

The Intriguing World of Haruki Murakami

By Mukesh Williams



Author Mukesh Williams

Murakami's fictional world is a world of elegiac beauty filled with mystical romance, fabulous intrigues and steamy sex where his stories race towards a *dénouement* hard to fathom. Within the wistful experience of this world people disappear and reappear recounting strange tales of mutants, alternate reality, cults, crime and loneliness. Occasionally with a sleight of hand Murakami switches the world that his characters inhabit and absolves them of any moral or legal responsibility. Much to the dislike of Japanese traditionalists, Murakami's fiction has gained wide readership in both Japan and the West, perhaps making him the new cultural face of Japan and a possible choice for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Though some might dismiss him as a pop artist, eccentric lone wolf, or Americanophile, he represents a new Japanese sensibility, a writer who fuses Western and Japanese culture and aesthetics with unique Japanese responses. In this sense he is the first Japanese writer with a postmodernist perspective rooted within the Japanese cultural ethos, outdoing Junichiro Tanizaki's modernist viewpoint.

Impact of the Sixties

Murakami's fiction also returns to the powerful American era of the 1960s and its impact upon Japan in later decades. The literature, attitudes, and music of the Sixties are just waiting to be told in Murakami's novels. His characters are steeped in it. Though Murakami's young readers do not share the experience of growing up in the 1960s and 1970s they can nevertheless imagine them. Often we miss an ethos we have never witnessed or remember a place we have never been. The media is all too powerful, throwing up images and experiences that become our own. It is the psychology of identity, the confusion of appropriating a world we never belonged to. Murakami is no stranger to it, and his fiction speaks of this confusion.

Born in Kyoto in 1949 to parents who taught Japanese literature, Murakami rejected most Japanese literature in favor of American

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Haruki Murakami, the acclaimed Japanese writer, received the 2006 Franz Kafka Award and the 2009 Jerusalem Prize, Israel's highest literary honor for foreign writers.

pulp and mystery novels. His favorite writers are European and American writers — Kafka, Dostoevsky, Scott Fitzgerald, Kurt Vonnegut, Raymond Carver, Raymond Chandler — and his protagonists are social outcasts, loners, part-timers and rebels. Murakami combines the surreal comedy of Kafka, the Fitzgeraldian angst of the lost generation, the surreal dystopia of Vonnegut, the poetic intensity of Carver, and the racy *dénouements* of Chandler's detective pulp. He fuses this heady cocktail with references to Western classical music —

composers such as Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, Handel, Mozart, Schubert and Wagner, and jazz artists like Nat King Cole, Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra. Interestingly Murakami has rejected much of Japanese literature but likes to read a few modern Japanese writers such as Ryu Murakami and Banana Yoshimoto.

Though the West captivates his imagination, Murakami's characters are typically Japanese and rooted in the urban culture of Japan. In an interview with John Wray of *The Paris Review* earlier this year, Murakami talks about this rootedness:

I don't want to write about foreigners in foreign countries; I want to write about us. I want to write about Japan, about our life here. That's important to me. Many people say that my style is accessible to Westerners; it might be true, but my stories are my own, and they are not Westernized.

Some of his critics might disagree with this, but all his novels are written from a first person point of view. They reveal a Japanese protagonist with a sense of urban independence and unique singularity. In the same interview, Murakami says his characters choose "freedom and solitude over intimacy and personal bonds". He calls his style "postmodern".

The *Mono-no-Aware* Effect

Murakami brings to reality a strange quality of fabrication through a song, a movie or a novel, attempting to catch its essence and the regret in failing to do so. He brings to his works the *mono-no-aware* or the sadness of things passing. The novel *Sputnik Sweetheart* (1999) touches us with the sad intensity of human transience and convinces us that "there exists a silent place where everything can disappear, melting together in a single, overlapping figure." When we

close our eyes, as the protagonist K does, we can enter a parallel world, see “many beautiful lost things” and know the “fleeting” nature of our existence. Through Murakami we become aware of classical works like *The Tale of Genji* or *Man'yōshū* and simultaneously feel the loneliness of the individual in a conformist society like Japan.

1Q84 – Incommensurable Worlds

Murakami's fiction highlights the disconnection between the psychological and material worlds his characters inhabit. In his fictional world interpretations are unreliable and events constantly surprise us. Though the two worlds — 1Q84 and 1984 — are parallel and incommensurable, they are both in need of love. Before the Leader is executed by Aomame with an ice pick in *1Q84* he makes a telling statement: “If you don't believe in the world, and if there is no love in it, then everything is phoney.”

