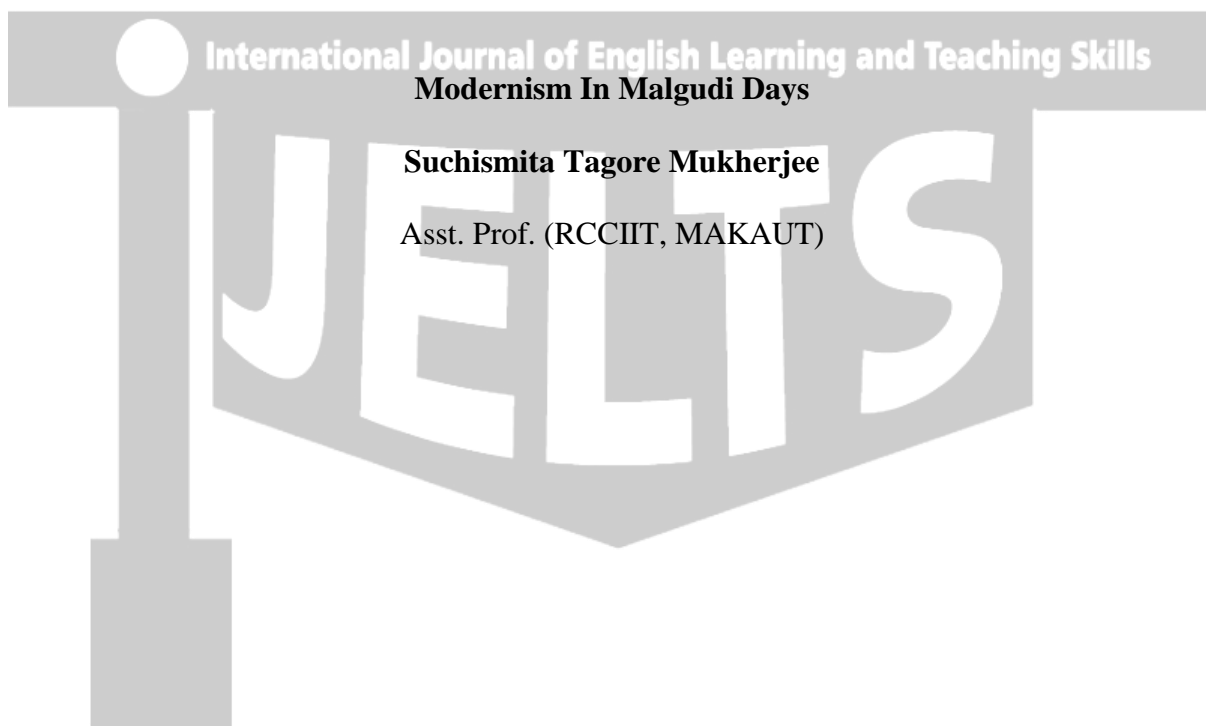


Running Head: MODERNISM IN MALGUDI DAYS

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ABSTRACT:

Modernism celebrates the inner strength of an individual. In R. K. Narayan's fictional world in the imaginary town of Malgudi, the Indian microcosm is shown to have a bipolar existence where traditional age old beliefs and values are finely blended with modernism of the West. The old order changes leaving place for the new. The tussle between the "Tradition" and " Modernism " is what gives R. K. Narayan's writings gain a universal appeal.

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MODERNISM

Modernism is a term,difficult in itself to define as it is marked by a strong and intentional break with tradition.This break includes a strong reaction against established religious,political and social views.It begins with the belief that the world is created in the act of perceiving it. There is no such thing as absolute truth and all things are relative. Modernism celebrates the inner strength of an individual. Life follows no particular order and is concerned with the sub- conscious mind. It can also be considered as a movement towards ' Existence in this absurd world. '

The most dominant form of conflict in the fictional world of Narayan is one between tradition and modernity. But in this conflict,it is the old tradition that gains an edge over modernity. The modern simply touches the outer fringe of the society and doesn't, however, penetrate the inner most circles. The Malgudi milieu stands in perpetual danger of numerous contradictions caused by old beliefs, superstitions and age- old culture on the one hand and glamour and attraction of the modern life-style and civilisation on the other. Narayan is clear on one point that Indian sensibility is different from Western sensibility and hence his novels have to embody a widely different mentality, feelings and responses. The Malgudi existence is bi-polar one resting on age old beliefs and values and the other on westernised way of living and economic progress. In Narayan's

fiction, the Malgudi are caught up in a mess caused by the tussle between the old tradition and modern civilization. This tussle of " Tradition " vs. "Modernity" is what makes " Malgudi Days" so very modern in its outlook. The Malgudians encounter such situations with stoic endurance. Western education gives rise to adoption of new lifestyles and significant advancements in the materialistic field. "Individualism" is on the rise under new conditions. The old order changes giving place to the new and the tussle between the two goes on forever.

