



# **MODERNISM** *AND* **POSTMODERNISM**

**REFLECTIONS AND SPECULATIONS**

**VOLUME-I**

**EDITORS**

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# MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM ; *Reflections and Speculations*

- PUBLISHED BY : DR ABUL FOYES MD MALIK, DEPT. OF BENGALI  
DIGBOI MAHILA MAHAVIDYALAYA, DIGBOI
- DR. DIPAK KUMAR DOLEY, DEPT. OF ENGLISH  
DIBRUGARH UNIVERSITY, DIBRUGARH
- FIRST PUBLISHED : NOVEMBER, 2020
- EDITED BY : DR ABUL FOYES MD MALIK  
DEPT. OF BENGALI, DIGBOI MAHILA MAHAVIDYALAYA
- DR. DIPAK KUMAR DOLEY, DEPT. OF ENGLISH  
DIBRUGARH UNIVERSITY, DIBRUGARH
- COVER DESIGN : EDITORS
- PRICE : 1000/- (RUPEES ONE THOUSAND ONLY)
- PRINTED BY : THE ASSAM COMPUTERS  
SECTOR - 49, BY LANE - 5<sup>TH</sup>  
BAMUNIMAIDAN INDUSTRIAL AREA  
GUWAHATI
- ISBN : "978-2-12-345680-3"

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# Globalisation and the Japanese Urban Life: A Study of Haruki Murakami's *After Dark*

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## Introduction:

It is well-known that the phenomenon of globalisation that emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century has had a tremendous impact on cultures around the world. In the words of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, "Globalization is the process whereby individual lives and local communities are affected by economic and cultural forces that operate world-wide" (100). Not only has globalisation connected groups of people and individuals across continents in ways previously unseen but it has come to alter our perception of human civilisation as a whole. Unsurprisingly, this changing face of the world has caught the attention of writers across the globe in an immense way so much so that much of the literatures produced during the last four to five decades document globalism in one or the other way. Based upon this premise, the present paper focusses attention on the renowned Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami's much talked about novel, *After Dark* (2004). Written during the days of Japan's rise as a major technological superpower, the novel portrays how the tides of globalisation impact the metropolitan life of the Japanese capital, Tokyo.

## Plot of *After Dark*:

*After Dark* is set in the city of Tokyo over the course of one night. The novel commences with Mari Asai, a nineteen year old female student who decides to spend the night at a restaurant where she meets Tetsuya Takahashi, a trombone playing student who happens to be the ex-boyfriend of her elder sister Eri Asai. Through him she comes to meet Kaoru, a retired female wrestler who is the manager of a love-hotel in Tokyo. Kaoru's world is closely associated with the dark world of prostitution and a vicious gang of Chinese mafia which is chasing an office worker, Shirakawa, for physically assaulting a prostitute that the gang owns. A smaller subplot of the novel centres around Eri Asai who is in a state of deep sleep in her room, but is being watched and monitored by mysterious external agencies. The readers are told that Eri suffers from certain mental problems that have created a barrier between her and Mari. Towards the end of the novel, Mari experiences a renewed closeness with her sister on the verge of her visit to China for studies, while Takahashi is seen harbouring romantic feelings for Mari as he decides to wait for her return from China.

## City Life and Globalisation:

Murakami's novel offers a faithful projection of the metropolitan Tokyo where people's lives are extremely fast-paced and busy. To represent the sequence of action and also to denote how events take place very rapidly in a city, Murakami includes a sketch of clock showing a particular time at the beginning page of each chapter. Thus, the chapters represent time in a sequential order denoting "11.56 P.M.," "11.57 P.M.," "12.25 A.M.," "12.37 A.M." and so on. The opening lines of the novel are strikingly suggestive of the metropolitan lifestyle of modern Tokyo:



Through the eyes of a high-flying night bird, we take in the scene from midair. In our broad sweep, the city looks like a single gigantic creature—or more like a single collective entity created by many intertwining organisms. Countless arteries stretch to the ends of its elusive body, circulating a continuous supply of fresh blood cells (3)

The first person plural narrator provides a bird's eye view which may remind one of a satellite constantly flying at a high altitude and capturing images from the mid-air. The personification of the city as a "single gigantic creature" with "intertwining organisms" suggests the interconnected and internal network among its parts which is a sign of a highly modernised city.

