncanny. The uncanny emerges out of repressed emotions and experiences. These surface into the consciousness where they experience the strangely familiar aspects of the past. Freud's analysis, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, explicates his fascination with the game played by his grandson called “fort-da” where a child throws a toy to a place where he cannot see it and eventually pulls it back again joyfully. According to Freud, this game is played by the child to come to terms with the loss/absence of the mother who has left the child alone. However, Freud's fascination on watching the boy play is a result of the uncanny, which may have stemmed out of a feeling of loss and homelessness experienced very early in his life (Svenaeus 249). The uncanny manifests itself when the child's game of the mother departing becomes reality in life upon the death of the mother. The coincidence itself becomes uncanny as the resemblance of the situation to the early childhood gameplay coincides.

Unhomeliness and *A Life Apart*

Homi Bhabha in his essay, “The World and The Home” uses Freud's concept of the uncanny to explain the postcolonial condition. Ritwik lives in a postcolonial world as he

migrates to London for a better life. Bhabha states that the two terms “homelessness” and “unhomely” have different meanings; the former being devoid of a home and the latter referring to a space where the private and the public spheres become a part of each other. Freud's uncanny can be located in the psyche of the characters. The concept of unhomeliness, by Bhabha, is the manifestation of the uncanny in the socio-political sphere. Unhomeliness is not homelessness, and consequently, it indicates the position of a character who feels strange due to the trauma inflicted by historical traumas. Factors such as racism, colonialism, displacement places the character in a state of unhomeliness. There is a structural collapse of the personal space and the public space.

In postcolonial displacement, there emerges a confusion between the borders of home and the world. Bhabha says:

The home does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart. The unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the home, the home-in-the-world. (Bhabha 141)

The apt reference to Henry James's character of Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*, being trapped in an abusive marriage, where she is metaphorically incarcerated in her own domestic sphere facilitates to analyse the life of Ritwik where his life in Calcutta is governed by violence. Ritwik's life after his immigration to England does not metamorphose into his expectations. Rather, it marks a displacement where he is caught under the currents of illegal immigration and sex work. Ritwik lives in London illegally in a hostile world and transacts his body for financial security. His private home is constantly exposed to the harsh reality of public life marked by illegality and exploitation. Similarly Ritwik's fictional character Miss Gilby's private space provided by Nikhilesh Roy Chowdhury is intruded by the public furore of the Swadeshi Movement.

Psychologically, the memory of Anne Cameron, the woman whom Ritwik takes care of in England and in whose home he resides, hauntingly alludes to the uncanny. She has dementia and is unable to recall names, but her mind is constantly invaded by the memories of her past, particularly the imperial times. As she involuntarily remembers snippets of her past, the boundary between home and the world gets blurred. The physical space of Anne is the site of uncanny. As uncanny makes the private space merge with the public, Anne's domestic space is merged with the foreign. Dementia makes her remember her past and connections with India. As a birdwatcher, she perceives "Quetzals" at the horse chestnut tree (Mukherjee 232). Certain memories of the past are meant to remain hidden. However, dementia makes the return of the repressed memories. The colonial India in which Anne passed her early phases of life is narrated in front of Ritwik, who actually wants to forget. This involuntarily makes him remember his connections with India. The familiar home at 37 Ganymede Road appears strange to Anne Cameron as the home reverberates with the past. Ritwik appears shocked to know that Cameron remembers India despite her dementia:

What on earth was she saying? She was in India? When? Why wait for four months and then mention it? (Mukherjee 229)

Homi Bhabha specifically places the transformation of Bimala, portrayed in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and The World*, as a site of the unhomely. Along with a reference to Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Tony Morrison's *Beloved*, the venturing out of Bimala from the secluded women's quarters, *andarmahal*, and from the zenana to the world of public affairs, where Swadeshi Movement sets Bengal ablaze is essentially a site of the uncanny. Neel Mukherjee's creation of a character like Ritwik who writes fiction and creates a parallel narrative of the life of Bimala is a deliberate attempt at representation of the uncanny.

Historical events are rendered visible through a temporal distancing or lag (Bhabha 143). Homi Bhabha distances himself from the Kantian aesthetic and stresses the importance of distancing in fictional historical representation. The historical events, the traumatic ones or the postcolonial condition which is problematic, needs revisiting through a temporary distancing. Neel Mukherjee executes this through the creation of a lag between the life of Ritwik in London and the fictional narrative he writes. The narrative centering around Miss Gilby looks back at the early 20th century when the Swadeshi movement was at the helm. As Ritwik’s life in London is essentially uncanny, the disturbing reality in London doesn’t resolve his trauma. There is no resolve when Ritwik writes the story; rather it is an exposition of the wounds of colonialism.

Bhabha says:

The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence. (Bhabha 144)

The personal experiences which can be categorised as uncanny often relate to a larger political history. Bhabha explicates this through Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, where the killing of Sethe’s daughter signifies the haunting black deaths and slavery. Essentially, Sethe is herself a victim of social death; hence, the trauma seen as personal and private is intertwined with the collective history of slavery. Similarly, Ritwik’s repressed sexuality and financial strain in England are inextricably related to the larger problem of homophobia and immigration.