Aomame's love for Tengo makes her realize that the two moons she sees in the sky are indicative of the switching of tracks, the gateway to the two worlds, which lie below the emergency stairs of Metropolitan Expressway No. 3 in Tokyo. So towards the end of Book Three she takes the same stairway with Tengo to return to the world called “1984” that she took in the beginning of the story to enter “1Q84.”

The novel *1Q84* begins with two different narratives, one involving the cram school maths teacher Tengo (heavenly) aspiring to win the Akutagawa award, and the other a gym instructor-cum-executioner Aomame (green peas). The novel progresses to the music of Vivaldi and Leos Janacek. The taxi that Aomame takes on her macabre mission to execute a wife beater plays Janacek's pipe organ music from his *Sinfonietta* symbolizing modern man's fight for victory over the forces that demean life. In a sense it represents her success as an executioner hiding a heart of gold. Dressed in a Junko Shimada suit and Charles Jourdan high heels, wearing sun glasses and carrying a 9 mm pistol, she seeks Tengo with suicidal intensity and is willing to kill anyone who gets in her way.

The story shifts between two worlds inhabited by lesbian police officers and balding adulterous men. Hiding behind the facade of licentiousness, subverted sex, masturbation and murder is the adolescent true love of Tengo and Aomame. Even though they live in a new world of two moons called “1Q84” they have not lost spiritual touch with each other. They have not forgotten the moment 25 years ago when she held his hand at age 10 in an elementary school in Ichikawa. They are still invisibly “drawn to each other” and think of each other when they masturbate. By presenting suspenseful events without pontificating Murakami moves away from the narrow Victorian world into an amoral postmodern world of surrealism appealing to the sensibilities of young Japanese readers. In *The Paris Review* interview, Murakami says he likes to “observe people” and not “judge” them or draw “conclusions” but “leave everything wide open to all the possibilities of the world.”

Carnality & Love

In his novels Murakami separates sexual desire from true love.

Photo: EPA=JUI



Murakami's first novel in three years — “*Shikisai wo Motanai Tazaki Tsukuru to Kare no Junrei no Toshi*” (*Colorless Tazaki Tsukuru and his Years of Pilgrimage*) — was published on 12 April 2013 in an initial print-run of 500,000 copies.

Both are important but the first is a physical need, the second an eternal quest for fulfillment and completion. His characters feel no guilt in sexual escapades and Murakami feels no compulsion to evaluate their actions. But even while they are seeking sexual satisfaction with different partners they are always looking for their lost love. In some novels like *1Q84* they succeed, while in others like *South of the Border* (1992) they do not. Though some of the sex scenes in Murakami might seem kinky and tasteless to some Western readers, they hardly raise eyebrows in Japan. To see sex as one of the primary themes of Murakami's novels is to misread them. In Murakami sex anchors the story in a psychological space and often does not lead to self-discovery. Characters know from the very beginning what they are looking for in a sexual encounter and a spiritual union. In *1Q84* the reader encounters the mystical sexual union between Tengo and Fuda-Eri that leaves Aomame pregnant with his child, something like the Immaculate Conception. But underlying the somewhat bizarre impregnation of Aomame is the almost mystical coming together of the long-lost lovers with the help of Fuda-Eri. It is the slow distilling of human essences, the strange encounters with the past that leaves behind a deep regret, a sense of loneliness, a “helpless feeling” of “walking on the surface of the moon”.

A Bewildering World of Tunnels & Golden Beasts

Murakami's fascination for the subterranean world of crime and disembodied shadows is largely influenced by Chandler's detective fiction and Kafka's psychological narratives. His fantasies weave their way through real and symbolic underworlds. The twin themes are ideally represented in the two stories of the novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and The End of the World* (1985/2003). The first is told from the viewpoint of a human data processor called Calcutech who must battle with the criminal gang of INKlings and Semiotecs plotting to steal the data, and the other from the viewpoint of the Newcomer whose shadow is cut off from his body and whose eyes are operated to read dreams. The weaving of both stories is fascinating. The world of tunnels, mind control, unicorns, sex and dream-reading represent modern Tokyo in its criminality and grotesqueness.

