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Organized Peasant Resistance in Fiction: *The Sword and The Sickle* and *The Lives of Others*

Angela Eyre

- 1 Mulk Raj Anand's novel *The Sword and The Sickle* tells the story of the rise of a peasant movement in Oudh in U.P. in 1920–21. It was published in 1942 in London while Anand was living in Britain and campaigning for India to be given independence. Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* was published in Delhi, London and New York in 2014 and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize the same year. The Naxalite insurgency in Bengal in 1967–1970 forms one of its two core narratives. Both novels, therefore, brought a regional Indian peasant agitation to an English-speaking metropolitan readership. Through their literary strategies, both texts connect the local situation to broader national and international influences and also relate a story set in the past to the present in which they were written and published. These multiple layers, not surprisingly, mean that the question of “who speaks for the village?” is mediated by the reader and the framework they apply.
- 2 This article considers reviews of the novels written just after publication to examine the way in which they were sometimes read through their international frames; the relationship between colonial India and Britain in the case of *The Sword and The Sickle* and discourses around terrorism in the case of *The Lives of Others*. These readings obscured some aspects of the peasant narratives and this article aims to make these more visible. I use comparison as a critical approach to the novels and combine this with an examination of the historical context in order to focus on the representation of the local economic and political problems faced by the peasants. This article views these novels as part of a line of Indian fiction about agrarian problems, which I have explored in more detail elsewhere (Eyre 2005). While the problems represented in this line of fiction vary across regions (depending on the system of land tenure) and the status of the peasant (tenant-farmer, sharecropper, landless laborer and so on) debt, insecurity of tenure and exploitation by landlords are common and the novels raise questions about what can be done to improve

conditions. In doing so they draw on discourses which Meenakshi Mukherjee has identified as being part of the nationalist movement, including “Gandhian ideology” and those associated with leftist, terrorist, and revolutionary parties (2005:42–3). In agrarian narratives, these discourses have taken the form of the Gandhian ideal of landowners having a change of heart (as happens in the surprise ending of Renu’s *Maila anchal*) and “leftist” legislative reform such as the abolition of the zamindari system under Nehru’s first government (which forms part of the narrative of Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*). What distinguishes Anand and Mukherjee’s novels is that they depict historical, organized movements of rebellion (the founding of a *kisan sabha* and the spread of the Naxalite movement) and place these in relation to the international context. The mobilization of subalterns in rebellion presents specific challenges of literary representation and also of interpretation and these are explored in this article.

- 3 Recent scholarship on Anand has advanced our understanding of the way in which he was writing in multiple contexts (Bluemel 2004; Nasta 2012; Ranasinha 2010), while Tickell’s identification of “a three-way debate” in some of Anand’s short stories “between metropolitan left-liberalism, Gandhian subaltern politics and a more pointed critique of colonial state-terror and its revolutionary nationalist counterpart” (2013:217) provides a focus which can also be used to analyze the discourses in *The Sword and The Sickle*. I am indebted to these approaches and draw on them to examine the intersection of the multiple contexts within which peasant resistance is represented. Reviews of Mukherjee’s *The Lives of Others* did not place it within the long history of agrarian novels and the range of discourses outlined above, although some reviews related it to other recent “Naxalite” novels. By comparing these two novels, the distinctiveness of the peasants’ struggles is brought to the fore, and the fictionalized voices of those speaking for the peasants are heard a little more clearly.

- 4 *The Sword and the Sickle* is the third part of a trilogy featuring the protagonist Lalu Singh who is from a Punjabi peasant family. It makes use of the account found in Nehru’s *Autobiography* (1936) of a movement which included the founding of a *kisan sabha*, or farmers’ union (Cawasjee 1977:116). In his autobiography, Nehru emphasizes the way the peasants and Congress began to work together and the way in which Congress influenced the peasants:

Especially powerful was the influence of Congress in favor of peace, for the new creed of nonviolence was stressed wherever the Congress worker went...it did prevent the peasantry taking to violence. (P. 61)

Anand published his own non-fiction account of the movement in *Letters on India* (hereafter *Letters*). The significant differences between the two non-fiction versions on the one hand and *The Sword and The Sickle* on the other illuminate the strategies used in the novel.

- 5 Through its characters the novel debates various means of improving the conditions of peasants. Returning home from World War I, Lalu discovers his land has been sold off to the landlord and so he joins the *kisan sabha* movement in U.P. which is led by an erstwhile *zamindar* (landlord) who has become a peasant leader. A peasant, Sukhua, has been evicted from his land and another has died while doing *begar*, or forced labor. Lalu becomes involved, learns to give speeches at rallies, tries to interest Gandhi and Nehru in the problems of the peasants, and is present when the *kisan sabha* is founded and when a court case against a peasant is thrown out after the peasants demonstrate. This apparent triumph, however, turns to disaster at the end of the novel when the *zamindar* leaves the

peasants to go and plead with the authorities against his internment; the peasants follow and are shot and Lalu is imprisoned.

