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Postwar Historiography of Japan and Haruki Murakami: A Study of Haruki Murakami's Select Fiction

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Abstract:

The novels of Haruki Murakami dichotomise the prewar and postwar Japan and establish linearity between the two by showing that postwar Japan is a mere continuum of the prewar imperialistic state. In these novels, he shows that the postwar narrative of growth and development immediately after the war was an attempt by the authoritarian state to erase its war memories—memories of its brutal expeditions in the East-Asian region and the subsequent defeat. However, the postwar youths who knew the war but did not experience it first-hand could not find linearity and failed to conform to the state-sponsored ideals of collectivism. As a result, they often remained isolated or psychologically unstable. From this state of psychological instability, the characters of Haruki Murakami undertake an odyssey that eventually leads to a confrontation with history. In this chapter, I have assessed the postwar condition of Japanese youths as represented in the works of Haruki Murakami and how historical awareness helps them to reconcile with themselves.

Keywords: *flesh-ism, history, historiography, memory*

Introduction:

Often referred to as a ‘ubiquitously cosmopolitan’ and ‘non-national’ writer, Haruki Murakami is an avid critic of Japan’s colonial expeditions and its brutal exercises on the colonised and the subsequent negation of war memories in the postwar period. Postwar Japan was essentially built on the wreckage of the war yet the memories of the war were marginalised because Japan was an aggressor in the war. The impending result of these brutal exercises and the subsequent negation of memories created a void in the society that Haruki Murakami termed in *Underground* a “black hole” (213). The youths of the postwar society, as evident in his writings, are ‘disillusioned’ and ‘fatalistic’ in nature. Postwar Japan is, in fact, characterised by consumerism, industrialization, and

overwork, and capitalism is ruled by the traditional imperialistic form of government. The successful establishment of the nation was realized through the penetration of nationalism that coincided with the nation's modernization and industrialization with rapid changes in each field. Such rapid changes in this period are often seen as an effort to subdue the guilt of those colonial expeditions and the sense of loss in the Second World War. The building of modern Japan, by eradicating these inhuman political exercises from the 'collective subconscious', was a deliberate effort made by the authoritarian government of Japan. Modern Japan chose to be amnesiac. In other words, Modern Japan was another empire in which feudal loyalty was replaced by nationalist loyalty. The outcome of such voluntary obliteration of selective past and substitution of them with 'over-work' and 'industrialization' had a serious impact on society. As observed by Hiroshi Minami, the justification and substitution of the defeat in the Second World War and the inhuman colonial expeditions had negative social impacts such as 'psychological instability', 'fatalism' and 'flesh-ism'. These factors are prevalent in almost all the fictions of Haruki Murakami. His characters are very much influenced by social factors such as 'fatalism', 'flesh-ism' and 'psychological instability', and from such bizarre conditions, they undergo a journey towards self-discovery. But as the journey moves on, they start getting entangled with larger social and historical events. Their historical lineage starts unfolding.

The characters of Haruki Murakami's fiction are presented against this background, where they suffer from crises such as 'loneliness', 'purposelessness', and 'isolation'. The protagonists are mostly without a job such as Toru Okada in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, who leaves his job for no specific reason, and he does not try to find another even. On a symbolic level, the protagonists are a representation of what Hiroshi Minami termed about Japanese youths, that is 'fatalistic' and 'flesh-ist'. They are also characterized by a 'lack of emotional intelligence' such as Boku in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, who is least disturbed by the fact that his wife has divorced him or his ex-girlfriend has died. These characters resort to in an isolated way of life which is far away from the capitalistic society or resort to bodily pleasures such as mindless sex and drinking. From such conditions of 'disillusioned' and 'purposelessness,' they start their odyssey of self-discovery or realisation. The quest initially begins with a search for something external such as Toru Okada going out for the lost cat, Boku going out for the star-marked sheep, and Kafka going out of his home to escape the Oedipal prophecy prophesied by his father that he will sleep with his sister, rape his mother, and kill his father. This external journey, however, takes a turn towards self-discovery where Murakami entangles them with the larger historical context. The journey from 'amnesia' to 'knowledge' begins. During their journey, Boku learns how a group of people such as the Boss profited from the war, which is one of the recurring motifs in the works of Murakami, Toru Okada learns about the inhuman practices of the Japanese soldiers in the Chinese Mainland, and Kafka learns about the fatality of war. The commonality in their findings is that Japan's invasion of China was less of a

civilising mission than to assert dominance and profit from the war that resulted in The Second World War and the subsequent defeat of Japan in the war. In *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, Lieutenant Mamiya says,

