

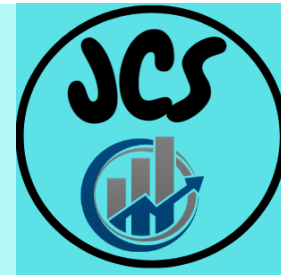


Wires, Currents, and Connections: The Symbolic Economy of Electricity in Daniyal Mueenuddin's Nawabdin Electrician

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Abstract

The paper will discuss the symbolic economy of electricity in the short story, Nawabdin Electrician by Daniyal Mueenuddin, which shows how a simple aspect can be used as a metaphor on many levels through the lens of socio-economic situations in rural Pakistan. Electricity as a literal source of livelihood to the main protagonist becomes a very powerful symbol of modernity, longing, and transient empowerment in the text. Due to the ingenuity and the attempt of Nawabdin, the story sheds light on the potential

freedom and restraint regarding the social mobility in the society which has not completely got rid of feudal hierarchies. However, the changeable and highly risky character of electricity reflects the changeability of these upward climbs and displays the fragility of any advances that the marginalized is making. This discussion relies on theoretical concepts drawn in a postcolonial and Marxist approach and therefore, this project argues that Mueenuddin employs the theme of electricity to explore the overlap between technology, power, and inequality. Through the emphasis on one motif, the paper offers a narrow scope to the scholarship of Mueenuddin by introducing the idea of the transformative and fragile nature of technologically advancing rural Pakistan.

Keywords: Symbolic Economy, Socio-Economic, Hierarchies, Marxist, Postcolonial, Empowerment, Fragile, Feudal, Ingenuity.

Introduction

Electricity comes across similar with the acts of common symbols of modernity, progress, and communication. It energizes the industries, dominates the domestic life, and holds out a bridge between rural aloneness and city hope. However, electricity, in societies characterized by vast economic disparities, is a source of inequality, precariousness and unequal access too. It is no longer a utility but a commodity in the rural scenario of Pakistan and its accessibility and control is a socio-political indicator. The ambivalence of electricity as a factor of life and a factor of destruction, a source of power and of death, offers a rich territory within literature, especially when electricity enters into the question of interacting and frictional relationships between technology and aspiration and the relation of both to the social structure of the play.

Daniyal Mueenuddin, a celebrated Pakistani-American author, is well established in his delicate descriptions of Pakistan feudal systems, changed economies, and complicated human relations that the two give rise to. His first book, a collection of interlinked stories, *In Other Rooms, Other*



Wonders (2009), reflects the life of people of different social classes, landowners to workers, on the edge of tradition and modernity. These stories show the most interest in one such tradesman, as is the case with the short story Nawabdin Electrician which is set in an electrician shop and the main characters means of livelihood is connected in more ways than one to the electric currents that he commands. The plot is based on the life of Nawabdin who is an electrician working under a rich landlord; his ingenuity and perseverance grant him a degree of freedom. In this story, electricity is used to extend beyond its utilitarian purpose, the force is transformed into a metaphor of ambition, adaptability, and the insecure possession of agency that can be claimed by those who are at the margins of the society. The survival of Nawabdin as a professional and economically as an individual depends on his skill in facing the physical and the social-economic challenges of electrical work and the people of rural Pakistan.

Although Mueenuddin has featured themes of feudalism, class differences and gender relations in his work, there is very little critical analysis on the symbolic meaning of electricity in his fiction works. Such a gap ignores the richness of the metaphorical framework created by Mueenuddin, and especially one in which technology is used as a theme in the larger context of struggles over power (literally and otherwise). But electricity in Nawabdin Electrician does not just provide a touch of background; it is the driving force behind the story that gives character motivation, dramatizes social ambition, and reflects the impression of transience of upwards mobility.

The present paper will attempt to fill this gap by examining symbolic economy of electricity in Nawabdin Electrician. The work is based on postcolonial theory, Marxist criticism and symbolic anthropology applied to electricity as a form that fulfills and delves into the constraints of progress within the feudal rural world. It states that Mueenuddin employs the theme of electricity to light up the failures of modernization in which a rapid growth in technologically advanced resources bring only a brief burst of power, but do not remove the systemic elements that maintain inequality. By so doing, this analysis not only makes the analysis of Nawabdin Electrician as the story of personal ambition but also makes it a kind of understated commentary of imbalanced distribution of power in all its avatars. Using the character of Nawabdin, Mueenuddin paints a portrait of a man whose existence is similar to the electrical current he is in control of, is full of possibility but yet can be severed at any moment as well.