- 6 The first two chapters of the novel frame this narrative with the story of how Lalu, who fought for the British in the trenches, returns home expecting to receive a gift of land and a pension as a reward, but is dismissed without them. There are parallels with India's position in 1939 when it was declared a belligerent by the British without consultation and with only a promise of talks on its status after the war (Chandra 1989:448–49). The broken promise to Lalu, therefore, becomes a warning of what might happen after the end of the Second World War, and the plot of land not given to Lalu becomes a symbol of the land of India.
- 7 Some reviews of *The Sword and The Sickle* written at the time it was published mention the peasant agitation, but largely ignore the injustices which have led to it. Kate O'Brien in *The Spectator* was sympathetic to the peasants but saw moral weaknesses as the cause of their poverty:

We get a picture of desperate poverty and of its relation to...traditional spiritual states –pride, hopelessness, humour, rancor, laziness and mystical detachment. (1942:20)

The review in the *London Illustrated News* recognized economic exploitation but did not mention the link to imperialism:

The Oppressions are plain enough; the country folk are miserable beyond words, squeezed by the landlord and the money-lender, enslaved by debt, bullied and blackmailed by all the tyrants at every turn. (Kennedy 1942:562)

Edwin Muir in *The Listener* discussed how Lalu loses his land in the opening chapters, but passed over the lack of British reward for his services in the war:

Lal Singh returns to his native place at the end of the last war on being released from a German prison camp. He finds that his father's house and property have been sold up to satisfy a money-lender and he sets out for Oudh. (1942:602)¹

It is possible that reluctance to criticize Britain's rule of India during the war led reviewers to omit to mention imperialism's role in the novel.

- 8 To understand this further we need to look in more detail at Anand's position as a public intellectual, his demands for independence, and Britain's vulnerability during the war. Anand wrote *The Sword and The Sickle* between July 1940 and January 1941 (the dates are written underneath the last line of the novel). In March 1941 he declined to work on BBC propaganda broadcasts for India which encouraged participation in the British war effort. He refused because he questioned "the morality of a government which could ostensibly wage a war against fascism in Europe whilst imprisoning Congress leaders and restricting freedoms in India" (Nasta 2011:14) and was disillusioned with "the British government's evasion of the question of India's independence promised before the war" (Ranasinha 2010:65). By June 1941, however, as Anand states in *Letters* (1942), his perspective shifted after Russia joined with England in the war against Hitler (p. 6), while in January 1942 the threat to India itself increased as the Japanese reached its borders. So, in February 1942, Anand finally agreed to broadcast for the BBC alongside George Orwell (Nasta 2011:15). In early April 1942 Cripps' offer of new terms to India was rejected and shortly afterwards *The Sword and The Sickle* was published. Although Anand's position on helping the British in the war against fascism had changed, his position on independence had not and this is visible in some reactions to his new novel.

- 9 Shahani, reviewing it for the *Times Literary Supplement*, alludes to the link made in the novel between the agrarian problems and British involvement, but finds it regrettable in the context of the War:

What is really disagreeable, however, is the spirit of the novel; it tends to create bad blood between Indians and British, which is a bad thing at any time and a dangerous one *at this hour* [emphasis mine]. (1942:221)

The review ends with anxiety about the international situation at the time of publication: it is able to focus on this because of the way the novel links the local peasants' movement to imperialism and the narrative set in the past to the present. When George Orwell came to Anand's defense in *Horizon* in July 1942 he wrote:

The rest of the story deals mostly with the peasant movement and the beginnings of the Indian Communist Party...I notice that Mr. Anand has already got himself into trouble by what is wrongly described as his bitterness...though the ultimate objective is to get rid of British rule, it is almost forgotten among the weaknesses and internecine struggles of the revolutionaries themselves...while the world remains in anything like its present shape the central problem of India, its poverty is not soluble. (P. 217)

The story of the peasant struggle is here connected to "the beginnings of the Indian Communist Party" (there are communists in the novel, but the beginning of the party is not part of the story). Moreover, Orwell's prioritization sees the end of imperialism as the "ultimate objective" while the peasants' movement is of secondary importance and obscures that objective by causing it to be "almost forgotten". Orwell then turns to the present and the international situation:

Is it the case that the Indian anti-British intelligentsia actually wishes to see... Europe a Nazi concentration camp? No, that is not fair either: it is merely that the nationalism of defeated peoples is necessarily revengeful and short-sighted. (P. 218-19)

In this review, the struggle of the peasantry against the landlords is all but silenced by the national story of anti-imperialism and the international war against fascism.

- 10 Orwell's review was published in July, while Anand's first letter had been published in *Fortnightly* the previous month. The book of *Letters* followed shortly afterwards in September and contained seventeen more letters, including the one on the peasant movement. Comparing the different ways in which the narrative of the movement was mediated by the form of *Letters* and *The Sword and The Sickle* helps to clarify an issue which is raised by later critics. Critical appraisals of *The Sword and The Sickle* began to be published after Independence, when Britain's reliance on India during the war was no longer an issue, and they consider the peasant movement directly. Several critics, however, see the novel as confused in its handling of its material (Naik 1973; Mukherjee 2005; Gandhi 2003; Rajan quoted in Riemenschneider 2005). Cowasjee (1977) offers one of the most in-depth studies of the representation of the ideological strands which make up the movement and he argues that "it is not Anand who is confused; through Lalu he is showing the confusion in the minds of the Indian people" (p. 124). Cowasjee does not, however, examine the differences between versions of the movement in *Letters* and *The Sword and The Sickle*.
- 11 The account in *Letters* is succinct and clear:
- About 1918 a man called Ram Chandra...began to organize the peasants in Oudh into Peasant Unions on the basis of various demands such as restriction of evictions, restriction of forced labor, abolition of fines and illegal exactions. (Anand 1942:60)

It stresses the peacefulness of the peasants in line with the ideology of the nationalist leaders: “*The peasants had to take a vow that they would remain peaceful, [my emphasis] that they would not pay illegal exactions*” (p. 60). It also highlights the violent reaction of the Government:

