

Haruki Murakami's Characters and Works-as the Representation of Postmodernism.

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Abstract

As one of the most outstanding Japanese authors, Haruki Murakami always comes up with excellent ideas of surrealistic stories. The Postmodern condition is evident in most of Murakami's novels. A sense of alienation of character and world is evident by a language medium invented to form a kind of rhythmic syntax structure which complements the illustration of the main characters' subconscious fears and paranoia in the course of his exploration of a seemingly chaotic world. His portrayal of characters is unique and significant that expresses the dichotomy of characters who fight between reality and fantasy. Nevertheless, their ambition to be free from the structures that bound them do not always come true. Some of them left their symbolic mechanism to enter another one. In the end, the characters cannot be the Other; as long as they are still in the clutches of a particular token device they would only be able to be the other. His Characters explore themselves in search of meaning of their existence. His characters often utter speeches which directly contradict their subsequent actions. They are male, middle-aged, leading aimless existences. They enjoy preparing and eating such western foods as spaghetti; they love American pop culture, particularly music of the 1960s and 1970s; and they are hedonistic and idle. They either engage in casual love affairs or fantasize about having them. His novels like *After dark*(2004) and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1994) is postmodern works by the coexistence of the surreal scenes.

Keywords: surrealistic, symbolic mechanism, aimless, fantasize, hedonistic, dichotomy, Paranoia, intermittent syntax, Subconscious fears.

Murakami is a renowned author of postmodern fiction. Postmodernism is a term which only emerged as a widely-recognized area of academic study in the mid-1980s. It is a concept which is not limited to the review of the literature but also appears in a variety of disciplines including art, architecture, music, film, sociology, communications, fashion, and technology. According to Dr. Mary Klages, postmodernism in literature appears as a rejection of boundaries between high and low forms of art and rigid genre distinctions, and an emphasis on in Postmodernism, *English 2010: Modern Critical Thought* Course Notes “pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony, and playfulness ... reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation, and discontinuity (especially in narrative structures), ambiguity, simultaneity, and on the destructured, decentered, dehumanized subject”(4).

This paper will focus mainly on ways in which Murakami adopt, as an author, postmodernist positions as outlined above. In *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Margaret Drabble argues that many features of postmodernism echo or continue traditions of modernism, but that postmodernism is mainly distinguished from its literary predecessor by an indifference to the redemptive mission of Art as conceived by the Modernist pioneers. Her observation is that “Postmodernism thus favors random play rather than purposeful action, surface rather than depth” (5).

As a postmodern author, Murakami ignores the realist tradition of the novel with its established components of plot, characters, setting, theme, and tone, intent on exposing such realism as a fallacy unsupported by and not representational of lived experience. This rejection of literary realism may serve as a useful departure point for analysis of his works, which indeed abandon, or transform, or change what might be known as the traditional elements of fiction. A realistic novel is one which seeks to present a believable world, taking great pains to provide “motivation for the thoughts, emotions, and actions of the characters as well as for the turns and twists of the plot” (7). Such acceptable characters are known as

rounded characters, and the realistic novelist places them firmly in a credible context – “in a specific cultural group, locale, and historical era” (8). With a few notable exceptions, a realistic novelist further attempts to enhance the credibility of his efforts by striking out his presence in his work, presenting it as truth or a narrative based on facts. Murakami breaks nearly all these conventions, Murakami takes the technique to unusual lengths. Sometimes it seems impossible for him to tell a tale in any other way.

His protagonists, who embody contemporary society, offer answers to a variety of compelling questions, such as what human beings are about and their intentions. They represent a generation of people who have been groping for their place and a set of values to live by in a shifting society. Perhaps they see a reflection of their indefiniteness in Murakami’s cool and peculiar characters, who distance themselves from those around them. Moreover, his works are electrifying and frank, and the stories are exciting. Murakami’s unsentimental literature, overflowing with references to pop culture based on the American lifestyle, unfolds like a puzzle and draws readers into a postmodern world in a fantasy-like manner. The excitement is similar to that of a mystery novel. This aspect of his works, along with a literary style suggestive of improvisational jazz, seems to account in part for his enormous popularity.

The author lets his characters wander between reality and fantasy, organizing reality as he pleases. The wall separating fact from pseudo-reality gradually fades away, and the notion of the here loses its former meaning. In other words, here simultaneously becomes the otherworld and the real world.