Daniyal Mueenuddin is a Pakistani-American who writes critically on the auto-economic and cultural fabric of modern Pakistan with finer details. Born of an American mother and Pakistani father in Los Angeles, Mueenuddin spent a considerable part of his early age in both United States and Pakistan which influenced his literary inspiration in a major way (Burney, 2011). A graduate of Dartmouth College and Yale Law School, he became a journalist and then lawyer (but later returned to run a mango farm he owned with his family in Punjab). This physical immersion in the Pakistani countryside gave him a detailed knowledge of the feudal and rural system that commonly act as the setting of his fiction (Schwartz, 2009).

His first book, the short story collection which he edited and published under the title *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* (2009), received extensive critical praise as each of the connected tales moves across the Pakistani rigid class divisions, and deals with overlapping lives (landlords and servants, tradesmen and urban professionals). His work has been hailed because of its non-flashy prose writing, dense characterization, and capability of integrating themes of power, passion, and



delusion in the rural and urban contexts (Masood, 2012). His ability to describe the human face of modernization and globalization in a society that remains bound to firmly established hierarchies has been observed by his critics (Williams, 2010)

Despite the fact that Mueenuddin tends to concentrate on the intimate life of his characters, it is firmly rooted in the political and economic situation of Pakistan. With the survival of these patron-client systems, his description of rural Punjab carries an awareness of the manner in which people manipulate the system through various degrees of living under it or inside it in some form or another. In that respect, Mueenuddin is comparable to other South Asian literature colleagues like Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie, except that his storyline centers itself firmly in the war between the traditional and the gradual intrusion of modernity.

One of the unforgettable tales in the collection of the acclaimed *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* by Daniyal Mueenuddin is the tale of Nawabdin Electrician. It is set in rural Punjab and it revolves around Nawabdin, an enterprising and industrious electrician who is employed by a landowner who is rich. Nawabdin is described as a man of middling means and phenomenal resourcefulness, a person who in addition to keeping the electrical apparatus at the estate running, uses his abilities as a means to better his own situation in small ways. His operation exposes him to both living in the house of landlord and the village of poor people, which places him in a middle-status social position, neither being a member of elite society nor the poor. The story starts with the portrayal of the character of Nawabdin, a man that works hard, is innovative and is aggressive enough to take a certain risk in an effort to improve the life of the family. His desire to purchase a motorcycle as a convenient need to his job turns out to be one of the main plot elements, since it would enable him to travel between his jobs faster and hopefully able to perform more jobs. The story traces his success in persuading the landlord to assist him in getting this motor bike which is one of the significant steps towards mobility and independence though at a small scale.

The story provides an image of a rural life caught up in the past and the present-day with the personal experience of Nawabdin. The motorbike, the electrical wires and the unending movement of electricity are at the same time a practical and symbolic tool that could be considered as proofs of ambition, connection and the vulnerability of social rise. There is nothing in the story to suggest that the life of Nawabdin can be a path to prosperity; progress is there something which is fluid and subjected to be unstable and must depend on the circumstances around an individual.

The presented study is important in several regards, both literary and thematic, cultural and socio-political, since it helps better comprehend Daniyal Mueenuddin in his work *Nawabdin Electrician*, and the same ecosystem of literature and society as a whole. Using the lens of literature, the study moves the critical gaze on the commonly discussed aspects of feudalism, social ranking and gender relationships in Mueenuddin to a more subtle aspect of symbolism given to electricity. Most of the analyses locate his stories in the socio-economic framework of Pakistan; however, none of them pay much attention to the way technological motifs can be used as the principle plot frames. Such analysis therefore creates a new field of interpretations as clearly exhibited here is how Mueenuddin uses lay descriptions of rural life to create complicated social statements.



Thematic wise, the research further adds to the discussion regarding the interaction between human agency and technology. The electricity in the story Nawabdin Electrician is not just verification of the utilitarian aspect of electricity but it is the sign that shows the dynamism of ambition, power, and vulnerability. Making this motif a priority, the study demonstrates that in spite of the promises of mobility and changes by technological growth, it can reflect not only the instability and fragility of social gains but also an embodiment of such movement. The interpretation transcends the more general themes of modernity and focuses more on considering its lumpy and at times precarious effects on excluded people.