Of course, the Government and the landlords were perturbed at this awakening among the peasants...On January 7, 1921, the police opened fire on a crowd of peasants at Munshigang in Rai Barelli. (P. 60)

The account continues beyond the police firing to show that the movement had some success:

Peasant Unions forced the Government to reconsider rent-revenue legislation. Evictions by notice were stopped, and a new law was promulgated granting tenure for life to the peasants. The reason for this climb-down on the part of the bureaucracy was its fear that the peasants would be affected by Gandhi’s non-co-operation movement. (P. 60–61)

In *Letters*, therefore, there is no conflict between the methods of non-violent Gandhian change, legislative change and the actions of peasants: the peasants adhere to Gandhi’s peaceful means while the British fear of the non-co-operation movement helps to secure legislative change for the peasants. It is possible that Anand considered the presentation of a relatively harmonious relationship between peasants and national leadership—a united front—necessary to support the stated aim of *Letters* which was to convince British readers of the case for India to be given independence in the middle of the war.

- 12 *The Sword and The Sickle*, on the other hand, differentiates between the interests of the nationalist leadership and the peasants and creates a distinct space for peasant concerns. In doing so it might be considered more radical in its representation of the relationship between the peasants and the nationalist leadership than the shorter, non-fiction version in *Letters*. Bluemel (2004), relating Anand’s writing in the 1940s to the literary context of Bloomsbury and British left wing circles, argues that the “revolutionary argument” of Anand’s novels is constrained in a way that his non-fiction is not and that the novels’ “ability to challenge the norms of dominant, hierarchical English and Indian cultures in the interests of promoting more egalitarian social relations” is partly circumscribed by Anand’s use of Modernist techniques in them (p. 81). While I agree with much of Bluemel’s argument about *The Sword and The Sickle*, I consider the representation of a distinct peasant struggle to be an exception to it.
- 13 *The Sword and The Sickle* includes discourses which debate the ideologies of change through legislation and non-violent resistance. The novel appears to be arguing directly with Nehru. In his autobiography Nehru comments, “[T]he Indian *kisans* have little staying power, little energy to resist for long” (1942:64). Lalu questions this statement using Nehru’s own vocabulary: “[T]here seemed to be a strong enough resistance, the power for ceaseless activity even through dire agony and suffering. Who said that they had no staying power?” (Anand 1942:200). No character in the novel has made this comment about “staying power,” so the question seems to be directed out beyond the covers of the novel at the nationalist leadership.
- 14 It also represents the peasants as having separate desires to Congress, which wanted the peasants’ help to achieve *its* demands, but would not back their economic demands or their fight against the *zamindars* (Kumar 2011:46). The first way in which the novel puts distance between the peasants and nationalist discourse is through the absence of legislative progress. *The Sword and The Sickle*, unlike *Letters*, omits to record the Oudh movement’s success in giving rise to new legislation. Nehru, in his autobiography, records

that the British legislation which came in the wake of the movement “sounded attractive to [the peasant] but as he found out subsequently, his lot [was] in no way better” (1942:64). *The Sword and The Sickle* raises the question of whether legislation in an independent India will necessarily improve the lot of the peasant any more effectively. The communist character Sarshar warns Lalu that when the British go there will be “a mere change of names and labels!...I believe they will use the...same regulations by which they are put in gaols, to suppress those whom they don't like” (p. 316). This is a vision of the future which, in *The Lives of Others*, has come to pass.

- 15 *The Sword and The Sickle* introduces Gandhi into the narrative in an apparently invented episode, since according to the account in Nehru's *Autobiography* and in *Letters*, Gandhi was not part of the events in Oudh. The circumstances in which Gandhi is introduced place the involuntary suffering of the peasants against the ideology of non-violent resistance and provides a critique of Gandhi's ideology. A young peasant, Chandra, dies after refusing to carry out forced labor while ill. In order to bring the episode to the attention of Congress leaders, Chandra's corpse is carried to Allahabad, but the corpse is mauled by the landlord's dogs and one of the peasants is shot dead. The descriptions emphasize the grotesque physical nature of the violence:

Lalu bent down and strained to lever the dead bodies with trembling hands. A sharp odour of decomposing flesh shot up to his nostrils from Chandra's body, while his hands were smeared with blood from Nandu's neck. (P. 175)

Coming after this episode, the words given to Gandhi in conversation with Lalu seem incongruously abstract: “even if they were ill-treated, non-violent volunteers should be able to withstand the suffering and then exert their wills by passive disobedience” (p. 196). In addition, the character of Gandhi appears to deny the peasants their own concerns when he says, “not the airing of the grievances of the ryots but the invocation of revolution against the landlords is violence” (p. 196). Later on in the narrative, the *kisan sabha* is launched and the peasants take the vows discussed above. In a significant change to the version in *Letters*, there is no vow to be non-violent (p. 254).

