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OURSELVES
IN TECHNOLOGICAL
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Mari Asai's Personal Isolation in Haruki Murakami's *After Dark*

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ABSTRACT

This paper sought to reveal insights into how Haruki Murakami's *After Dark* is reflective of the isolation currently being experienced by Japanese society today. The writer analyzed and consolidated the author's writing style and explored the prominence of the theme of isolation on the novel's protagonist. This was achieved using a formalist approach to the story, sticking only to what the text has to offer and give evidence for. The paper found that the expression of a society's culture can be seen in how they depict themselves for others to read and understand them, especially in analyzing the character of Mari.

Key Words: Haruki Murakami, *After Dark*, Japanese literature

INTRODUCTION

Literatures of different countries have different ways of reflecting their country as a nation, its history as a society, and the culture by which its people live their day to day lives. For foreigners who read such literature, these stories spread across the globe are the means by which they can get to know these places with cultures so different yet so similar to their own and obtain a better understanding of them. In the realms of academic and scholarly studies of these literatures, it is, more often than not, more common to find research and reviews done by non-Asians on Asian literature and it is only within the past decades that Asians have set their eyes on taking a peek at their fellow Asians literatures. However, here in this paper, a Southeast Asian will attempt to tackle an East Asian, specifically a Japanese, work and hope to come out with a viable study.

Japanese literature has a unique history of being very self-reflective, perhaps because of their experiences throughout history as their culture evolved into what it is today. The contemporary works that can be seen and read today reflect that history and the kind of culture that thrives within its islands continuously. For this paper, the specific work that will be analyzed is Haruki Murakami's *After Dark* and a formalist approach of analysis will be used in order to derive and understand how this work is reflective of the contemporary Japanese society and culture of the present.

Haruki Murakami is a Japanese author born on the 12th of January 1949 in Kyoto. He is known for many works that have been translated into English and many other languages all over the world. Some of these works are of novels such as *Norwegian Wood*, *The Wind-Up*

Bird Chronicle, Kafka on the Shore, 1Q84, and ColorlessTsukuruTazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage.

His novel that will be focused on for this paper is entitled *After Dark*, originally published in 2004 before being translated into English and published internationally in 2007. Set in contemporary metropolitan Tokyo, it tells a story of things that happen in the late hours of the night where everyone is usually asleep. It seems to mainly explore the theme of isolation with each of the characters whose experiences throughout the events of the novel seem coincidentally connected to each other in some way. In a way, it can be said that this work is reflective of a contemporary Japanese society and culture wherein the people constantly try to find connections with each other but cannot because of their own personal kinds of isolation. This will be discussed in detail when the protagonist of the novel is analyzed in detail.

WRITING STYLE

Murakami's writing style is characteristic of his culture, not playing out in the conventional sense like in Western novels of the same period, especially in the way foreign audiences might perceive it. Instead of being plot-driven, it seems to be more character-driven, at least in the academic sense. There is no overarching "something must happen" feeling when one reads the novel; instead the reader would be more focused on how the characters themselves are driving the plot forward at their own casual paces based on their own reflections and actions that help push the plot onwards. It is true that there are some things that happen in the novel that are not motivated by characters, but those are secondary to their ability to provide context or further elaborations on what is happening compared to how much the characters are not led by the plot but lead it. This must be attributed to Murakami's own writing style for it is the author who weaves the tale for it to flow seamlessly when others read it.

As with all things, there are some things that cannot be fully grasped or understood, and, in this case, it lies in the fact that the copy of this novel that the author of this paper has written on is an English translation of the text. Therein lies the problem. Translations have surely been done by some of the best and, in doing their jobs, translators must be able to properly convey the most proper meaning of what they are translating. This is not to say that Jay Rubin, the one who has translated the copy that the author of this paper possesses, is at fault here. Something that must be acknowledged is the fact that meanings can get lost in translation, especially if certain native words or phrases do not have any equal meanings in languages like English. That is why some sentences seem odd or nonsensical to the English language reader then if it is shown to a Japanese person, he/she is more than likely to understand it immediately. This is also not to discredit this research as its basis is on the translated copy because of the fact that it is still a very good translation of Murakami's work and is still a good case to study in the field of literature.

Another aspect of Murakami's writing style to be explored in *After Dark* is the very cinematographic approach he takes in writing out the events of as they unfold throughout the novel. Evidence of this can be found in different instances within the novel. First there is at the beginning and at the end of the novel where the narrator pans around the city like an omniscient camera that can narrate and describe what is happening around as if needing to explain to the reader, through imagery most likely, the context of the setting he/she must find him/herself in. Another specific instance would be whenever the reader encounters the chapters which involve EriAsai and the slightly creepy omniscient camera

the reader takes the point of view of as she sleeps deeply and odd things happen between the reality and a dream that one cannot tell which is which anymore. Another instance of this cinematographic approach would be less on the visual sense of cinematography but more on the writing aspect. In some parts of the novel where two characters are conversing with each other, usually seen between Korugi and Komugi, two workers at the Alphaville love hotel, it turns into a script format of a dialogue between the women, which, interestingly enough, barely happens to the other characters, even the more minor ones.

The last aspect of Murakami's writing style which will be discussed is the postmodernist-like approach he takes in writing the novel itself, not only in such an unconventional way as discussed in the previous paragraphs, but also in how he titled all the chapters. True to the title of the novel, *After Dark*, the titles of each chapter is set at a certain time on a wall clock, as if by reading the novel, one gets a feel of the events as if they're happening in real time as the late hours of the night approaches. The first chapter starts at 11:56PM while the last chapter ends at 6:52AM. In the course of less than seven hours, so many things have happened to the characters, especially to Mari Asai, who is arguably the protagonist of the novel.