After Dark (2004) is a postmodern novel in which the scenes are portrayed fantastically: the most spoken of character of the text. Eri Asai delves deep into an everlasting sleep. And the family is so busy to notice the hibernation taken by the eldest daughter except

the younger sister Mari Asai. This condition of inactiveness is evident through the character Eri Asai in *After Dark*(2004);

But consciousness-or its absence-is of no concern as long as the functions for sustaining life are maintained. Eri's pulse and respiration continue at the lowest possible level. Her existence seems to have been placed upon the narrow threshold that separates the organic from the inorganic- secretly, and with great care. How or why this condition was brought about we as yet have no way of knowing. (31)

Home is the place where one can be oneself but the protagonist of *After Dark*(2004) doesn't feel at home. She wants to elude from the clutches of the reality and takes shelter at a Denny's, a night hotel. "I just wanted to be alone for a while someplace other than my house. Until morning." (70) The Night is considered to be a time for rest where a person can forget the worries that in the day. But here in *After Dark*(2004), the night time is highly peopled and a part of the world is still carrying the burden of the day and creating its engagement.

The very title of the novel and the names of its characters – the sisters Malta and Creta Kano, Nutmeg, Boris the Manskiner – have a postmodern feel. *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*(1994) viewed as a postmodern work by the coexistence of the surreal scenes that overwhelm the novel and true-to-life scenes, most of which depict the Nomonhan Incident and the Sino-Japanese War. In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*(1994), Murakami expresses the postmodern predicament subtly that,

Every few minutes, someone would come and paint over the grey – one with a touch of gold or green or red. I was impressed with the variety of greys that existed. Human beings are strange. All you had to do was sit still for ten minutes, and you could see this amazing variety of greys. (61)

Murakami's characters are male, middle-aged, leading aimless existences. They enjoy preparing and eating such western foods as spaghetti; they love American pop culture, particularly the music of the 1960s and 1970s; and they are hedonistic and idle. They either engage in casual love affairs or fantasize about having them. Murakami's novels showcase the meandering plots and improbable coincidences and mysteries. The reader is tempted to identify their male narrators with Murakami himself.

There is a rebellious tone to Murakami's work as well, an all-pervasive atmosphere of anomie, of the breakdown of social structures and systems. Murakami's predicament is not a recent one for the Japanese writer, who has expressed for the past century and a half a sense of inhabiting a deracinated culture in which traditional values have been supplanted by foreign ones, whose feelings for the west are a curious blend of contempt and fascination, superiority and inferiority.

Murakami's narratives similarly are granted little autonomy or distinguishing features. As an author Murakami displays a cavalier, negligent attitude towards his fictional creations; he can scarcely be bothered to think up individual names let alone personalities for them. In *The Elephant Vanishes*, for example, the name Noboru Watanabe is bestowed on a missing cat in the story 'The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women' and on the narrator's sister's fiance in the story 'Family Affair.' Murakami's characters inhabit a quirky but ultimately empty world devoid of ethical concerns in which, for example, it is nothing out of the ordinary for a hungry young couple whose fridge is empty to decide to stage a burglary at a nearby McDonald's, stealing not money but thirty hamburgers to assuage their appetites.

Internal logic need to play no part in the narratives Murakami fashions. His characters often utter speeches which directly contradict their subsequent actions. In *South of the Border, West of the Sun*, for example, despite his being happily married, the narrator is

unable to forget a girl named Shimamoto, he had known in junior high school. When she improbably turns up once again in his life, they embark on an affair, but, like most of Murakami's female characters, she is a mysterious, self-absorbed individual whose personality and motives are impossible to fathom. She appears and disappears in the narrator's life at will; he knows nothing of her life apart from the snippets of information she grants him when she decides to materialize in the small bar he owns in Tokyo. At what proves to be their last meeting, they agree to drive to a cottage the narrator owns in Hakone and, en-route, he affirms his love for her and his commitment to their relationship because she asserts that she will settle for nothing less. But, despite having successfully wrung this concession from her lover, Shimamoto has disappeared by the next morning. Like a cloud that can materialize in the sky on a clear day, she is seen one minute and gone the next, with Murakami feeling under no obligation to provide the slightest motive or explanation for her behavior.

Some of Murakami's more recent work, such as a novel entitled *Sputnik Sweetheart*, published in 2001, has been described as predictable and worn, the work of an author who has taken *faux naive* to the next level. It is evident that Murakami's popularity in the west is on the increase, a phenomenon he attributes to the way his novels show an individual's everyday progress through a suddenly diverted into the weird and fantastical. Murakami's works resemble a slow progression but pleasurable wandering through a strange yet somehow recognizable reality, asking far less of us and not even soliciting our credulity.

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