- 16 Anand's representation of the peasant struggle does not align with the ideologies of the nationalist leaders and because of this the peasants themselves are given some agency and express ideas which are not completely in line with those of their leaders, interpreting them on their own terms. Anand thus addresses a phenomenon described fifty years later by Chatterjee (after Guha)(1995) in *The Nation and Its Fragments* that peasants made sense of “the hitherto unknown world of nationalist agitation” by translating “the discursive forms of modern bourgeois politics...into their own codes” (p. 160). The leaders have explained to the peasants the connection between the landlords and the British “sarkar” (government) which they aim to change in the future:

Behind the manager of the Rajgarh estate stands the Court of Wards, with the head of the District as the President? Don't you realize that behind the Deputy Collector... stands the Omnipotent Sarkar, the chief arbiter of our fates? (P. 215)

The peasants interpret this by flouting the law in the present – they refuse to pay for train tickets (for which they are later rebuked for indiscipline by the leaders). One of them tells the station master, “Go, go, the old days of Sarkari Raj have gone, now it is peasant Raj, exactly as it is in Roos [Russia]” (p. 305). On the one hand the naivety of the statement that British rule has already ended and that peasants rule in its place produces comedy, but on the other it demonstrates how radical the peasants are in their vision of a truly revolutionary change: “There will be no master and servant! So said that Razwi Sahib. They are going to put an end to this Sarkar” (p. 308–9). The peasants do not

instigate the rebellion, but they debate the ideas of its leaders and they do so in an idiom which the novel creates for them.

- 17 Secondly, violence as a possible means of action is discussed by the peasants: “When we have killed all the landlords, brother Lal Singh,’ asked Mithu, ‘shall we all become landlords in our own right?’” (p. 330–31). Lalu is said to be depressed at first by this sentiment, but then realizes that “through this campaign...the peasants seemed to be throwing off their abjectness and fear and speaking their minds freely” (p. 331). This has parallels in *The Lives of Others*. Through Lalu’s thoughts, Anand’s novel observes a process which was theorized decades later by Fanon in the anti-colonial context: “violence ... frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction” (2001:74). In the novel, the dialogue about violence creates peasant characters able to envisage their own future (as landlords) in a way which is independent of the ideology of their leaders. What adds to the sense of confusion around the issue of violence is that despite the talk, the only violent action by the peasants is the accidental death of one old peasant in a fight with another, and a slap given to a *zamindar* because he attacked Lalu’s wife. The dialogue and the events combined fall between Gandhi’s fears of violence on the one hand and the idea of a revolution in which Russia is mentioned as a model on the other. The fictional space created includes some tolerance of lawlessness and violence, or talk of violence, on the part of the peasantry, if that is the price for removing their passivity and enabling a truly mass movement.
- 18 The final image of the peasants in the novel, however, is as victims of violence when they run across the river towards Lalu, not heeding the soldiers and being shot at and killed. Unlike the account in *Letters*, the novel ends just after the shooting with the imprisonment of Lalu. The movement therefore ends in failure, though with Lalu vowing to carry on the struggle. Bluemel (2004) argues that none of Anand’s downtrodden heroes “is able to envision a less oppressive, post-imperial future for himself or India” (p. 71). In *The Sword and The Sickle*, Lalu’s vision of the future while he is in prison at the end of the novel is indeed vague: “Now is the time to change the world, to fight for Life and happiness” (Anand: 1942:366). It does not come to a conclusion about the various ideological strands in the novel. Although Lalu mentions revolution: “Revolution is a need of togetherness, Comrade, the need to curb malice among men, the need for men to stand together as brothers” (p. 367), this is not a specific program for a Russian-inspired revolution, given its description as something which aspires to “curb malice”.
- 19 There is some justification for critics’ comments about the novel being confusing. However, perhaps some of the sense of confusion arises because the peasants never completely align with any of the main ideological threads in the novel as some critics expected them to (Orwell elides the peasant movement with Communism, as mentioned above, and Leela Gandhi (2003) with Gandhism (p. 178)). Rather than looking for absolute ideological alignment, Tickell (2013) provides a way to think about strategies in some of Anand’s short stories which is also useful for analyzing *The Sword and The Sickle*. He states that “Anand’s literary project is to re-envisage the parameters of a liberal-humanism by conveying the desperate pressure of marginalization or injustice” (p. 227). *The Sword and The Sickle* can be read for the way its literary techniques “re-envisage the parameters” of colonial and nationalist discourse in the representation of local peasant demands and an embryonic movement finding its way.
- 20 *The Lives of Others* is a contrast to *The Sword and The Sickle* in the way it is structured. Anand’s long novel is divided into only eight chapters and the strands I have discussed

are not reflected in the layout of the text. *The Lives of Others*, on the other hand, highlights the relationship of past to present through structural means: a prologue, main section and epilogue. Its main section is divided into two threads: one tells the story of three generations of the bourgeois Ghosh family in Calcutta; the other consists of letters from Supratik, one of the grandsons in the Ghosh family, who has become involved with the “Naxalite” insurgency. In addition, its descriptions of the degradation of the peasant and the violence of revolutionary movements are plentiful and visceral. It was published in India as well as the UK and the US and was therefore aimed at a readership knowledgeable about the Naxalites as well as one which may not have previously heard of them.

- 21 While Anand’s novel opens up a space for peasant interests, Mukherjee’s strategy in the Naxalite thread of *The Lives of Others* is, in contrast, to narrow the options of the peasant to “nothing” in order to represent a social situation in which even the hope of change has gone:

In the past there was hunger in them, hunger and hope and end of hope and pain, and perhaps even a puzzled resentment, a kind of muted accusation, but now there is nothing, a slow, beyond-the-end nothing. (2014:2)

This “nothing” precipitates the action in the shocking prologue: a farmer, Nitai, who is starving, begs for help from his landlord but is turned away and returns home, weakened by hunger, apparently to starve inevitably and slowly to death. On reaching his family he kills his wife and children and then himself. The killings and suicide are vividly and brutally described. As with the description of Chandra’s death in *The Sword and The Sickle*, this opening seems to place the reader in extreme and exceptional territory which complicates moral questions. Nitai’s actions may fit the description of mercy killings, except that the terror of each of his victims as they try to evade him is also described, suggesting these are murders. The reader may ponder how culpable Nitai is for what he does, or whether the landlord is a killer. The death of Nitai primes the reader to be open to Supratik’s views that this is moral territory in which “normal” democratic solutions are not applicable.