A Cut off Sensation

Relying on the self to make sense of the world, Murakami's characters often feel disembodied, as if cut off from people and events. In *South of the Border* Murakami calls it the "cut off sensation". This is something that his young readers love. They see him as representing their lifestyles, attitudes and values. If his writing is unpolished and lacks the formal restraint of traditional Japanese writers like Natsume Soseki or Junichiro Tanizaki, Murakami creates a powerfully chaotic world where his protagonists are constantly baffled by Daliesque distortions of events, be it Toru Watanabe in *Norwegian Wood* (2000), jazz bar owner Hajime in *South of the Border*, the chain-smoking Japanese of *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1989), teacher Tengu Kawane in 1Q94 or nondescript Tsukuru Tazaki in *Shikisai wo Motainai Tazaki Tsukuru* (2013). In this frenzied world life can become meaningless without love; it can become an arid desert.

In his novels characters wander aimlessly following a mirage of love and getting confused in the process. Hajime speaks for all of them when he concludes that, "Everyone just keeps on disappearing. Some things just vanish, as if they were cut away. Others fade slowly into the mist. And all that remains is a desert." When Yukiko asks him if she is included in the desert Hajime answers yes. However what is intriguing to Hajime is the celluloid existence of the desert as in Disney's film *The Living Desert*, which exudes a delusive energy both confusing and disempowering. Much to the chagrin of traditional scholars, Murakami's blasé and amoral style represents the changing face of literary Japan.

South of the Border

There is always a lack of something between what we want to say and what we feel. Murakami's characters are forever grappling with this Derridaen predicament. The poignant nostalgia of postwar Tokyo, the wistful sadness of adolescent love, the middle age crisis of finding authenticity in life are all framed in the backdrop of Nat King Cole's haunting rendition of the song "South of the Border" in the novel of the same name. The protagonist Hajime, now a successful owner of jazz bars in Aoyama, confronts his past after a visit from his long-lost love Shimamoto. He finally chooses his wife and two lovely daughters over the beautiful rain-scented Shimamoto. But the novel is less about star-crossed lovers, family duty, suicide or nostalgia for the 1960s and more about unreliable memory, confusing sensations and alternate reality that throws individual consciousness into turmoil. This is Murakami's world, where events are not grounded in moral clichés but stand for themselves in a confused eddy of sequential time. It is this quality that endears him to the Japanese young.

Towards the end of the novel, *South of the Border*, looking for the Shimamoto envelope with 100,000 yen, Hajime feels a "cut off sensation" and describes it as follows:

Because memory and sensations are so uncertain, so biased,

we always rely on a certain reality — call it an *alternate* reality — to prove the reality of events. To what extent facts we recognize as such really *are* as they seem, and to what extent these are facts merely because we label them as such, is an impossible distinction to draw. Therefore, in order to pin down reality as reality, we need another reality to relativize the first. Yet that other reality requires a third reality to serve as its grounding. An endless chain is created within our consciousness, and it is the very maintenance of this chain that produces the sensation that we are actually here, that we ourselves exist. But something can happen to sever that chain and we are at a loss.

Hajime reveals the dependence of memory and sensations on a chain of events, and whenever this chain is broken it causes confusion. Murakami believes that often confusion leads to disappointment, which in turn creates a "new awareness of the world".

Social Commitment

Murakami is also a socially committed writer who is disturbed by calamitous events, either man-made or natural. This is reflected in two works — *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* and *After the Quake*. The first is a series of interviews revealing the loneliness of individuals in a highly materialistic society after the gas attack and the second a collection of short stories around the Kobe earthquake. Such events reveal the fragility of life and society, and how a small event can make economic development go awry. Critical of the "seductive narrative" of the media detailing the lives of the Aum perpetrators, Murakami wants to portray the lives of the victims to correct the picture. Like Junpei in "Honey Pie" Murakami wants to "write about people who dream and wait for the night to end, who long for the light so they can hold the ones they love."

Conclusion

Though Murakami's fictional characters are filled with intense passion and a longing to be loved, there is a bewildering confusion at the heart of his fiction. People like the Sheep Man reject the constraining aspects of society and go into hiding from "war, civilization, the law, the system." They find themselves "at the edge of the world" where "everything spill[s] over into nothingness" (*Dance Dance Dance*); only love redeems. Ultimately, neither the writer nor his characters are in a position to pontificate about the efficacy or futility of the world they live in. When Tengu asks the question to himself, "*What kind of world will be there tomorrow?*" the wise Fuka-Eri, reading his mind, answers, "No one knows the answer to that." Only time will tell. **JS**

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