In applying these approaches in writing his novel, Murakami still tells a story but does so in a creative manner that he pulls off very well. It may be unconventional and surely not the traditional manner by which one would tell a story, but he does so anyway with the way he sees fit to best convey the story he wants to tell.

MARI ASAI'S PERSONAL KIND OF ISOLATION

The protagonist of the novel, Mari is described as an ordinary-looking, nineteen-year old college freshman who is out late at night spending it away from home and perhaps to get away from home. She is described by the other characters, and it is sometimes even implied by what she tells of herself, that she is a hardworking lady who is sure of herself and is strong-willed, even if she does not come off that way initially or thinks of herself that way. And yet, as the novel progresses and the reader learns about her life bit by bit, one can notice how she leads an isolated life that may have its own pockets of peaceful solitude but it becomes quite clear that she struggles to not drown in her isolation, whether it was forced on her or self-imposed or even both. The main struggle she seems to deal with throughout the novel is the isolation she feels from her older sister, Eri, whom she feels she is no longer close to ever since they drifted apart. The tipping point for Mari's midnight excursions may have been the fact that, as she reveals, her sister has been sleeping deeply for the past two months and has done little else but that and it worries her. This can be seen in the following excerpt:

“My parents are trying to take the most optimistic view---that my sister will sleep as much as she wants to, and one day she'll wake up like nothing ever happened, and everything'll go back to normal. They're clinging to that possibility. But I can't stand it. Or should I say, every once in a while I can't take it anymore---living under the same roof with my sister and not having any idea why she's out cold for two months.” (Murakami, 2007)

The isolating she feels between her sister and herself is expressed even further by Mari when she confides with Korogi that she has not felt like she knows her sister anymore despite living together.

““To be completely honest,” Mari says, “I never knew my sister very well--- like, how she was spending her days, or what she was thinking about, or who she was seeing. I don’t even know if something was troubling her. I know this sounds cold, but even though we were living in the same house, she was busy with her stuff and I was busy with my stuff, and the two of us never really talked heart-to-heart. It’s not that we didn’t get along: we never had a fight after we grew up. It’s just that we’ve been living very different lives for a long time.”” (Murakami, 2007)

One can feel the hint of sadness Mari is feeling when she thinks about how separate the lives she and her sister are living despite being sisters and living together. Here, Mari’s, and even Eri’s, own isolation shows itself prominently in how Mari feels left out by her sister who is the complete different from her in all but blood. But she may be already realizing that she herself may have been isolating herself from her sister as well, perhaps as a way to not get hurt when she is eventually isolated by her sister, at least, if she thinks about it that way. This is confirmed when Korogi listens patiently to Mari’s stories about what her sister is like before giving the young lady some advice to help:

“You may not feel that close to her now, but I’m sure there was a time when you did. Try to remember a moment when you felt totally in touch with her, without any gaps between you. You probably can’t think of anything right this second, but if you try hard it’ll come. She and you are family, after all--- you’ve got a long history together. You must have at least one memory like that stored away somewhere.” (Murakami, 2007)

It seems like it was at this point where Mari decided that she must acknowledge her own self-imposed isolation towards her sister and reconnect with her again. Towards the end of the novel, when she and her friend Takahashi are walking to the train station, she finally opens up to him more about how she feels about her sister. It seems that here she manages to do what Korogi said that she could; bringing up a fond memory of a certain time she spent with her sister where she was very close to her. Mari recounts a story from when she was in kindergarten, and she and her sister were stuck in a powered off elevator.

“Of course, Eri was scared to death, too. I’m sure. Maybe even as scared as I was. She must have wanted to scream and cry. I mean, she was just a second-grader, after all. But she stayed calm. She probably decided on the spot that she was going to be strong. She made up her mind that she would have to be the strong big sister for my sake. And the whole time she kept whispering in my ear stuff like, ‘We’re gonna be okay. There’s nothing to be afraid of. I’m here with you, and somebody’s gonna come and help soon.’ She even sounded totally calm. Like a grown-up. She even sang me songs, though I don’t remember what they were. I wanted to sing with her, but I couldn’t. I was so scared my voice wouldn’t come out. But Eri just kept singing for me all by herself. I entrusted myself completely to her arms. The two of us became one: there were no gaps between us. We even shared a single heartbeat. Then suddenly the lights came on, and the elevator shook again and started to move.”

Mari inserts a pause. She is backtracking through her memory, looking for the words.

“But that was the last time. That was...how should I say it?...the one moment in my life when I was able to draw closest to Eri...the one moment when she and I joined heart to heart as one: there was nothing separating us. After that, it seems, we grew farther and farther apart. We separated, and before long we were living in different worlds. That sense of union I felt in the darkness of the elevator, that strong bond between our hearts, never came back again. I don't know what went wrong, but we were never able to go back to where we started from.” (Murakami, 2007)

Perhaps, in finally recalling a memory where she experienced the closeness that she yearns for from her older sister, Mari has found a way to overcome her isolation with Eri and finally reconnect and get close to her again, hopefully when, and if, she finally wakes up from her deep sleep.

CONCLUSION

In a way, Haruki Murakami's novel entitled *After Dark* can reflect one aspect of the Japanese society culture of today, especially in a society where people are disconnected from each other despite being physically together. People, especially the youth, may be feeling isolated from one another perhaps because of what society has imposed on them or perhaps what isolation they impose on themselves or even perhaps a mix of both. And perhaps, as the title implies, it is only after darkness descends where people can truly open up and confess their deepest secrets and become closer to one another.

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