- 22 This is the first of the literary strategies employed by Mukherjee to funnel the reader into a position in which they may be willing to consider whether, in certain conditions, revolutionary violence may be legitimate. It is a position which Malreddy identifies as part of the premise of Arundhati Roy’s (2012) non-fiction account of twenty-first century Naxalites, *Walking with the Comrades*. He argues that in her text, “the Naxalite insurgency is legitimized as a sovereign struggle for authentic nationalism by depicting the existing sovereignty as morally illegitimate” (2016:223). Shah (2018) too, in a review of non-fiction literature on the current Naxalite conflict writes of a work whose proposition is:

That under certain conditions, revolutionary violence is legitimate. The question, then, is whether revolutionary violence is justifiable in the contemporary Indian context (a question which requires an analysis of the Indian state) and, if so, whether the Naxal violence, in particular, is legitimate. (P. 265)

Mukherjee’s novel creates a fictional experience in which the reader may be prepared to suspend a liberal humanist condemnation of violence and consider it potentially legitimate.

- 23 This is done in a variety of ways. In the main part of the novel, Supratik and two comrades go to live in a village to work alongside the farmers and foment revolution. Supratik’s admiration for the peasants’ work in the fields is an important part of their depiction. In a novel in which bodies are often reduced to parts (eyeballs, finger nails,

blood or excrement), causing reactions of disgust or squeamishness in the reader, the bodies of the peasants as they work are at times, by contrast, presented as whole and attractive. While ploughing, Supratik finds the sun unbearable and notices his peasant host Kanu's body: "Where did this beaten physique, as if something carved in oily dark stone, come from if all he and his kind got to eat was chhatu and rice and puffed rice once, maybe twice, a day (Mukherjee 2014:194)?"

- 24 Supratik and his companions work alongside the villagers during successive seasons of ploughing, sowing and harvesting. The farmers' skill is emphasized by comparison with Supratik who is unable to manage ploughing on his own or to help transplant the rice seedlings (p. 217).

They advanced with the choreographed grace and rigour of dancers, leaving me behind, standing alone, the bad student who couldn't master the movements. How did they do it? ...Even that flinging backwards of the sheaves—even that required the mastery of a trick, a particular motion of the hand and wrist so that the sticks all fell with their bases aligned to the bases of the others already harvested. (P. 144–45)

It is central to the effect of the narrative that the peasants' labor is represented as skilled and based on knowledge beyond the grasp of the bourgeois student, and that the peasants are represented as hardworking and tough; like oily stone. The description of their work might lead the reader to expect that the fruits of the labor would produce enough food for them, but this is not the case. Supratik's letters make clear that this is not a time of drought; there is no natural reason for their hunger. Instead the letters create a picture of the exploitative economic system: "the bullocks belong to the landlord, as the seedlings, later, will too, so Kanu will get only 20 per cent of the crop produced" (p. 195). In an interview, Mukherjee (2014a) commented on the importance of work to the novel:

Work defines our loves and our place in the world. I wanted to depict this base, the triangulation of labor, capital and output/income, if you will...The lives of rice-farmers and labourers [rests on] selling their labor. (P. 3)

The language used in Supratik's letters represents him as ideologically driven in relation to the problems of farmers before he even leaves Calcutta and this may distance the reader from him. The descriptions of the farmers' work once he arrives in the village, on the other hand, are persuasive in showing that the problem is not with their work, but in the system of "output/income" and that any hope must therefore come from economic change.

- 25 Early on in *The Lives of Others*, however, all of the methods of effecting a change in the economic system which had given rise to hope in earlier novels about agrarian relations are excluded as possible sources of transformation. The end of British rule, which was a source of hope for the future in *The Sword and The Sickle*, has taken place and universal suffrage and the legislative abolition of the zamindari system, which generated some optimism in Vikram Seth's (1993) *A Suitable Boy* (set in 1951–52), has also occurred, but none of these have changed conditions for the farmers. Supratik's third letter records a farmer telling him:

We used to be told that the sahebs are sucking our blood dry, the sahebs are taking our land away...but the sahebs have long gone now, why are things still the same?... [T]he bloodsuckers are still there, their skin colour has changed. That's the only thing that has happened. (P. 98)

The same farmer says that universal suffrage has not helped, because the farmers vote for "whoever the village head man asks them to cast their vote for" (p. 97), nor has

legislation to abolish zamindari and strengthen tenancy rights because landlords exploit loopholes and use threats:

Under the Land Tenure Act, Mukunda was eligible for occupancy...[but] the jotedaar gave Mukunda a choice: if Mukunda wanted to register as a tenant, he would be evicted immediately.” (P. 98)

When asked about his novel in relation to *A Suitable Boy*, Mukherjee stated, “[I]t’s 16 years after the land reform acts and nothing has changed” (Adams and Mukherjee 2014). In *The Lives of Others*, it is not only hope for democratic and legislative change but also disillusionment with it which lies in the past, in the novel’s pre-history. The hopes which had been placed in independence, democracy and legislative change are presented as illusory and long gone: therefore, they are no longer available as a continued source of hope in this novel.

