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Book review: *Kafka on the Shore*

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Kafka on the Shore

Author: Haruki Murakami

Original Language: Japanese

Translated into English by Philip Gabriel

Publisher: Vintage

Year of Publication: 2005

Pages: 505

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When we come across a book by Haruki Murakami, we know that it is obviously going to be a thought-provoking read making us question the uncritical acceptance of outward reality and usher us into a tantalising fictional world of magic and fantasy. But his books are not any fantasy fiction in which fantasy is used for its own sake in order to temporarily regale the readers. Unlike in fantasy pulp fiction, in Murakami's books, the phantasmagoric world which blurs the tenuous line between the real and the hyperreal, lends itself to varied interpretations regarding the nature and existence of the self vis-a-vis psychic reality. Despite the metaphysical question about man's identitarian struggle being the recurrent theme in his works, these are by no means meant only for a small coterie. On the contrary, there is an abiding appeal of his books to the masses, the reason behind which is the relatability of his works which engage the readers in conversation with the characters. Moreover, the author has a unique gift for juxtaposing the elements of popular culture and philosophical discourse into a coherent whole which dismantles the cultural sacrosanctity of high art. For instance, in *Kafka on the Shore* there are disparate references ranging from Mickey Mouse, the popular liquor brand Jonnie Walker to Austrian composer Franz Schubert and Hegel's dialectic in the speech of a prostitute hired by Colonel Sanders, the founder of America's fast food chain KFC. In my opinion, Murakami's ability to dismantle the firmly entrenched divide between



mass and class and to grip the readers' attention by surprising them at every turn by placing these familiar references in unfamiliar contexts, earned him the status of a bestselling author.

Though this Japanese writer started his literary career much earlier, he came into limelight with the publication of *Norwegian Wood* which brought him instant fame. In spite of his immense popularity with Japanese youth and international acclaim, he is sadly not considered a part of Japan's intelligentsia because of the allegedly excessive western influence on his works. Though since his school days, he has been an avid reader of European literature, it does not mean he is not sensitive enough to Japanese history or culture or literature. For him, the Japanese and western culture are not mutually exclusive. Just as his own novels refuse to be straitjacketed into a specific category, he rules out any binary opposition between these two cultures. When asked about the American understanding of Japanese cultural references in an interview, he made his standpoint clear. He said "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. I can't imagine how American readers will react to this, but in a novel if the story is appealing it doesn't matter much if you don't catch all the detail. I'm not too familiar with the geography of nineteenth century London, for instance, but I still enjoy reading Dickens." In another interview after the publication of the novel *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*, he says, in reference to his not having read many Japanese contemporaries, "I'm a kind of outcast of the Japanese literary world. I have my own readers ... But critics, writers, many of them don't like me... I have been writing for 35 years and from the beginning up to now the situation's almost the same. I'm kind of an ugly duckling... always the duckling, never the swan."

On reading this novel through, I feel that the number of references made to the Japanese tradition or how far he is Japanese in his sensibility, should not be our primary concern here. What matters here is the universal appeal of the textual world which strikes a chord with millions of readers. Just like the entrance stone which for Nataka is a guide to the extraterrestrial world, this novel leads the readers out of the mundane world into an alternative textual world unmediated by the constraints of logical time, space and incidents. There they encounter happenings like fish and leeches falling



from the sky, cats conversing with man, Kafka's father taking the shape of a bottle of whisky, flutes made out of cats' souls, which are outside the pale of rational explanation or objective reality. The focal point in this novel is the search for the integrity of the self. This eerie world takes sensory reality to a metaphysical domain which makes the readers cross the tenuous line between the textual and the real world. The process of reading through which the readers experience the psychic trials and tribulations of the central characters Kafka and Nataka urges them to synthesize the scattered fragmented pieces of their selves.

