

Reclusion in the Works of Haruki Murakami

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Abstract:

This paper will deal with the idea of the 'recluse' as understood in the earlier times and how it has evolved with the changing times. This study will primarily be based on a few selected works of Haruki Murakami and the portrayal of his characters. The works which will be considered are *Kafka on the Shore* and *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and his Years of Pilgrimage*. All the three novels have protagonists who were alienated; this paper aims at understanding their background and situations.

Keywords: Recluse, Reclusion, Alienation, Japanese Literature, Haruki Murakami.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the continuously developing world of today, words are gaining different meanings. One such word is 'Recluse'. In the early fifteenth century 'Recluse' traditionally referred to a person who lived away from the society, a hermit, who had renounced the materialistic things and moved on to the peripheral landscapes of mountains and countryside. Highly influenced by Chinese Zen Buddhism, the court hermits were well read, books like *Tao-Te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu* were the most common texts in their lists. But in the contemporary world, this word is also evolving with time. A recluse in the present scenario can be understood as a person who has not necessarily given up on the idea of the society but has created a solitary niche for himself on the peripheries.

Muro, in his idea of 'recluse of the mind' talks about the hermits who were pure and genuine even after living in the capital. He then goes on to talk about internalizing the idea of reclusion, by stating that these hermits could still live in the secluded lands and solitude in their minds and imagination. This paper will include a reading of the contemporary and modern idea of the recluse. Borrowing from Muro, this paper will illustrate how a person who is not completely on the outside of the

borders of the society can maintain a balance between being a part of it and being solitary simultaneously. A present day recluse will know how to maintain the balance between his personal space and the outer space (*uchi/soto*). He will know his boundaries, when to step out of it and when to let anyone else enter. Murakami over the years has portrayed characters who have been shown in the light of alienation and sometimes deep in existential crisis. According to Kim Smiley "we live in a society that stigmatizes seclusion, yet has an almost rabid fascination with it at the same time." Thus, Murakamian characters are very attractive and alluring to study about.

II. THE MURAKAMIAN RECLUSE

Haruki Murakami, while talking about his work, '*Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*' exclaimed, "I am an outcast of the Japanese literary world." The Japanese literature which is full of anecdotal stories related to their culture and tradition is considered to be canonical. Great writers like Kōbō Abe, Banana Yoshimoto, Ryu Murakami, Kenzaburō Ōe all keep going back to the Japanese tradition of solidarity, community, love and culture. Japan has always been a society which knew and practiced unity. They have always kept their traditions close to their hearts. Japanese

school of thought has always been religiously and culturally rich.

Murakami on the other hand opens up a different world for the readers. Not forgetting to inculcate the ideas of mystery, magic and the Japanese culture, Murakami has also included themes like alienation and existential crisis. He has created beautiful works which intersect at the point of history and popular culture. While analyzing the horrendous affects of the war on Japan he not only portrays the collective thinking of the society but also delves into individualism and the individual psyche of people who were affected. Other than writing about social issues and Landmark events like the war he also considers the daily struggles of a human mind and life. His characters are shown to be engrossed in the daily life, facing the problems which any other regular person would be facing. His characters go through the turmoil of life, face problems like depression, insomnia and many more disorders. They are loners, who observe the society from a distance with occasional interaction. The backgrounds and circumstances of all these characters might differ but they always end up alone, pointing to the bitter truth of life, that everyone is lonely at the end of the day. Murakami once said, "I am a loner, I don't like groups, schools, literary circles." In each novel he aims at developing a main character who is "an independent, absolute individual, a type of man who chooses freedom and solitude over intimacy and personal bonds." Murakami filters his personal ideology and practices into his works. He also stated in an interview, "When I write a novel I put into play all the information inside me. It might be Japanese information or it might be western; I don't draw a distinction between the two."

All these words point to the one fact that Murakami believes in breaking the shackles of society, community, groups and border bound landscapes. He observes himself as a free spirit and reflects this lifestyle in his characters. Referring back to the idea of the 'recluse of the mind' this paper will look into

the various circumstances and situations which lead to the formation of a recluse. Some might end up in a situation or circumstance which leads them to be a recluse, while the others choose to do so due to their innate nature. It can be the schizoid personality disorder, agoraphobia, the belief that the self is more superior to the rest, lack in confidence or lack of interest. The background or the life experiences can equally contribute in the development of such a character who is alienated. As Murakami says in his book 'Kafka on the Shore', "Solitude comes in different varieties." Leading to the understanding that recluse can also be of multiple types and identities.