The novel delineates two pertinent places: Calcutta and London, which hold different meanings in the protagonist’s mind. Ritwik deplores what Calcutta has mutated into, particularly the cityscape with which he is utterly disappointed. Ritwik’s desire to move out

of the place may have been motivated by the spatial imaginary. A segment of the literature posits Calcutta as an erstwhile opulent British colony. Ritwik’s perception of a place that offers a historical richness, vibrant culture, and favourable ground for wishes to be fulfilled as unimpressive is anomalous. Claude Levi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* wishes he could travel to Calcutta during the days of the British Raj. He complains about the filth, chaos and congestion in the city. Pathologised depiction of Calcutta invariably generates a preconceived notion in people’s minds. Though Ritwik’s perception is visibly a product of his own mind, such deficit-based narratives regarding Calcutta are not uncommon. He never fully understands Calcutta, and this gives rise to an illusory idea of an ideal London. Ritwik vehemently despises the monsoon in Calcutta and the glorification by the educational apparatus. In Chapter One, Ritwik is reportedly quite stubborn regarding the notions of the idealised monsoon represented in the textbooks and culture. His attention is veered towards the issues of waterlogging that swallows streets, and also the open drains that invariably overflow during the season. In chapter 6, he tells his friend Gavin that he does not want to live in squalor. He doesn’t want to be like his father and desires a different life. He complains about the sticky monsoons, the drying heat of summer, the insects, the filth and mud of Calcutta streets, the power cuts, and the chronic water shortages (Mukherjee 186). This perception of Ritwik gives a line of reasoning that advances towards how he thinks London would eventually eliminate his miseries.

The trajectory of Ritwik’s imagination of Kolkata emerges from his personal experiences, as described in the initial narrative arc. When his mother suffers from a stroke, which eventually proves to be fatal, Ritwik finds no ambulances in Calcutta. There are no emergency numbers to dial for help. The inconveniences trouble Ritwik, and as he moves towards the hospital with his mother in the city, the experience of the city with its bumpy roads, tram tracks, and convoluted ride makes him uncomfortable. His constant complaints

about no demarcated space for pedestrians and traffic, a sea of people flooding the streets with bicycles, autorickshaws, lorries, and street dogs creating chaos, is a nuisance and chaotic for Ritwik. During his childhood, he slowly developed a fascination for the outside world. Ritwik and his brother Aritra fantasise about Venice and what it would be like. However, Ritwik’s life in London was not what he expected. He had to live illegally without a legal visa and engage in prostitution to earn some money.

Ritwik expected London to provide him a life of comfort which Calcutta could not. He was poor as a child and he had to wear worn out clothes and ill fitting school shoes. His relatives, particularly his uncle, were poor as well. He remembers his mother threatening to leave him at his uncle’s place, where he would get only salt and rice to eat. The large family survived through non-linear livelihood maintenance. The narrator says:

Since the death of Ritwik’s grandfather, his grandmother and uncles and aunt had lived from hand to mouth, sometimes on the charity of neighbours and distant relatives, at the other times on meagre handouts and soft loans begged from people. Ritwik’s father could not have moved in at a more opportune moment. It was an extended family often now, living in a three-bedroom flat, with one tiny kitchen, an equally small bathroom, a balcony fronting the street, and a larger room, which was really no room, in the true sense, only an open space on to which all the bedrooms opened. (Mukherjee 102)

When Ritwik is accommodated on 37 Ganymede Road to look after an elderly lady named Anne Cameron, that he did not achieve his desired life in London is readily discernible. The place of Anne Cameron is a fractured spatial imaginary. Moving from the filth of Calcutta, he finds himself in a room of dirt. Anne Cameron’s house is a detached house on a terrace, with a glass roof, smeared and dimmer than the wall rooms. There is dust all around the sofa covers, bookshelves, mantel piece, and photographs. The narrator says:

Dust is slowly invading and taking over the entire place. It is like being in a first-world version of the flat he left behind in Grange Road for a better life, a place where dirt is slowly edging out humans from their space. (Mukherjee 198)

In chapter four, when Ritwik is in London, he thinks he has escaped from the clutches of his mother's abuse. However, when he talks to Sarah, who joins the National Society for The Prevention of Cruelty to Children, he enters a state of epistemic enquiry. He recalls the problem of child labour prevalent in India, and undergoes cognitive restructuring of what domestic abuse entails. When Sarah informs about abuse enveloping the issues of parents physically and sexually abusing children, Ritwik's haven of England is flooded with memories of the past. He remembers the core of cracks, and neat sharp sounds on his bare arms, legs, thighs, where he was hit by his mother. He remembers his mother dragging him out of the place, and hitting the concrete floor. The abuse went so far that he was bleeding. This makes England unhomely for Ritwik.

In stark contrast to Calcutta, at the end of the novel, when he encounters a group of men in England, the cityscape is no different. He is approached by unknown men in a dark street, in front of an abandoned warehouse with no street lights around. Ritwik always wanted to get away from the dark streets of Calcutta, but sadly finds himself in trouble in England. The cityscape was essentially incomprehensible to him, which made it uncanny. Without his knowledge, he was living as an outsider bereft of any identity. This is the reason why he was verbally abused prior to his physical assault for his displaced identity.

The sheer incomprehensibility of the dangerous situation during the Swadeshi Movement for Miss Gilby and the racial prejudice against Ritwik in England makes it uncanny. Akin to Ritwik, Miss Gilby is an outsider during colonial times. Despite being a mentor to Bimala, she feels the surge of nationalism and becomes a victim of abuse. Ritwik

endeavours to conform to British society, but unknowingly fails to do so, leading to his death. Just like Miss Gilby, who feels lonely, Ritwik is isolated in England. Interestingly, there is a parallel between Miss Gilby’s assault and Ritwik’s final assault. Miss Gilby hears the chant of *bande mataram, bande mataram* similar to the racial slurs Ritwik hears before his death (Mukherjee 364).

Conclusion

Throughout the novel, Ritwik’s psychological state is one of unhomeliness. He is unable to comprehend reality after living illegally in England. His delusion of detachment from childhood trauma and poverty after moving to England makes his life uncanny. The novel never fails to portray the uncanny through the minor characters, such as Anne Cameron. The metafiction further helps to solidify the evidence of the uncanny located in the novel.

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