It is a fact that besides being one of the most advanced metropolitan cities in the world, Tokyo is also known for its entertainment districts and night life which attract tourists from different parts of the world. The novel is set in a particular "amusement district" of Tokyo characterised by a "sea of neon colours" (3). The area is noted for "A large game centre crammed with young people; wild electronic sounds; a group of college students spilling out from a bar: teenage girls with brilliant bleached hair ... dark-suited men racing across diagonal crossings for the last trains to the suburbs. Even at this hour, the karaoke club pitchmen keep shouting for customers." (4). Such a description draws our attention to the idea that a modern metropolitan city like Tokyo offers nightlong entertainment and is a hub for visitors.

#### **Globalisation and the Western Culture:**

One simple yet obvious way of looking at globalisation is to consider it as the contemporary incarnation of western capitalism (Parry 11). Especially, the overwhelming role of United States as the major player in global economy, politics and culture in the modern world has made globalisation loosely synonymous with Americanisation. This idea does not seem far-fetched when one considers the global expansion of the American capital, epitomised by its multinational corporations and companies operating worldwide. In Murakami's novel, the setting may be Tokyo, but American and Western culture clearly permeates almost all spheres of the Japanese metropolitan life.

It is significant that the two main characters of the novel, Mari and Takahashi, meet at a Denny's (Takahashi 7). Denny's is a highly popular American restaurant chain which operates in over 1700 locations worldwide. The aura of western culture is created by the playing of the song "Go Away Little Girl" by Percy Faith and his Orchestra at the restaurant (6). Takahashi himself is a trombone-playing student obsessed with Jazz music. He is a fan of Western singers and musicians like Mick Jagger, Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix and Peté Townshend (20). Even Mari, who does not have any special interest in western music, hums "Five Spot After Dark" by the American Jazz trombonist Curtis Fuller (21). All these suggest how American pop culture has become a global phenomenon and has come to gain popularity among the young generation of Japan.

Arjun Appadurai mentions that "if a global cultural system is emerging, it is filled with ironies and resistances, sometimes camouflaged as passivity and a bottomless appetite in the Asian world for things Western" (29). It indicates that beneath Asians' apparent obsession with western things there lies an implicit element of resistance that threatens to modify or defeat the west itself. This idea is evidenced in Murakami's novel. For instance, Shirakawa, the office worker, jokingly tells his wife that his company wants to "buy out Microsoft" (84). This seemingly innocent joke might represent the subconscious desire of

the Japanese to overwhelm the American multinational corporations like Microsoft despite the fact that Microsoft has given employment to thousands of Japanese by setting up its subsidiary, Microsoft Japan at Tokyo. Likewise, on another occasion, Takahashi complains on receiving a dissatisfying toast at Denny's: "What with Japanese industriousness and high-tech culture and the market principles that the Denny's chain is always pursuing, it shouldn't be that hard to get crispy toast" (12-13). This suggests the possibility of a supposedly ideal situation where the Denny's, an American company with its branch in Japan, would have to learn job ethics and principles from Japan's culture and not the opposite.

### **Changing Nature of Mass Migration:**

An important feature of globalisation is the migration of people across international borders in search of work. In his influential book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (1996) Arjun Appadurai identifies five dimensions of global cultural flows which he terms as (a) Ethnoscapes, (b) Mediascapes, (c) Technoscapes, (d) Financescapes, and (e) Ideoscapes (33). Appadurai defines ethnoscapes as the landscape of the shifting world of tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals (33). This idea is reiterated by Zygmunt Bauman when he terms the current phase of mass migration as the "age of diasporas: an infinite archipelago of ethnic, religious and linguistic settlements" which are guided by the "logic of the global redistribution of living resources and the chances of survival peculiar to the current stadium of globalization" (35). In the late twentieth century, the flood of illegal Chinese migrants sneaking into Japan in search of jobs exemplifies the current phase of mass migration in the wake of internationalisation in Asia (Wudunn). Murakami's novel highlights on a particular section of these Chinese migrants who are involved with prostitution in Japan.