- 26 The reader’s willingness to contemplate revolutionary violence is furthered by the way violence is introduced carefully into the novel through reports of its transformative results in other villages: “class uprisings were happening throughout the country, peasants were snatching their land and crops back from landowners, shaking off the yokes of their slavery” (Mukherjee 2014:174). The plot is structured so that it is not until the tenth letter that the reader encounters a description of violence carried out by the protagonist, Supratik, and his comrades. By this point in the novel, the misery of the peasants has accumulated in the reader’s mind and the reader is perhaps less likely to be alienated from Supratik by the killing, particularly as it is presented as the way to prevent the deaths of a family who have been cheated out of their land, and are close to starvation. The landlord’s role in the family’s suffering is so direct that his murder can be seen partly as a sort of pre-emptive defense. The next murder carried out by Supratik is of the man responsible for Nitai’s death and, unexpectedly, the farmers join and help with it. Murder is given added legitimacy because, in Supratik’s account, it lifts some of the despair of the farmers: “They seem more...more daring, less cowed by the people who’ve been sucking their blood for centuries” (p. 305). In *The Sword and The Sickle*, the peasants merely talk of violence; here they enact it. In both novels, however, the expression of violence leads to the hope that the farmers are losing their passive fatalism. This hope is short-lived because the farmers with whom Supratik and his comrades have been staying are taken to jail while Supratik escapes to the forest. The third and final action in the village sees the violence escalate as the police are armed and the Naxalites use hand grenades. After the thirteenth letter, which is Supratik’s last, he returns to Calcutta and it becomes apparent that he is involved in campaigns to bomb the city.
- 27 The reader’s readiness to contemplate violence as legitimate in certain circumstances is thus complicated by the plot’s intensification of violence. If the reader feels that the bombing is illegitimate but the murder of the landlord was not, this may prompt them to consider the grounds on which they can make this sort of distinction. If, on the other hand, they consider that all killing is illegitimate, then they are effectively taking up a position which means that the tenant whom the landlord was causing to starve to death should have been allowed to die through slow violence. The legitimacy or illegitimacy of violence is therefore not a settled question.
- 28 Questions around hopes for change and the legitimacy of revolution are raised again in the epilogue, dated 2012. The protagonists are a group of peasant farmers and *Adivasi* (tribal people) who have been evicted from their land and who join a modern day Naxalite group. The epilogue repeats some of the language of the prologue; the leader

Sabita chooses “people who are nothing too, whose lives are nothing, who have nothing. No recourse to any form of redress or justice” (p. 501). This creates a bleak certainty that nothing has changed. The temporal structure of the novel and the repetitions in the prologue, main narrative and epilogue, embody the cyclical nature of the desperation and violence. The circles are ever-widening: the life of one peasant family in the prologue, several villages in the main section, and the whole of India in the epilogue. The historical narrative is connected, partly through the structure, to the present of the novel’s publication. Although the prologue is dated “May 1966,” it is told in the present tense. In addition, the manner of Nitai’s suicide, by drinking insecticide, has resonance for the twenty-first century, linking his agony to an “epidemic” of farmers committing suicide by taking pesticide in the last two decades. As a recent study suggests, this problem is partly caused by farmers being increasingly at “the mercy of global economics” (Kennedy 2014). In the epilogue farmers and *Adivasi* are subject to eviction because of mining; the beneficiaries of their eviction in the present decade are global mining companies. The relationship between the national and the global is questioned by Sabita. “Is it true of everywhere in the world that some people are just fodder. Or has their country taken a wrong turning. She does not know” (Mukherjee 2014:503). *The Lives of Others*, set 50 years ago, raises questions about the present and the effect of the liberalization of the Indian economy and globalization on Indian farmers and others who live off the land.

- 29 The majority of the reviews of *The Lives of Others* discussed the peasant narrative. However, as with reviews of *The Sword and The Sickle*, some more or less ignored it. For some reviewers it was the Calcutta-based bourgeois narrative which was the dominant one: Brinda Bose (2014) writes that it is “a trifle surprising to me that commentators are consistently reading *The Lives of Others* primarily as a tale about the ‘us’ of the novel, settling deep among its domestic paraphernalia while passing relatively lightly over the interjected epistolary sections that make up its vital ‘other’ half” (p. 8). This may be because, as several reviewers have commented, the bourgeois narrative is familiar from Indian novels in English and European domestic novels. Patrick Gale (2014) for instance, describes *The Lives of Others*’ depiction of a dynasty in terms of Galsworthy and Mann. (Gale argues for the importance of the Naxalite strand but does not analyze it in any detail). A.S. Byatt (2014) ignores the peasant narrative almost completely. It would seem that the attention of these reviewers is drawn to the domestic saga at the expense of the novel’s voicing of peasant grievances.
- 30 Discussions about the peasant half of the narrative tend to focus on the interpretation of *The Lives of Others*’ violence and in particular the novel’s ending and these will be the subject of the rest of this article. The violence, which has increased in severity over the duration of the novel, intensifies again in the final pages. Sabita uses a technique attributed to Supratik to remove fishplates in order to derail a train. There is little chance that sabotage will fail since groups are taking out many fishplates along the same stretch of track. The next train to come along the line, as we are told in the very last line of the novel, will be carrying approximately 1,500 people (p.505). While a focus on the violence is understandable given its prominence in the novel, it also obscures some parts of the novel’s representation of the peasant. Some articles expressed the view that while the novel does not shy away from representing the violence of Maoist killings, the epilogue, with its combination of sympathy for the revolutionary Sabita and the violence she is working to bring about, implicitly *endorses* violence in these exceptional circumstances

(Ghosh 2014; Wessels 2017). Shah (2018) argues that the ending depicts the Naxalites as “ritualistic killers” (p. 279).