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"There are solitary figures of modernity in Narayan's work, as there are in much Indian fiction - their fates are usually depicted as difficult and antisocial, victims of derision or hostility, eccentric individuals struggling against the ancient weight of their communities. In Narayan's fiction, however, these pockets of modernity we encounter are no heroic figures toiling in the midst of rural ignorance, to educate the masses, but rather misfits and misanthropes whom Narayan does not refrain from colouring as slightly odd. "Second opinion" offers a good example of such a type. The story of the efforts of a traditional thinking, widowed mother to arrange a marriage for her bookish, eccentric son - and his " modern " resistance to the idea, inspired by some intensive reading of Toynbee and Plato from his father's library - displays all of the ambiguities, uncertainties and paradoxes concerning modernity which we have seen in the rest of Narayan's fiction. The son, unnamed, undergoes a Western -style awakening to consciousness shortly after the death of his father (the absence or departures of fathers in Narayan's stories often carry an uncanny metaphysical symbolism). He peruses and delights in his father's old library, immersing himself completely in passages from Max Muller and The Republic, a process of self- education which brings him into confrontation with his mother. Here the real theme of " Second Opinion "

takes place- a conflict of narratives, a squaring- up of world -views based on radically different foundations.

Narayan presents a son who, enlightened by the contents of his deceased father's library, attempts to " modernize" his mother with evangelical fervour. " In those days... . attempt to enlighten my mother's mind on modern ways. But she was impervious to my theories. We were poles apart.. "

Such episodes have, of course, been repeated in the fictions of several cultures - moments where the younger generation attempt to convince their elders of certain issues like the use of certain medicine. Narayan's story, however, is not just another domestic tale of East and West trying to live in the same house; what " Second Opinion " shows, more than most stories, is the way the son's new- found modernity is unable to cope with the immovable presence of the mother's persona. When the son is trying to explain to his mother how water underground feeds into wells, " You see, under the earth..... go on talking like a prophet... ".Poles are switched: the son is talking " nonsense ", and the mother interrupts him with impatient common sense. The intellectual hubris of the son is humbled by the mnemonic powers of the mother, when she surprisingly shows ability to process and sort the vast intricacies of her family tree, dropping scores of names.

The mother who should by all accounts be an ignorant, uneducated village woman, incapable of rational analysis or critical inquiry, is running rhetorical rings around her son whose head is filled with scraps of Shakespeare and Coleridge (" irrelevant odds and ends") as she speaks. Education, far from preparing the son to deal with reality has only served to detach him from it.

This levelling of the distinction between modernity and tradition continues in the presentation of the local doctor, whom Narayan presents as no archetypal figure of the Enlightenment, but rather

as someone who seems closer to a village holy-man than a doctor. The doctor says, "I'll give free medicine to anyone who can produce a longer prescription anywhere in this country. "

The protagonist asks him for "some elixir" to diffuse the mother's enthusiasm for his marriage.

In this story, " Second Opinion" ,Narayan limits himself to delineating the theme of modern sterility into a dilemma, without stooping to the banality of a solution. "I could welcome neither marriage nor my mother's death". Marriage or death, community or tradition, ritual or rationality: if modernity is to be associated with death and sterility in this story, then tradition signifies life, abundantly so. The mother's promise of human warmth, partnership, offspring, is placed alongside the coldly intellectual, misanthropic existence of her bachelor son.

Here, we could somehow draw an analogy, with the modern, "Theatre of the absurd". As we find in the Absurd, logical construction and argument giving way to illogical speech and to its ultimate conclusion, silence. Here also man's reaction to a world apparently without meaning. This is the resultant void, or unhappiness to be found in the heart of all things.

" Narayan, whom I don't hesitate to name (in the context of James, Chekhov and Conrad), more than any of them wakes in me a sense of gratitude, for he has offered me a second home. "

This unhappiness, Man pitted against the odds, the theme of meaningless suffering, is what the modern Absurd constitutes, which is so basic an element in Malgudi days.

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION:

Served as English Teacher in South Point High School, The Cambridge School and others for more than twelve years. Working as guest faculty, as Lecturer of Communicative English, in Aliah

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