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CONCEPT OF SALARYMAN MASCULINITY IN MURAKAMI'S *A WILD SHEEP CHASE*

Dr. P. S. SUBRAHMANYA BHAT¹, AKASH R. NAIK²

¹Associate Professor & Research Guide, Department of English, Karnatak Arts College Dharwad.

²Research Scholar, Department of English, Karnatak University Dharwad



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ABSTRACT

Japanese masculinity studies have been associated with R. W. Connell's theory of the gender order and hegemonic masculinity, with the Japanese salaryman being identified as a masculine ideal. The masculine traits that are performed differs from one to another in the context of the Japanese society and its gender order. The present article is an analysis of Haruki Murakami's novel *A Wild Sheep Chase*. It proposes that although the characters are asserted to the salaryman masculinity, the traits performed by the characters do not fulfil the models of salaryman masculinity. To understand the social ideal of a society it is important to explore how the gendered performance is influenced in the context of a salaryman.

Keywords: Masculinity, Salaryman masculinity, Complicit Masculinity, Japanese society and businessman class.

Masculinity refers to the qualities, roles, and social expectations of a man in a given society. It is a socially constructed phenomenon rather than biological. Masculinity studies emerged during 1970's. Masculinity studies focuses on masculinity as a social construction and it tries to understand the cultural and ideological functions of the society. According to *Whitehead and Barrett* "Masculinities are those behaviours, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organisational locations, which are commonly associated with men, thus culturally defined as not feminine". (Whitehead and Barrett 10). Strength, courage, leadership are some of the traits which constitute masculinity. Masculinity studies have been popularised by Australian sociologist R W Connell. In her work *Masculinities* Connell proposes four different types of masculinity. They are hegemonic, complicit, marginalised and subordinated. According to Connell dominance, oppression of women, muscular body, aggressiveness is some of the traits that constitute hegemonic masculinity. In complicit masculinity a man does not acquire all the traits of hegemonic masculinity but he does not want to challenge this notion as he gets benefits from this in the society. In Marginalised masculinity men do not have access to hegemonic masculinity because of certain characteristics like race, class and disabilities. Subordinated masculinity springs up when a man is unable to express his hegemonic traits.

In the Japanese context the term 'salaryman' refers to middle class white-collar workers who work tirelessly for their company and are the sole breadwinner of the family. They happily live with a guaranteed lifetime employment. According to Romit Dasgupta "the idea of salaryman is typified through men as breadwinners, with absolute commitment to their company demonstrated through exhaustingly long work days and their nondescript black business suits". (Dasgupta 1). In the Japanese social context, the focus has been on how individuals are performing the cultural ideal of the salaryman and on those masculinities that are marginalised by this model. For the people of Japan, the salaryman is a desirable, achievable and idealised form

of masculinity. The salaryman masculinity emerged during Japan's economic revolution which got approval from the society gradually and later on even the government also sanctioned its approval. Because of this there has been an increase in the ratio of the individuals successfully performing traits of salaryman masculinity. However, there was another group of people who lived beside this ideal and those who were not able to fully achieve it. Thus, it could be argued that the concept of salaryman masculinity became neither completely successful nor completely failed.

A Wild Sheep Chase, a novel set in late 1970s' Japan is the journey of an unnamed protagonist and his quest to find a mysterious Sheep which possesses people for the sake of world domination. The plot begins with the protagonist living in Tokyo who is a divorcee and runs a small publishing business with his alcoholic business partner. He has a girlfriend with magical and attractive ears. One day the black-suited secretary of a right-wing politician called 'Boss' meets him and demands that the protagonist should track down a sheep which was in a photograph he used in a recent publication. The Sheep in the photo is the thing that had possessed the Boss since the Second World War. The protagonist refuses to divulge the name of his old friend the 'Rat' who provided the photo. As a result, he sets out to find this Sheep with his magical-eared girlfriend. When he arrives at the villa in a place called Hokkaido where Rat was last seen his girlfriend suddenly disappears. Then the protagonist meets a man who lives in the mountains dressed as a Sheep. The spectre of the Rat then appears to the protagonist and starts explaining that he had been possessed by the Sheep and for his freedom he had killed himself and taken the Sheep with him. The novel ends with the protagonist returning to the "Boss" and telling him that the sheep is dead.

This article explores different aspects of masculinity in Murakami's novel *A Wild Sheep Chase*. The social theories related to the gender helps us for the better assessment of the novel. As the novel explores the image of salaryman masculinity in Japanese context the protagonist and the business partner demonstrate how the high expectations are associated with the salaryman model has created tensions in the lives of individuals. The business partner dresses in the manner of a responsible businessman "A deep-blue shirt with a black tie, hair neatly combed, cologne" (Murakami 46). His family life is that of a salaryman. He owns a "four-bedroom condominium" (Murakami 147) and has two children who both go to private school and he is the sole breadwinner of the family. In Japanese society owning a house is very important to a middle-class family. The success of the protagonist and business partner's small business has given them the ability to fulfil this dream of own a house. Although like any other salaryman the business partner doesn't work for a large corporate company, he tries to acquire all those traits of a salaryman. However, it appears that the business partner is performing the traits of complicit masculinity in the novel. Although the business partner does not acquire all the traits of salaryman masculinity yet he is receiving the benefits from it.