III. KAFKA TAMURA: THE BOY NAMED CROW

Kafka Tamura was a fifteen year old boy who chose to leave his home and the luxuries to go around the world, reading and learning new things. He meets different people, finds out truths about himself, stays in the woods all alone and reads endlessly. The lifestyle which he chose for himself was of solitude and occasional feeling of loneliness. If his family and the background which he hailed from are seen under the analytical lens the multiple reasons for his reclusion can be identified. His mother left when he was a kid, planting the fear of being left alone in him. His father never paid attention to his life and was always engrossed in his own work and life. Kafka never had a life full of love or care, all he ever had was himself and the voice in his head 'The boy named crow'. He knew that he "had to get out of here", "no two ways about it". His circumstances and situations led him to be a recluse. Murakami thus shows a character who is pushed into the solitary lifestyle. Even though he spends most of his time alone, he befriends Oshima and lets him in his life. He says, "All the students dress neatly, have nice straight teeth, and are boring as hell. Naturally, I have zero friends. I've built a wall around me, never letting anybody inside and trying not to venture outside myself." The reasons for Kafka's reclusion can thus be understood as his low confidence and his realization that eventually

everyone is left alone. He chooses who to let in and whom to push away. His life is of a complete loner who does not need any body's presence. Murakami also hints at the psychological innate factors which might lead the reclusion in the part where the boy named crow states, "Not that running away's going to solve everything. I wouldn't count on escaping this place if I were you. No matter how far you run. Distance might not solve anything." These lines reflect the fact that by his innate nature Kafka was person who was bound to be a recluse, no matter where he goes or whom he meets.

IV. NAKATA: THE OUTCAST

"I can't describe that feeling of total loneliness. I just wanted to disappear into thin air and not think about anything." Nakata, a middle aged man went through what Erikson labels as the 'Identity Crisis', which is further explained by Frank Johnson as the "Stressed individualized feelings, purposelessness, moral relativism, absurdity, loneliness, separation, a perceived lack of control over one's environment and a consequent awareness of the instability of one's own actions." Nakata was the result of a pivotal event which occurred in his life. He was affected by the magical rays which suddenly changed his life, he lost his memory and took years to understand who he really was. This lack of understanding of himself led him to shut out the rest of the world. The society also looked at him as a phenomenon which was a post- apocalyptic result, which could cause fishes and leeches to rain from the sky. He was an outcast because he was a mystery. He had just one goal in his life and that was to find the entrance to the other world, relieving him of this alienated life. Even though he spent a lot of time with Hoshino, his situations were never completely revealed. Hoshino knew nothing about Nakata, till the end he remained a mystery no matter how much time they had spent together. Nakata was thus a recluse by his circumstances and situations, which later he had to accept as a choice in order to be not looked at differently by the society.

V. TSUKURU TAZAKI: THE COLORLESS

"Something must be fundamentally wrong with me, Tsukuru often thought. Something must be blocking the normal flow of emotions, warping my personality. But Tsukuru couldn't tell whether this blockage came about when he was rejected by his four friends, or whether it was something innate, a structural issue unrelated to the trauma he'd gone through." Tsukuru Tazaki was shockingly thrown out of his group of friends, all the stability he knew about in his life vanished suddenly. This had a traumatic effect on him leading to his lifestyle of isolation. Even if he interacted with people, he made sure to never create emotional ties with them. Sara, his lover finally convinces him to go back to his friends and find out the reasons behind the disturbing banishment which happened over a decade ago and haunted Tsukuru till present day. Tsukuru represents the recluse by chance in the works of Murakami. He is a character who is pushed into the solitary life due to the traumatic experiences. He is considered 'colorless' in the world full of colorful people, this is a metaphor which Murakami uses to evoke and illustrate the idea of alienation. Tsukuru was different and that is why he was an outcast, he did not have an option but to live his life without ever creating intimate bonds. Even if he tried to do so he failed miserably, he could never sexually perform, he could never open up about his feeling and emotions, he became the definition of a schizoid. Shlomo Shoham views 'separation' as a vector opposed to 'participation'. Tsukuru 'participated' in the society, in his little world for a long time and stayed happy but later after he was forcefully taught 'separation' he mastered that art and later struggled to 'participate' again.

VI. CONCLUSION

"Alienation is often viewed as some sort of 'disease' – an undesirable state of affairs which should be changed." It is important to understand that a person who is a recluse might not necessarily be suffering. He/ she might be happy in their niche away from human interactions and building walls around them

which occasionally crumble for someone to enter. Richard Schacht divides the idea of alienation in subjective and objective. According to his theory the subjective alienation is a result of psychological dissatisfaction, while the objective alienation is caused by social dysfunction. Characters like Kafka Tamura are the result of both, since he faced a lot of psychological dissatisfactions from the side of his family, later he developed a dysfunction to be able to mingle with the society. Tsukuru Tazaki practiced the subjective alienation, resulted by his psychological traumas. Nakata on the other hand had become psychologically numb, he was dysfunctional due to the extraordinary powers he possessed and the out worldly aims and goals of his life.

Gattungswesen means the essence of the human species, the utopian idea, and an ideal state of non-alienated man. Karl Marx meant this as a term for the elimination of the economic alienation in the capitalist society. Fromm and Marcuse believe that, "Alienation becomes a judgmental instrument for criticizing the existing state of affairs." This paper thus concludes that there can be multiple reasons behind the creation of a recluse and it is unfair to see him only under one light of positivity or negativity. While some characters are forced into reclusion, some are born with a mind which leads them to this fate. Murakami brilliantly portrays all the perspectives in his works and succeeds in not only delving into the characters' psyche but also putting him parallel to the societal perception and ideology.

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