The study places the realities of rural Pakistan within a cultural and socio-political discursive framework of access to technology and infrastructure, which is highly related to discourses of power, inequality, and survival. The middle man aspect of Nawabdin between the landowners who are elites and the people of the villages brings out their larger issues of trying to operate within a system that only provides few privileges and growth requires favors. The implications of this analysis can be of great use in understanding how technological change can interact with the old socio-economic stratification system, so the study is useful to both literary studies and other kinds of studies including South Asian cultural studies, development studies, and rural sociology.

Lastly, in an academic perspective, the study is filling a gap in the inquiry of Mueenuddin since it is limited in scope of pedantic inquiry into one of the recurring motifs, and its narrative meaning. It contextualizes the discussion of technology in “Nawabdin Electrician” through the study of postcolonial theory, Marxist criticism, and symbolic anthropology in order to place the story in a wider scholarly concern over the issue of technological representation in postcolonial fiction. The contribution enriches the scope of literary critique directed to the work of Mueenuddin and provides a kind of methodological construct to analyze similar types of symbolic economies in other pieces of literature.

Overall, the research is meaningful because it is innovative, qualitative in theme and interdisciplinary. It not just deepens the debate on the story but also adds to the knowledge of why and why not literature can be seen as reflective, critical, and refractive, of the poetical and deep realities of technological advancement in unequal societies.

Research questions

How does electricity serve as both a practical and symbolic element in “Nawabdin Electrician”?

How does the story depict the link between technological progress and inequality in rural Pakistan?

Research objectives

To explore its role as livelihood and metaphor for ambition and fragility

To examine how modernization is shaped and limited by feudal structures.

Literature review

Technology, power, and the configuration of social structures has been a point of interest in postcolonial literature where material things may bear multiple levels of symbolism. Fiction placed in the socio-economic contexts of rural Pakistan, the works of Daniyal Mueenuddin have



generated a reasonable attempt at the criticism due to the novelistic range of motifs and themes such as the division of classes, feudalistic relationships, and the effects of modernization. The literature has mostly dwelt on how he captures human relations in these hierarchies but the symbolic status of the technological features, which he uses, like electricity in Nawabdin Electrician, is underrepresented. In examining pertinent literature, his literary work has been seen to fit in bigger questions concerning social change, rural life, and price of progress.

(Waheed, 2017) Marxist critics rave on how the burden of socioeconomic factors occur. Most the life of the people in Pakistan is lived in pressure of socioeconomic condition. Such socioeconomic forces exist covertly and overtly and they are always present. These factors determine the personalities and the lives of the ordinary poor people and drive them towards turning a “prey” to “economic prosperity and stability”. These forces metamorphose people most of the time into what is not acceptable to society. The views of Marx with regards to society specifically In order to carry out the current research, Marxism, in general, has been touched. There are three stories: These books, in other rooms other wonders by Mueenuddin, have been discussed since there is a large extent that has been relied upon in the studies. The stories give real Pakistani society. The detailed discussion reveals the modifications and impacts in they could bring about the lives of ordinary people because of the economic aspects. The study will become effective to affect the realization of the pragmatic changes of the society by the critical inquiry of these impacts.

(Farooqi & Ahmad, 2025) Deconstructs a patriarchal social good through bringing to bear the Toolkit of Discourse Analysis (Gee 2011) on the linguistic man oeuvres in a short story of the eponymous Nawabdin Electrician by Mueenuddin in his debut short story collection In Other Rooms, Other Wonders (2010). The evidence in the analysis shows how ideologically charged words are used to make an implicit claim of the significance of sons as patriarch society goods an idea promotes and keeps alive patriarchal social structure. In literary language, the meanings are seldom put forward in a straightforward way; therefore, these implications can be traced in the language strategies of text. A critical reading of the passage chosen points out that fertility in women is seen as something that should be scrutinized when it comes out in the form of more daughters than sons, also, blame is only leveled on the mother whereas the father has no responsibility in producing his daughters. Putting the desire to have sons in the context of the social structure of Pakistan as a whole is illustrative of how the gender expectations reshape the social life. Male children are made to support the family by carrying the same name, inheriting property and business, offering financial support, securing the family during hardships and taking care of the elderly parents. Such expectations, consequently, make women weak, dependent, and marginalized.