In the novel, in alternating chapters, two different narratives run parallel to each other. In the odd numbered chapters, a fifteen-year-old boy who has adopted the pseudonym Kafka embarks on an Oedipal quest for his mother who left him when he was four and a half years old. Though there is no direct link established between Kafka Tamura and the philosopher Franz Kafka by the author, our fifteen-year-old Kafka Tamura inhabits a Kafkaesque world of alienation, anxiety, and existential crisis. Since this adolescent boy has been emotionally alienated by his domineering father who looms large as a patriarchal authority, he craves complete assimilation with his lost mother figure. This Oedipal motif calls to our mind Franz Kafka's 'The Judgement' in which he explores the anxiety and guilt in a conflicted father-son relationship which reverses the oedipal myth with the father condemning the son to death. In case of Kafka, in order to intensify his alienation, his father curses him that he would be the murderer of his father and end up having sexual encounter with his mother. In order to evade this Oedipal curse he flees his house and then we see him taken through a series of incidents which are acted out on a surreal plane giving free rein to the readers' imagination. After Kafka loses his physical shelter, he gets emotional shelter in the supposedly surrogate mother figure Miss Saeki, a librarian who takes him under her wing. The interdependence and mutual attraction between them are beyond the dimension of realism and seen in supranatural world of apparitions and simultaneous existence of the different versions of the same persona. Their liaison constitutes a patchwork of dreams in which Miss Saeki, in a reverie, attempts to relive her past by sleeping with Kafka whom she identifies with her dead lover who died young. Kafka is in love with the apparition of her fifteen-year-old self and at the same time is



seen to be enamoured of the same mother figure. His relationship with figures from the past and present lays bare his unconscious enabling him in coming to terms with his own self. This is a liberating experience for him which helps him gradually evolve into “the toughest 15-year –old in the world”, as said by the boy named Crow. Since the author has a penchant for the interplay of multilayered allusions and mystery, the identity of the crow is never disclosed. Since Kafka means ‘crow’ in Czech, it can be assumed that Crow is a manifestation of his other self which sustains and negotiates with his fragile self.

As Kafka undertakes a journey along a meandering psychological path, another old man Nataka ekes out a vegetative existence after he lost his memory and rational faculty in the Rice Bowl Hill incident. After several weeks, he came back to his consciousness only to find himself left with little more than his instinctual drives. Following the disaster, he developed an extraordinary ability of speaking to cats and cat-finding becomes a means for him to earn his livelihood. Could we say that his conversations with cats provide him with a validation of his otherwise vacant existence? Is this so called absurd activity a mode of searching the rational and superior self? The author leaves us pondering over the questions. We see that a turning point in his life comes which proves to be very crucial for Kafka as well. At this point, Kafka’s father becomes instrumental in leading both Nataka and Kafka to their psychic growth. In a surrealist scene, a whisky bottle labelled Jonnie Walker gradually turns into Kafka’s father who threatens Nataka that he will kill the cats and warns him that he would make flutes out of their souls. When Nataka murders him for saving the lives of the cats, mysteriously Kafka’s clothes get blood-stained. The blood stains suggest that the murder is committed in Kafka’s psychological realm in which he fulfils his father’s prophecy without suffering the guilt of actual murder. This virtual murder also shocks Nataka out of his passive and blinkered existence and gives him the agency to exert his own will.

The merit of this novel lies in its ability to open up a wide range of possibilities for delving into the motives, symbols, images and characters over and over again. Immediately after the publication of this novel, the readers became so perplexed and overwhelmed that Murakami’s Japanese publisher opened an website so that they could ask any question related to the novel.



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Though, out of eight thousand questions Murakami responded to only twelve hundred , he concluded that the key to understanding this work is multiple readings with which the readers would come up with myriad perspectives. In this postmodern world which frustrates any attempt at getting a unitary or one dimensional meaning, Murakami's encouraging such fluidity of interpretations or diverse responses would challenge the unifying and metanarratorial scope of a text and endorse multiple, often contradictory, theoretical standpoints.

Work Cited

Murakami, Haruki. *Kafka on The Shore*. Philip Gabriel (Translator). Vintage International, 2005.