Indianness is the New Otherness in the Short Stories of R. K. Narayan's Malgudi Days

Mrs. Suchismita Tagore Mukherjee
Research scholar UEM, Kolkata
Dr. Samapika Das Biswas (Supervisor)
Associate Professor IEM, Kolkata

Postcolonial criticism challenges the standardized conceptions of cosmopolitanism rooted in metropolitan cultures by inviting locally-bred, subaltern and third world experiences as forces of intervention and interruption in shaping Universalist ethics for a shared humanity. Nevertheless, these approaches remain more speculative than substantive, required for grounding local cosmopolitanism(s) outside of diasporic, transnational, exilic contexts.

In a close observation into the short story collection of Malgudi Days, a thorough reading of R.K. Narayan's fictional town of Malgudi, this paper explores its metonymical implications for the Indianness in a local cosmopolitanism (inclusiveness in diversity) its unique rural and urban constellations: and an ethno-humanist narrative drawn along the "locopolitan" lines as opposed to the metropolitan preconditioning of cosmopolitan experience. Such a reading aims at opening up an empirical basis for local cosmopolitanism within the milieu of Indian sensibility. Narayan's first step in removing the footlights from the Indian theatre was selecting the unknown, unassuming small town named Malgudi as the locus for all his novels. Fictitious but nonetheless real, Malgudi is the amalgamation of all the factors that embed the lives of the common, ordinary middle-class people. For the readers of the Malgudi novels, Malgudi signifies streets and public squares, taxi stands, market places and cricket grounds. We are hardly given the privilege of voyeurism as bedrooms and closets do not assume central roles. There is hardly any scope for deeply intimate conversation or private introspection. Enclosed places in his novels include only dingy presses, cinema halls, shops, School buildings, the headmaster's room, courtyards or dining-halls and the like where there is no chance of isolation or any private thought or action. Even if there is an attempt at isolation, as we find in The Dark Room, it is shown as ineffective. In fact Narayan adopted humorous forms – open-air-spectacles, parodies of the high and official and a very common Non-poetic language – in creating his world of Malgudi. To say that Narayan chose the common people as the subversive force does not mean that Narayan became the spokesperson for the common exploited people, as Marxist writers like Mulk Raj Anand did. There is no question of the Marxist binaries of the exploiter and exploited being present in Narayan. Rather, Narayan saw through the more intricate play of power in various strata and shades of social relations, where encounters may happen between any set of characters irrespective of age, sex or status. We see frictions between fathers and sons, headmasters and students, husbands and wives, shopkeepers and customers, grandmas and grandsons, and even among strangers. Narayan joyfully exposes that the play of power is relative and not always gradient; that is, at any moment the king may be dethroned and the clown may usurp all the glory. It is a jolly world view that accepts this uncertainty as a sign of life and change. Narayan chose the common people because they are not learned in cold scholastic introspection, analysis and revaluation, and their personages are not opaque and are responsive to changes. Thus they are the most transparent participants of history.

"Indianness" as the new form of "otherness" in the short stories of "Malgudi Days" is an interesting lens through which to analyze R.K. Narayan's work. "Malgudi Days" is a collection of short stories set in the fictional town of Malgudi, and it's known for its exploration of various themes related to Indian society, culture, and identity. The concept of "otherness" refers to the portrayal of certain groups or individuals as different, alien, or outsider in comparison to the perceived norm.

In the context of "Malgudi Days" "Indianness" can be seen as a new form of otherness because the stories often highlight the complexity and diversity within Indian society itself. Instead of focusing solely on the contrast between Indians and foreigners, Narayan delves into the intricacies of cultural, social and economic differences among different groups within the Indian population. Here are a few ways in which "indianness can be seen as the new form of otherness in the short stories:

Regional Diversity: The stories frequently explore the diversity of India's various regions and languages Characters from different parts of the country might experience a sense of otherness when they interact with people from other regions due to differences in language, customs, and traditions.

Caste and Class Differences: Narayan's stories often portray the caste and class divisions prevalent in Indian society. Characters from lower castes or lower socioeconomic backgrounds might be treated as "others" by those from higher castes or privileged backgrounds.

Urban-Rural Divide: Many stories in the collection also explore the contrast between urban and rural life, Characters who move from rural areas to the city or vice versa might experience a sense of otherness due to differences in lifestyle and values.

Generational Gap: The generation gap between younger and older characters can also lead to a sense of otherness. Traditional values and beliefs might clash with modern perspectives, leading to a feeling of being out of place.

Religious and Cultural Differences: Religious and cultural diversity is another aspect that Narayan's stories touch upon. Characters from different religious backgrounds might experience a form of otherness, especially in situations where their beliefs or practices are in contrast to those of the majority.

Modernization and Change: As society undergoes changes due to modernization and urbanization, characters who resist or are unable to adapt might find themselves marginalized or treated as outsiders.

Individual vs. Society: In some stories, characters who deviate from societal norms or expectations might be seen as "other" by the communities. The individual choices might lead to a sense of alienation.

By focusing on these various forms of "Indianness" as otherness, Narayan provides a nuanced and multifaceted portrayal of the complexities within Indian society. This approach challenges the simplistic notion of a unified Indian identity and emphasizes that otherness can manifest with one's own culture and community. It also prompts readers to reflect on prejudices and biases can exist even within a shared cultural context.

References

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