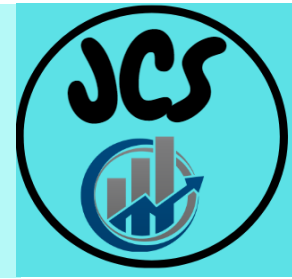
(Khan, 2023) Stated that in the patriarchal societies women are suppressed and subordinated by one way or the other. Men are privileged and they are maintained as central. They speak out, express and dream and in the process they enjoy and have the freedom given to them by the phal logocentric system. On the contrary, women become marginalized. The patriarchal authors designated women as weak, fragile, helpless, docile, submissive, and emotional. Nevertheless, this paper shows that Pakistani male authors are still stigmatizing women in Daniyal Mueenuddin in his short story called Nawabdin Electrician and Abrar-ul-Haq in his song called Chamkeeli, despite changes of times and gender performance. This paper reveals that despite the



changing roles of women, they are still subordinate. My paper asserts that unlike in the past, women are now no longer depicted as submissive, docile, suppressed, uncritical, mindless, etc. In silence, in these two more recent texts women are portrayed as uncontrollable, hypersexual, dangerous, mad, violent, hysterically dominating, and madly authoritative. I claim that these new representations fail to serve and liberate women of Pakistan. In 2019, a petition was filed in Lahore Civil Court against the song by Advocate Rana Adnan Asghar who said it is a scurrilous attack on the integrity of men. In my analysis, however, I found out that Haq has portrayed helpless men against powerful women in a manner that attempts to validate his view that when women are emancipated, it may become a nightmare to patriarchy. Therefore, contrary to demeaning the men, the behavior of a wild uncontrollable woman that Haq, the author describes, does not intend to directly criticize the men but the women. This means that the dominance of Pakistani familial and social systems show favor towards patriarchy and oppress women further to safeguard men against honor. I find in my work that there has been no serious change in the period between the two texts (2009 to 2019) since gender discrimination is evidenced in the writings of Pakistani men. This paper provides a decoding of these new biased female stereotypes so as to attain a liberated future of females.

(Nasrullah, Fasih Ur Rehman, & Nawaz, 2024) thrives to investigate pampered consciousness that the lower phase in society is produced by the upper phase in the subsequent stories, Nawabdin Electrician, Saleema, A Spoiled Man, Provide, In Other Rooms, Other Wonders, a Burning Girl forwarded in the collection of the short stories, In Other Rooms, Other Wonders by Daniyal Mueenuddin. It also examines in details how the upper class manipulates the mind of the proletariat into believing that they are giving them these false ideas and it equally compels us to consider in details how the lower strata are kept in deception in the paradigm of capitalism and how this false consciousness was the cause that destroyed the lives of the many characters. Such stories have been assessed in the field of Marxism. In this paper, the Marxist analysis of the text shall be included and it represents an interpretative category of research that entails textual analysis of the proposed text. A research study has concluded that various characters become the victims of false consciousness in the capitalistic society and this research under study is very qualitative and exploratory.

(Karim, 2018) Examines the interrelation between postcolonial and Marxism paradigms in a range of Pakistani English fiction texts of choice. Raising controversies of both classical Marxism and post Marxism in particular, Louis Althusser and Fredrick Jameson, the paper would discuss the zones of class, class awareness and ideological class stratifications in the chosen fiction of Daniyal Mueenuddin In Other Rooms Other Wonders, Raza Rabbani Invisible People, Home Boy by H. M. Naqvi and Maps for Lost Lovers by Nadeem Aslam. The paper also encompasses the ideas of Jameson to discuss the first world/third world dichotomy, as well as the development of third world voices in the imperial cities. The choice of fiction can be justified by the fact that Pakistan fiction does not tend to replicate key aspects of class and the dynamics of capitalism that have been changing in the current globalized world. Thereby, this paper explains social realism in Pakistani fiction through a wide scope of Marxist and post-Marxist theoretical approaches, thus pointing out the class variations in Pakistani fiction. It also represents the way the Pakistani, English-language fiction is responding to the ongoing transformations in the global capitalism and how Pakistan, as a postcolonial nation, is struggling to negotiate the feudal



capitalistic structure, class divide, extensive rural-urban gap and disproportionate economic growth.