Beginning from 1980s, a large section of prostitutes in Japan are Chinese who have eventually come to dominate the prostitution business in Tokyo's entertainment zones such as Kabukicho (Globalist). They are mostly controlled by the Chinese triads who have an edge on their Japanese counterparts known as *yazuka* (Globalist). In Murakami's novel, Kaoru, the manager of the love hotel gives us some idea about the Chinese mafia in Tokyo: "They [Chinese mafia] run prostitution around here. They sneak women in by boat from the mainland and make them pay for it with their bodies. They take phone orders and deliver the women to hotels on motorcycles... They're one of our best clients" (43). Evidently, poor and helpless Chinese women are exploited and brutalised in the hands of triads. Kaoru's description exposes the dark side of the sex trafficking business in modern Japan, a business coinciding with the spread of transnational job avenues in this age of globalisation.

It is noticeable that albeit the majority of the trafficked victims migrate to Japan with hopes of working and economically helping their families back home, upon their arrival they are subjected to debt bondage and forced prostitution (Mensendiek). Kaoru reflects upon this sad reality while speaking sympathetically to the Chinese prostitute in her hotel: "You come all the way from China, sneak into Japan, and you end up with those goons sucking the life outta you. I don't know what it was like for you back home, but you probably would've been better off not coming here..." (45). Kaoru criticises the precarious choice that many poor Chinese women make in the hope of securing a better future away from their homeland, who, far from fulfilling their dreams, end up as victims of globalised crime.

### Electronic Media and Privacy:

In today's world, media is one of the most powerful tools that have shaped the rise of globalisation. Media enables the individual to reach out to the outer world beyond their private sphere. This relation between media and the individual has certain deeper implications, as Tim Dwyer notes: "Today, in media culture, there is a tendency towards the dissolution of the boundary between the private and the public; toward intensified penetration of the public into the realm of privacy, and of privacy into the public sphere" (32). It is obvious that when the media freely encroaches into the individual's secret sphere, privacy is compromised and private life turns into a spectacle for visual consumption of the public.

In *After Dark*, the strange case of Eri Masai, a fashion model for teen magazines, exemplifies how the media controls the privacy of individuals especially in an urban sphere. She never speaks, but is shown as being in a continuous long sleep. In the second chapter of the novel the mysterious third person plural narrator intrudes into Eri's privacy in her bedroom: "We allow ourselves to become a single point of view, and we observe her for a time. Perhaps it should be said that we are peeping in on her. Our viewpoint takes the form of a midair camera that can move freely about the room" (25). One might be tempted to assume that the strange narrator is the personified electronic media, exporting her images to the outside audience. But the intricate thought-process of the narrator, indicative of a complex personality of its own, and its tendency to form subjective opinions suggest that the narrator is either a section of the audience who consume images or those people who control the media. The identity of the narrator is emphasised in these lines: "We are invisible, anonymous intruders. We look. We listen. We note odours. But we are not physically present in the place, and we leave behind no traces" (27). In a way, the author here hints at the disturbing presence of an elusive gaze of the electronic media in our private lives, a gaze which closely monitors us and which is beyond our control.

According to Tim Dwyer, "When the private self goes public...the character of authentic self-disclosure begins to shift to a dramatised, strategic self-presentation and theatrical self-expression" (32). Murakami does not overlook this possibility occasioned by the interaction between the private and public spheres. So, the narrator continues: "Honestly speaking, however, the information regarding Eri Asai that we can glean from the appearance of this room is far from abundant. It gives the impression that preparations have been made to hide her personality and cleverly elude observing eyes" (27). Clearly, the narrator posits that Eri's private life has been cleverly recreated with the intention of promoting a customised identity which is false and far from expressing her genuine self. In this way, Murakami examines the individual life in a modernised society dominated by electronic media.

### Conclusion:

Murakami's novel *After Dark*, thus, touches upon certain aspects of the Japanese urban life in Tokyo in the wake of globalisation. In the twenty first century, when globalism has become a lived reality of people's lives across borders the nature of globalisation in Japan has remained complex. This is because, as Mark Schilling points out, despite its claims to having a strong presence in global economy in the late twentieth century Japan was perceived to have no international cultural presence (qtd. in Allen and Sakamoto 1). However, in the recent times, Japan's rise in the global market can hardly be overlooked. It

has adapted itself to the demands and expectations of the outside world and managed its own place in the global economy (Webster). It is against this backdrop of Japan's emergence as a powerful nation in the global arena that the novel *After Dark* remains a culturally and politically significant work.

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