The business partner tries to express his discomfort with the ideal of salaryman masculinity. He appears to be supporting this ideal in most of the times. But at various points in the novel, he compromises his personal ethics with that of the business practices. This compromise creates tension and raises the question whether the salaryman lifestyle is even desirable. If it's not the case then they are in a place where they lose their dominant position in the society. In a conversation with the protagonist the business partner expresses his concern with the way their business ethics have changed their lives as he says "it was more fun in the old days" (Murakami 48) when they used to do translation work and they liked it. However, the kind of work they do now feels exploitative as they are writing advertisements for products, they neither like nor believe in. The business partner also says 'we don't even know ourselves how much we really make. A tax accountant comes in and does all that awful paperwork, with exemptions and depreciations and write-off and what not' (Murakami 47-48). These lines suggest that the Japanese salaryman ideal has created tension with the role of a businessman and it is questioning the validity of their lifestyle.

"Masculinity is not a static object; it is the product of ongoing interaction between men and women" (Kimmel qt Clark). Women are central to the structure of the salaryman masculinity. In the social structure of the salaryman women supported men as they played a vital role by running the household and raising children. In the case of the ex-wife of the protagonist it generally appears that she was at ease in performing the housewife role. Even when they are not together, she continues to play this part by leaving the protagonist with

information for how to run the household. She says "I made out a list of details. Where papers are filed, trash days, things like that. Anything you can't figure out, give me a call." (Murakami 18). This constitutes the idea of a man where he is completely separated from the household concerns and the wife as the sole manager of it. There is little to suggest that she experiences the same tensions as the business partner. However, there is an important aspect of the ex-wife's behaviour which is different from this structure and should be regarded as a very important one as she had a long affair with a friend of the protagonist. She gets a divorce from her husband to move in with this friend. In successful marriage the position of women is to show complete loyalty and support to the husband and maintain household. But in the case of protagonist's ex-wife the affair and divorce are binary to the Japanese housewife culture. In the novel the ex-wife says "maybe if we'd had a child, it wouldn't have come to this" (Murakami 18), demonstrating the socially held belief that a child is at the core of a successful marriage. But the protagonist doesn't seem to agree with this ideology: "there're lots of couples with kids who get divorced" (Murakami 18). This interaction demonstrates that the ex-wife has engaged with this idealised discourse although the protagonist has rejected it. They came to a conclusion that the relationship was unsuccessful. She says that "I am going nowhere staying with you" (Murakami 21) because of the protagonist's different ideologies. The marriage may have failed as a result of the protagonist's attitude of thinking himself as unsuccessful in life.

In the novel the protagonist's portrayal is more complicated and he was not comfortable with salaryman ideologies. The protagonist's difficulties within the novel appears where he is unable to perform the salaryman ideal's gender performance. Even the society expects him to fulfil the masculine traits which are considered as his duties living in the salaryman lifestyle. Masculinity in the sense of the salaryman carries two important aspects; the struggle for maturity and the successful portrayal of manliness. Masculinity in Japan has been understood as the result of a man becoming mature, and it was something to be struggled for. In the novel the protagonist's engagement with the salaryman is influenced by a range of discourses like what it means to be a man, how to reach maturity, and his identity in the face of a hegemonic masculinity. The business partner seeks to comply with his role in the gender order but the protagonist believes that he himself cannot or should not comply. The protagonist should be in a similar position to his business partner and performing a complicit masculinity as close to the salaryman masculinity but he fails to do that. However, he does not consider himself that he has failed to be a man, but rather that it was just the way things went. He confesses that he believes himself to be the wrong kind of person to have children. He says "what kid would want to have anyone like me for a father" (Murakami 140). He is aware that he is meant to have children but he questions the purpose and the value of having so: "I don't really know if it's the right thing to do, making new life" (Murakami 90). This demonstrates that it is not due to ignorance of the protagonist that he is not performing the traits of salaryman masculinity but rather that he is not embracing the ideals. We can say that he is not completely rejecting the salaryman ideology but he questions the ability of himself to fulfil it.

The protagonist repeatedly compares himself with his more successful business partner. According to him the business partner is the one who is suited to the idea of salaryman. The protagonist does not appear to have fully committed to anything. He got married but did not set up a life, he runs a company but does not think he is involved in actually running it. As the protagonist points out to the black-suited secretary in response to a threat he says "What have I got to feel threatened about? Next to nothing. I broke up with my wife, I plan to quit my job today, my apartment is rented, and I have no furnishings worth worrying about... I made no name for myself, have no social credibility, no sex appeal, no talent. I'm not so young anymore, and I'm always saying dumb things that I later regret... What have I got to lose?" (Murakami 139). This shows protagonist's failure at performing complicit masculinity. He is not tied to anything valuable, and he has nothing that he values. This takes back to the fundamental issue with the salaryman that although in Japanese context it is a very desirable and influential model of masculinity it's not necessary that everyone will be able to perform these traits without any difficulties. Some people are not entirely happy with the salaryman lifestyle but as the society expects them to perform in such a way, they are struggling to cope up with it. In a society where there is less explicit hegemonic masculinity it is difficult to perform all the traits of salaryman ideal. The protagonist with his tension and struggle to compromise with the structure of salaryman has put him on the path of failure.

The novel *A Wild Sheep Chase* thus suggests that the salaryman masculinity offers a greater opportunity to lead a prosperous lifestyle. It also provides some advantages such as becoming the breadwinner, controlling the household activities and being the proud member of the family. To reach and exhibit the traits of the salaryman masculinity one has to struggle a lot but does not ensure his full proof identity in the society. The novel successfully shows that neither the salaryman nor the complicit masculinity has the potential to safeguard the interests of man in the Japanese context.

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