(Sadaf, 2014) In *Other Rooms, Other Wonders* is the ominous reiteration of Pakistani masculinity transformed metamorphosed as envisaged earlier by Daniyal Mueenuddin. The womanly characters are framed in a disturbingly masculine terminology of their look and behave. Comparatively, the thought and speech of the male characters is clouded with words of losses and regret. On such a large canvas extending between the top of the social ladder down to the lowest rungs of the power ladder, Mueenuddin illustrates each of his male characters in their hierarchies. In-between are middling characters, in and out of the story-rooms. The material ambitions of their own lives and the demonstration of power is made to violently contrast the growing impotency in their own lives. They are impotent, hapless men who are old or even deceased. This is a compilation of short stories that have been praised as being unreservedly revealing of a modern Pakistan. But instead, the alternative theme present in these stories is what this paper seeks to emphasize by demonstrating the Pakistani masculinity in a paraxial condition between the colonial markings of power, the resultant corruption in an aftermath post-colonial effect, and the consequent mix-up relating to matters of identity. Masculinity has been lost in this process and it is indicated by the metaphor of death. Instead of the depression of this condition of death, this figurative meaning creates the hope in the reader that there will be good rebirth.

Research Gap

The scholarship on Daniyal Mueenuddin has so far been focused largely on his depictions of the feudal structures of Pakistan, the oppositional forces between the rural and urban environments and the socio-economics factors that define the lives of people in his fiction. Scholars have done much work on the questions of class inequality and sexual relations or the continuity of patron-client relations in the web of his stories. These critical readings have been helpful in understanding how he portrays power and social systems and structure, but also have tended to examine the technology in his stories as superficial and incidental to the development of themes. Specifically, the film of such a rural livelihood and interpersonal negotiations in a feudal setting has been referred to numerous times through the perspective of the presence of electricity as the literal and metaphoric power, however, there is also little critical reflection given to the centrality of electricity as force. Specific consideration of how Mueenuddin employs electricity as an element of plot mechanism as well an analogy of drive, power, and the uneasy element of rising into the socioeconomic pyramid in a rural, postcolonial setting appears to be conspicuously absent. Moreover, little has been done to elucidate the nature of technological advancement in his stories as indicative of the volatility and imbalances inherent in the structures of power that was in place.

This research aims to fill this gap to propose an elaborate analysis of how the symbolic economy of electricity works in the story of Nawabdin Electrician and providing it in a larger context of post colonialism literacy and technological modernity. This way, it adds a fresh interpretive lens to bring out the connection between material advancement and socio-economic vulnerability as a significant aspect in the interactions of Mueenuddin.



Textual Analysis

Daniyal Mueenuddin's "Nawabdin Electrician" is a tightly crafted narrative that manages to be at once an intimate character sketch and a layered commentary on the intersection of technological modernity, ambition, and the rigid social hierarchies of rural Pakistan. On the surface, the story traces the life of Nawabdin, a skilled electrician working for a wealthy landlord. His work keeps the estate's electrical systems functioning, and his technical knowledge makes him an indispensable figure in an environment where electricity is both scarce and precious. Yet beneath this straightforward premise lies a complex web of symbolic meanings in which electricity becomes more than just a physical phenomenon—it becomes a metaphor for social mobility, aspiration, and the fragile balance of power in a stratified society.

From the outset, Mueenuddin paints Nawabdin as resourceful and pragmatic. His work is not romanticized; it is portrayed in concrete, physical terms—mending frayed wires, troubleshooting outages, adapting to the unpredictable conditions of rural power supply. These actions anchor him firmly in the material world, but they also position him as a man who can manipulate a vital and often mysterious force. This control over electricity earns him a form of respect, yet it is a respect that is conditional and limited. In a feudal environment, technical skill can open doors, but it does not erase the boundaries imposed by class and patronage. Nawabdin's talents are valuable to his employer, but his economic and social position remains subordinate.