- 31 Gorman-DaRiff (2017) reads the ending through the global war on terror, partly because of the mass targeting of civilians in a train in the novel’s ending. She argues that although the novel contextualizes the violence of the Maoists, the epilogue and Mukherjee’s “decision to have Sabita target the civilian population...generates the desire and demand for police protection even in its most excessive and extra-legal forms”. She continues:

Despite the work of the novel to engage with the long history of exceptional and excessive state violence, and to frame contemporary terrorism as response rather than cause, the ending demands and justifies the euphemistic “security” apparatus of state which has been normalised in the war on terror. (P. 124)

Police violence, in other words, is legitimized.

- 32 A few reviews see the novel as ambivalent to the end: Bose (2014) writes of “the complex rendering of the youthful urban political rebel and the sometimes suicidal, sometimes genocidal movement that swallows him up in Calcutta” and ends by assessing the novel as aspiring to “a novel of the political dialectic” (p. 9). Hirsh Sawhney (2014) places Mukherjee next to Arundhati Roy and Mahasweta Devi and argues that Mukherjee “attempts to inject more complexity into these issues” than they had done (p. 12). He writes that the novel “invites sympathy for characters who embrace violent ideologies as a result of injustice without ever vindicating the horrific violence they commit” (p. 12). The idea that the ending is ambivalent is supported by the uncertain symbolism of Supratik’s name. Supratik’s comrade tells him that some of the farmers in the Maoist movement have inadvertently shortened his name to “‘Pratik:’ ‘from auspicious symbol’ to ‘symbol’ only. ‘Who wants to be auspicious? Bloody cant of the bourgeois ***ers!’” (Mukherjee 2014:144). In the epilogue, as Sabita gets ready to remove the fishplates, she recalls that the method has been passed down from “a man known as Pratik-da” who “lived on in his bequest” (Mukherjee 2014:504). It is up to the reader to decide what this bequest is a symbol of: resistance or terrorism.

- 33 Two reviews published in India engage most closely with the political implications of the structure of the novel. Bose (2014) writes that Mukherjee:

Pulls the old and tested form of the bourgeois realist novel out to scrutiny, and does a dialectical turn on it. He produces...a realist domestic novel that transforms into a political novel with the help on another aged fictional form, the epistolary. (P.8)

The cyclical structure produces an effect of despair, but the two contrasting geographical settings produce a dialectical effect. The chapters about the peasants are alternated with chapters about the bourgeois Ghosh family. The question of the family’s relationship to those “others” who are peasants is indirect since they are not rural landlords. Nevertheless, the structure of the novel connects them:

The difficult harvest cycles of the landless wage-labourer Kanu...provides the counterpoint which demystifies the “big” problem of the ailing business of the Ghoshes’ Paper Mills. The Ghoshes’ world is seen for what it is precisely by making us see another world through Supratik’s “epistles.” (Katyal 2014)

Although the cycle of despair described in the rural setting might create a feeling of hopeless passivity, when the rural narrative is combined with the bourgeois narrative, it has an active role in raising questions about the relationship between the two.

- 34 The way in which the ending is read depends partly on whether either narrative is seen as dominant and if so which one. Dominance determines who the “others” of the novel’s title are. The reader’s familiarity with the “us” of the bourgeois narrative may cause them

to place themselves within the bourgeois world. From this position, the Naxalite violence is a threat and an ineffective violation of liberal values. However, it is the peasant section with which the novel begins and ends. As Katyal (2014) argues, after the prologue, “you can only hurtle forth searching for ways in which one can make sense of the world in which Nitai Das had to kill himself and his own.” Seen from this perspective, the Ghosh family members are “others” whose unsympathetic depiction characterizes them as materialistic, while a reader may seek to make sense of the way in which their riches, however indirectly, are founded on the exploitation of Nitai and his fellow peasants. The peasant narrative thus acts as a critique of the bourgeois one. The combination of the cyclical structure and the dialectic one produces ambivalence.

- 35 One reading of *The Lives of Others* is that it does not take sides in the conflict between revolutionary violence and state repressions. This is in contrast to most writings on Naxalites which Shah (2018) comments: “were divided between the mass who were radically opposed to them and those who tried to counter that position” (p. 254). It is also unlike those fictions which Malreddy (2016) argues display “enchanted solidarity” and which portray the insurgency as “a redemptive, derivative yet alternative ideology to the state’s systemic violence” (p. 220). Avoiding contributing to polarized views is, however, very difficult, not only because of the divisions about Naxalites, but also because it is perhaps inevitable, as Gorman-DaRiff’s (2017) article shows, that the novel will be read in the light of post-9/11 terrorism. In an article on Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, whose protagonist may either be a terrorist, or wrongly suspected as being a terrorist, Hai (2017) argues that the ending is open and remains ambiguous and that this is, “a deliberate strategy on Hamid’s part, designed to mirror back to readers their own predispositions...In this way, the novel could work as a way for readers to see and become aware of their own preconceptions.” However, she concludes, “the novel runs the very high risk of simply reaffirming those pre-existing prejudices” (Hai 2017). It may be that Mukherjee’s novel has run the same risk and fallen foul of it. Even with the novel’s generic toolkit for creating ambivalence, the beliefs readers bring to the novel, as Hai (2017) argues, can undermine attempts to create ambiguity.
- 36 Read as ambiguous, however, the ending of *The Lives of Others* does not condone violence, but rather lays bare its escalation and removes it as a potential solution to the problems of injustice, just as the novel had earlier excluded all liberal democratic solutions. The reader is caught wriggling on a hook between the horror of what is about to happen when the train comes and the apparent lack of any alternative means of resistance. The scale of the killing involved repulses even the reader who has been prepared to contemplate the murder of an exploitative landlord as justified in exceptional circumstances. Shah’s (2018) work of anthropology avoids the polarization identified above by showing the sheer range of approaches, motivation, personalities, shifting relationships and membership of the Maoist movement. Mukherjee’s (2014) method is a contrast to Shah’s (2018) as he narrows his protagonists’ options. *The Lives of Others* does not depict collective social change: as discussed above, this has been ruled out in the early part of the novel. In contrast also to Roy’s (2012) *Walking With the Comrades*—which ends with a sentence about an insurgent who is, “[m]arching, not just for herself but to keep hope alive for all of us” (p. 146)—the ending of Mukherjee’s novel cannot be read as hopeful. Instead, the reader encounters a deliberate narrative blocking: neither the scale of violence nor state repression will solve the problems of the peasants. The representation of the futility of