We did some terrible things in Nanking. My own unit did. We threw dozens of people into a well and dropped hand grenades in after them. Some of the things we did I couldn't bring myself to talk about. I'm telling you, Lieutenant, this is one war that doesn't have any *Righteous Cause*. It's just two sides killing each other. And the ones who get stepped on are the poor farmers, the ones without politics or ideology. (143)

However, it is important to note that Murakami's major concern in his writings is not the defeat of Japan in The Second World War, but the moral guilt of Japan that they should take responsibility for the grotesque injustices done to its colonial subjects. Though he does not pass judgment over those atrocities in his fiction, he explicates and replicates those historical massacres with grotesque details to evoke the feeling of moral guilt among the Japanese, which has been attempted to obliterate from the society. Deliberate attempts to push those memories into oblivion from the Japanese psyche can also be observed in their use of terminology. An example of which is the Nanking Massacre, where thousands of Chinese civilians were murdered, plundered and raped. But Japan prefers it to be called an 'incident' instead of 'massacre', thereby demeaning the significance of that massacre and thus veering away from taking any moral responsibility for the losses that took place. Modern Japanese historiography, this way, has been a victim of what Ranajit Guha termed as 'elitist' and 'statist' ideology. They were highly manipulated and politicised. Michel Seats in his book "*Murakami Haruki: The Simulacrum in Contemporary Japanese Culture*" takes on the Inega lawsuit where he was forbidden by the Education Ministry of Japan to publish *New Japanese History* because of certain inclusions that did not suit the imperial policy. He comments on the Japanese History books:

"In such books, 'history' appears in the form of timelines, dates and events with the most well-known trope of the imagined defining 'event' of Japanese modernity signified by the proper noun 'Meiji Restoration' which from the early 1930s down to today has been employed to dramatize loyalties and to force men to make clear their ideological commitments." (263)

Murakami both in his fiction and personal interviews claims for the official recognition of those crimes committed by Japan against the other peoples of Asia. His attempt in his writings is to assert the fact that Japan was not simply a victim of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the enemy, but they were also a reason behind the victimization of many. In this regard, Murakami was once asked by an interviewer why the current generation should take responsibility for the crimes committed in the past. In response to this, he replied:

Because we are Japanese. When I read about the atrocities in China in some books, I can't

believe it. It is so stupid and absurd and meaningless. That was the generation of my father and my grandfather. I want to know what drove them to do all those kinds of things, to kill or maim thousands and thousands of people. (qtd. in Jay Rubin 215)

The Wind-up Bird Chronicle can be seen as a part of that painful process to understand those historical events which are now being pushed towards the edge of oblivion. This fiction deals with the Namonhan Incident (1939), The Zoo Attacks and some other incidences with survivors, who recall their traumatic experiences of those incidents. In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, on the other hand, Murakami looks back to the beginning of such colonial invasions by Japan. In his quest for the star-marked sheep, he discovers the history of the place 'Hokkaido' and the reason behind the cultivation of sheep in that place. When Boku reads the area's history, he finds that the Meiji government started raising sheep to promote their plans for continental invasion. As a part of the plan, the government was offering sheep to the locals of Junitaki to raise them. Though it seemed to them as a business plan by the government to raise wool, as time went by and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) broke out they realized the real motive behind such kind of treatment by the government. The villagers were taken away from there and engaged in the war where they got killed. In a sense, the government was cultivating manpower to engage them in the upcoming wars.

Murakami, in both the novels, establishes a link between past and present and presents a critical overview of the process in which attempts were made by the authoritative force of Japan to obliterate those colonial expeditions into the unconscious memory. He sees them not as a past but as a continuous process still hovering in the subconscious mind of the Japanese. The Boss, who sends Boku on that journey, was born in Hokkaido and is described as having been sent to Manchuria "where he fell in with the upper echelons of the Kanto Army and became party to some plot" (Murakami 57). The Kwantung Army was, in fact, the culprit behind the fake railroad attack in Manchuria which resulted in the deaths of thousands of people and subsequently Japan established their puppet regime there. The modern version of this Boss is no less dominating, but rather a metamorphosed version of the colonial superpower. He is a 'right-wing' superpower responsible for the post-war capitalistic, consumerist Japan. He is also the one who is behind the obliteration of Japan's war memory. He is described as someone against whom no one can stand or write: "A magazine reporter got a scoop implicating him in some shady investment deals, but the story never saw the light of day" (56). The Boss was forming an organisation which Jay Rubin termed as a replication of a 'totalitarian state' where the Boss is the controller of everything "politics, finance, mass communications, the bureaucracy, culture, all sorts of things you would never dream of." (118). The commander of this state would be the Boss himself, and "If he pulls out the plug, the ship goes down. Passenger and all, lost at sea, and surely before anyone becomes aware of that fact" (ibid). By this character, Murakami was perhaps alluding to the contemporary Japanese government and its

authoritarian attitude. Through the character, as Jay Rubin observes:

Murakami imputes sinister motives to the key controlling elements of contemporary Japanese consumer culture, linking them with the same forces behind Japan's doomed, destructive attempt at continental expansion. Behind the Boss's all-encompassing shadow kingdom lurks a huge, individual-snuffing, totalitarian "Will" that is somehow embodied in a certain chestnut-coloured sheep with a star on its back. (Rubin 92)

A similar kind of character appears in the novel *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* named Noboru Wataya, whose uncle was a strong believer and supporter of Kanji Ishiwara, the 'ringleader' of the Manchurian Incident. His uncle was there when the incident took place and perhaps helped in perpetrating the attack. Noboru Wataya inherited his uncle's position and thus inherited his legacy of imperialism. Both Boss and Yoshitaka, the uncle of Noboru Wataya, hugely profited from the war and subsequently became economic and political superpowers. Through their characters and their postwar involvement, Murakami shows the profit-mongering nature of war that requires the sacrifices of ordinary civilians.

These characters representing the war-mongering imperial ideology are contrasted with characters such as Toru Okada and Boku, who bear the moral responsibility and the guilt of those victimizations in the colonized countries. Toru Okada, the least political character bears a huge historical significance. His name suggests 'some kind of pre-war foreign minister', and, in fact, Keisuke Okada, with whose name it has a resemblance, was the Prime Minister from 1934 to 1936 who promoted the ideals of 'national essence' and decided to go to war. The idea of 'national essence' was not dead even during the post-war period. The modern essentialised Japan is a standardised Japan with uniform characteristics disallowing internal variation. This Japan is largely the making of the central government to create a unified, uniform, and homogeneous nation. But this essentialised Japan as observed by Yoshio Shogomoto "is an imagined community far from the reality the country presents." (25). Toru Okada's dislike for his name in such a case could be a result of this historical coincidence and the forced notion of 'essentialism'. Again, when the Boku expresses his hatred for capitalism and shows a fondness for individualism the secretary of the Boss gives a long sermon on why individualism is detrimental for the society as a whole. The lecture of the secretary of the Boss, in other words, is an attempt to create a collective society devoid of any internal variation because internal variation often results in subordination or questioning of the nation-state.

The Battle of Namonan, The Zoo Attack, and The Manchurian Incidence told through the character of Lieutenant Mamiya who lived through war, plays a formative part in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*. However, while narrating these incidences Murakami has not maintained historical linearity, nor does he focus on the historical facts and dates. He rather emphasises the narrative

technique and describes each incident with vivid images and grotesque descriptions. Here Jay Rubin's observation is worth mentioning:

Rather than writing about historical facts, then, Murakami examines the Pacific War as a psychological phenomenon shared by generations of Japanese too young (like Toru) to have experienced it first-hand. History is a story. By exploiting the power of storytelling, Murakami takes readers to the edge of the cliff and makes them hang there while he switches to another narrative line. (218)

Murakami has taken up this question of representation of history in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* in a complex way that does not follow historical timelines, but the essence of the events. As Micheal Seats noted, "The text (*The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*) simply lays bare the terms of a debate which is related to the much earlier 'overcoming modernity' conundrum, and the concomitant repression of the signifier 'history' in the discourses of post-war Japanese 'Emperoism'" (263).

Murakami's obsession with such a psychological description of those events is because of the outcome of the state-organised concealing of the imperial history by substituting them with the narrative of 'nation building' that has forced a black hole in Japan's cultural memory. And the painful memories of those who were forced to fight were buried in the black hole. This historical amnesia has contributed to the schizophrenic cultural condition in which disoriented people wander around the empty hole. The condition of Lt. Mamiya and Mr. Honda in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* are the best examples in this case. Both of them had firsthand experiences of the Namonhan War, and after returning from there, their life became a curse for them. If anything they wanted is death. Rat in *A Wild Sheep Chase* decides to kill himself while the spirit of the powerful sheep slumbers inside him. Boku, on the other hand, plays his part by helping the Rat in bombing the Secretary who is equally obsessed with the idea of keeping the sheep in possession. The star-marked sheep that possesses him stands for the contagious imperialistic ideology signifying corrupt power. It once possessed the Boss in Manchuria and then somehow the Boss had lost control over it, and the sheep transferred itself to the Rat. The suicide, keeping the sheep inside himself, can be called as his form of protest against the spreading imperial ideology in modern Japan. The same can be said of Kumiko's decision to kill her child within herself because 'there is something evil in her family', the family of Noboru Wataya.