The theme of electricity is to be taken as the main symbolic reflection in the narrative. As electricity can move freely along fine burial cable, which can be cut at any given instant, so Nawabdin has ambitions which can be stopped like electricity by a single section. The wish to own a motorbike that is ostensibly practical which is needed as a convenience element to commute between appointments takes on a metaphorical feature. The machine symbolizes long reach and speed and an illusory freedom of the burden of being slow and laborious on the road. By doing this, the motorcycle serves as a kind of addition to his current, which he regulates on a daily basis, the physical representation of his personal drive toward development. However, similar to the wires that he works with, his journey is tied to external infrastructure, most importantly, the goodwill of his employer. This testimonial to patronage shows one of the major conflicts of the story: the paradox of technological advancement in a highly stratified culture. Nawabdin has bought the motorcycle not through economic independence but through gaining the favor of his landlord. What is more important is that in this transaction Mueenuddin reveals inadvertently the power exercised by the traditional hierarchies even when the instruments of modernity are involved electricity or mechanized transport. They do not necessarily change the established order; but they are assimilated in the status quo, thus enforcing the established lines of dependency. Nawabdin is mobile, and yet his mobility depends on the constructions that exist in establishing his world.

The encounters of the main character with a desperate thief by the road is a turning point in the story with a sharp change in tone. The incursion is unexpected and abrupt and is similar to the nature of an electrical blackout that has the potential to leave a vast region in darkness. In this case, Mueenuddin solidifies the vulnerability of Nawabdin whose degradation is evident. The violence removes the illusion of security that the motorcycle brought and counters that the objects, like ambitions, can be washed away within the blink of a blink. What is especially admonishing about the story is how Mueenuddin does not take a black and white moral approach



with it. Nawabdin does not die in the attack but there is no success story back to normalcy. Rather, the story ends with the reader in the knowledge that the powers that guide his life, technological, economic and social, are ever changing. Electricity with all the huge potential it holds is a fluctuating resource. It has the power to give light, motion, and contact but it can suddenly stop working and those who depend on it become the victims. This ambivalence reflects the reality on the ground in rural Pakistan, where modernization lives side by side with, or in the shadow of, deep-rooted inequality.

Combining the aspects of literal and symbolic spectrum of electricity, Mueenuddin forms an image of a man whose life is full of energy but is framed in brittle structures. Technical mastery by Nawabdin gives him an illusion of control, yet the quality of empowerment has never come along as the infrastructure state that supports him, both physical and social is weak. This story has therefore eschewed the account of blood progress which is synonymous with technology in the postcolonial contexts. Rather, it introduces modernization as asymmetrical, precarious and firmly rooted in local power relations.

Ultimately, though, Nawabdin Electrician is NOT merely a tale of a mechanic and his two-wheeled machine; but rather a philosophical reflection on the very concept of power--its course, its dispensation, and its disruption. The electricity that flows through the life of Nawabdin is both the literal and figurative one as it flows and gives strength to his ambition as well as showing the fragility of his position in the world. By the accuracy of detail, by the stratified symbolism and starkness in how he shows us the realities of the rural settings, Mueenuddin shows, obsolescence beckons at every instant of technology enabled empowerment in such a place.

Conclusions

An analysis of the Nawabdin Electrician would show that the electricity used in the story goes well beyond its logical attribute as a source of power, it becomes an emblematic tool of aspiration, relation, and the fragile networks of upward mobility in a strictly stratified society. Mueenuddin juxtaposes the character of Nawabdin against which he demonstrates how technical proficiency and the access to modern technology can produce openings through which one can rise, but these openings are never self-sustainable in a system guided by intricate hierarchies and patron-client relations. The bike is a symbol of speed, distance and potential, just as the electricity that Nawabdin gets to manipulate, but depends solely on the current power structures and not an individual skill.

The point of no return in the story, the bloody interaction at the roadside, emphasizes the instability of the progress in this kind of a social setting. Nawabdin has goals like an electrical circuit that can be cut by one vulnerable part. Not only does the interference of the thief deprive him of his new found asset, it also metaphorically cuts off the stream of upward motion serving to remind the reader that in the postcolonial world of the countryside, the process of empowerment through technology is seldom solidly anchored.

Through the lens of electricity as a concrete and metaphorical reality, this piece expounds an important niche in the studies of Mueenuddin who his works have greatly been conceptualized through disregard of technological aspects as tangential to his predominant concern of socio-economic motifs. In this case, technology has been presented to be highly interwoven with occupied systems of injustices, which in fact consolidates, but does not challenge them. This



interpretation places the very concept of Nawabdin Electrician into the context of a much wider discussion of postcolonial modernity, where the ideals the modernization process promise are balanced against structural constraints, vulnerable infrastructures, and the manifestation of federal power relations.

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