violence induces despair but also anger, which causes the reader to look outside the rural narrative and reassess the bourgeois narrative.

- 37 As Patrick Gale (2014) argues, the novel is, “a graphic reminder that the bourgeois Indian culture western readers so readily idealize is sustained at terrible human cost.” By connecting the Maoist movement to the global “war on terror,” the novel perhaps suggests that it is not just bourgeois Indian culture which is sustained in this way, but global culture, the culture of the reader in London and New York too. Mukherjee (2014b) commented:

Could the novel have its moral imperative returned to it? Now that we have been bludgeoned into quiescence in these late-capitalist times by that most amoral of all entities, the free-market, that imperative seems more urgent, more political than ever. (P. 3)

The peasants in *The Lives of Others* have no access to the free market, nor is it likely that by derailing a train they will affect the lives of those investing in, or indirectly benefitting from, global mining. If Mukherjee’s (2014) novel is meant to be radically ambivalent to encourage the reader to question the “triangulation of labor, capital and output/income... over which the structure of our lives, as individuals, families and social classes, are constructed” (2014a:3) then the place of the rice farmers and laborers who sell their labor within that structure is not something the majority of reviews have picked up on.

- 38 Like *The Sword and The Sickle*, *The Lives of Others* places the local peasant movement within a national and international economic order as part of its analysis of the causes of peasant poverty. Both novels connect a historical movement to the present in which they were written and in doing so make a local movement relevant to an international readership. In *The Sword and the Sickle* the peasants form part of the argument against the imperialist exploitation of India, but they are also represented as distinct from the nationalist leadership which will govern in the future, only five years after the novel is published. In *The Lives of Others*, the exploitation of the peasant highlights the effects of economic liberalization in India and the reach of a globalized economy. Each novel, however, uses literary strategies which allow for readings which focus on the national and international at the expense of the local, or which read the local through a polarized debate about “war”.
- 39 A comparison of the two novels refocuses attention on the peasants; their participation in organized rebellion and the way in which revolutionary violence or talk of it begins to remove their passivity. *The Sword and The Sickle* ends in hope that “a real Revolution” can be brought about, as long as colonial systems which ignore distinct peasant concerns are not replicated by an independent national government when it takes power. *The Lives of Others* begins and ends in despair: independence is represented as having changed nothing and the global economic order as equally as exploitative as the colonial one. However, in addition to generating despair in the reader it also creates feelings of anger which seeks change.
- 40 In *the Sword and The Sickle*, talk of violence and an acceptance of its possibility puts pressure on the parameters of liberal humanism set by Gandhian non-violence and legislative changes. In *The Lives of Others* the violence is enacted, described graphically and on a mass scale and this gives rise to more ambivalence about its use. However, when read alongside *The Sword and the Sickle* it is also possible to see violence in Mukherjee’s (2014) novel as neither condemned nor endorsed, but used as a strategy for putting pressure on acceptance of the national or global economic order. Like reform and

legislation, independence and democracy, violent resistance has not led to change. The question spoken on behalf of the peasant in both of these novels remains: What will? What form can anger at the exploitation of the peasant take? How can hope generated by their spirit of resistance turn into something more tangible?

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NOTES

1. <https://www.gale.com/intl/c/the-listener-historical-archive>

ABSTRACTS

Mulk Raj Anand's *The Sword and The Sickle* (1942) narrates a historical uprising in Oudh in 1921–22. Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* (2014) alternates a story about the Naxalite peasant insurgency between 1967 and 1970 with one about a bourgeois family in Calcutta. An epilogue dated 2012 connects the historical movement to present Maoist insurgencies.

Through their literary strategies, both texts connect the local situation to broader national and international influences and also relate a story set in the past to the time in which the novels were written and published. These multiple layers mean that the question of "who speaks for the village?" is mediated by the reader and the framework they apply.

This article considers reviews of the novels written just after publication to examine the way in which they were sometimes read through their international frames—the relationship between colonial India and Britain in the case of *The Sword and The Sickle*—and discourses around terrorism in the case of *The Lives of Others*. These readings obscured some aspects of the

narratives of the peasant. A comparison of the two novels brings to the fore the representation of the local economic and political problems faced by the peasants.

INDEX

Keywords: Mulk Raj Anand, Neel Mukherjee, peasant resistance, violence, Naxalite fiction

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