While the Rat and Kumiko stand to resist the spreading imperial ideology then Boku, Toru, and Chinamon stand for their quest for the meaning of existence and identity. Toru was introduced to those historical incidents by Mr. Honda and then through the letters sent by Lt. Mamiya. He also read about the Zoo Attack from the documents accessed from Chinamon's computer. Toru wonders why Chinamon maintained those historical documents, and the conclusion he could draw is: "He was engaged in a search for the meaning of his own existence. And he was hoping to find it by looking

into the events that had preceded his birth.” (525). This, Jay Rubin notes, is an attempt by the author himself to ‘search for the meaning of his own existence’.

And, in fact, the quest for individual identity is the core of both the novels. Both of them begin the quest for the unknown. Here, *A Wild Sheep Chase* serves as a prelude to *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* and the symbols used in the earlier are more precisely used in the latter. Boku’s search for Rat leads him to Junitaki where he finds “a bird-shaped fountain with no water in it”, while in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* Toru comes across the alley where there is a dead well and a statue of a bird, “The bird had its wings open as if it wanted to escape from this unpleasant place as soon as possible.” (14). Here Jay Rubin comments: “If Murakami’s birds represent a lively communication between the conscious and unconscious world, these frozen birds suggest a kind of amnesia.” (212). The same can also be said about the empty well in that yard. However, the well at the same time serves as a repository of knowledge. When Toru becomes aware of the incidences preceding his birth and the whereabouts of his wife, the well starts filling itself.

Both the fictions, thus, present a clash between the representative of ‘imperial ideology’ and the ‘subjects’ of it. Here, in this context, Murakami’s ‘egg’ and ‘wall’ analogy can be appropriated. The ‘wall’ stands for the powerful Japanese State which was attempting an appropriation of those atrocities by substituting them with a comfortable life of affluence and a state-sponsored ideology of economic participation. On the other hand, the ‘eggs’ stand for the individuals fighting against it, such as Toru and the Rat. The battle is never easy. The death of the Rat and Kumiko suggests the difficulty of this battle. However, killing the sheep or the child in Kumiko’s womb alone is not going to liberate Japan from the evil that they represent in both historical and present context, rather a collective awareness is required. What he ultimately suggests is that the battle is difficult but not unattainable.

That is why almost all the novels of Haruki Murakami emphasise storytelling and passing on stories verbally as against the state-sponsored version of elitist historiography. In *A Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, the stories about the war are passed on to the next generation by Lieutenant Mamiya and Nutmeg (the granddaughter of a war veteran who was stationed in the Chinese mainland during the war) and in *Kafka on the Shore*, the two runaway soldiers share their fear of joining the war and of return fearing persecution, and these are the subaltern versions of Japanese history. In Murakami’s version of historiography, the isolated and individualised versions are given prominence over the official versions and are better known for their obliteration and negation of memories. His novels always attempt to revive forgotten memories because, as Kafka says, “Robbing people of their actual history is the same as robbing them of part of themselves. It’s a crime” (368). However, such forms of historiography are always met with challenges. As a result, the history book written by Ienaga Saburo was taken down by the Education Ministry. In a similar manner, in the fictional world of

Haruki Murakami, Lieutenant Mamiya was made an outcast by the society and the two runaway soldiers do not return home fearing trials. Their isolation is imposed by an authoritarian society because their presence would mean the dissemination of subversive memories– a subversion. But for Murakami, the next generation deserves to know the truth and thus he always creates a narrative necessity through which historical figures who experienced the war pass on their stories to the next generations. Through this transference of wartime memories, he critiques both the postwar totalitarian state as well as its historiography. Interestingly, it is through this transference of knowledge, that the central characters find means to recover from their state of purposelessness and disillusionment. That is why, at the end of the novel *A Wild Sheep Chase*, Boku donates the amount that he earned from the quest to J., his only Chinese friend as a form of reparation. In *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, Toru manages to wound Noboru Wataya, his arch-enemy and a symbol of colonial legacy; and Kafka returns home with a clear conscience. It is the knowledge of history that helps these characters their self-discovery.

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