



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.2., 2017 (April-June)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

“We fell silent again”: Analyzing womanhood in Haruki Murakami’s *Trilogy of the Rat*

CHAANDREYI MUKHERJEE

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Jamia Millia Islamia



ABSTRACT

The fiction, fame and personality of Nobel nominated author, Haruki Murakami, constitute an unprecedented triumph of contemporary literature. Reading and understanding Murakami is a truly curious activity and as one of his eminent critics states, “Part of the difficulty in understanding and classifying Haruki Murakami is that he may represent a new cultural plurality that cannot be easily fit into common historical conceptions of national identity or literary canons.” An inalienable part of this surreal trajectory of his otherworldly narratives is his creation of a bafflingly divergent female identity. This paper questions whether the representation of women by a contemporary author like Murakami is truly postmodern or is it fraught with binaries and essentialisms, grazing the tabooed boundary of patriarchy. The paper looks at the first two novels of the *Trilogy of the Rat*, namely- *Hear the Wind Sing* and *Pinball, 1973* in order to analyse concerns of womanhood.

Keywords: Haruki Murakami, womanhood, magic realism, postmodernism

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Introduction

The Trilogy of the Rat is definitely one of the most unusual names given to a collection of three books. The first three novels of the famous Japanese writer, Haruki Murakami, *Hear The Wind Sing*, *Pinball, 1973* and *A Wild Sheep Chase*, have been popularly ascribed by the above name. The primary and most literal explanation of this peculiar naming is that each of the three books has an enigmatic if not metaphorical secondary character called Rat and much of the essence of the novels emerges through his exploits. There has been much debate about the identity of the Rat; whether he is actually a person, a struggling, drifting, dissatisfied author, or he is, in the end, only a figment of the narrator’s imagination, a bafflingly personal alter-ego associated with memory and desire. Notwithstanding the crisis of identity, Rat is the only character who receives a proper name, however curious it might be, from Murakami. With the exception of J, the Chinese bartender (who has only an alphabet for a name), all other characters are either identified on the basis of their relations to the narrator or their physical attributes or a general phrase describing that person or his occupation. One of Murakami’s eminent translators, close friend and self-confessed fan, Jay Rubin, in his brilliant book writes: “Earlier in his career Murakami said he was uncomfortable assuming the stance of a god-

like creator, deigning to impose names on his characters and narrating their actions in the third person. The first-person Boku was an instinctive decision to eschew all hint of authority in his narrative.” Even in his famous interview with Ellis and Hirabayashi, Murakami says:

In the early years of my career, I just hated to put names on my characters. It’s too conventional, I felt... Each word has its own image as a Chinese character. I wanted to avoid those characterizations. If I put the name in katakana, it’s more anonymous, as you say. It’s a kind of symbol. It’s a sign... (562).

Needless to say, the women in these three early novels are similarly nameless but almost always identified by some enigma. However, they achieve existence only through the words of the narrator. The first person narrative with typical postmodern detachment unfolds the lives of these women, shrouded in mystery, indefinable pain, and an acute sense of loss which the decentred and apathetic narrator recognises but cannot fathom. Rubin notes another peculiar tendency in the narrative, which however, is only evident in the original Japanese versions. He writes:

It is important that the word Murakami uses for “I” throughout is *boku*. Although the “I-novel” is a long-established fixture of serious Japanese fiction, the word most commonly used for the “I” narrator has a formal tone: *watakushi* or *watashi*. Murakami chose instead the casual *boku*, another pronoun-like word for “I”, but an unpretentious one used primarily by young men in informal circumstances. (Women never use *boku* for “I”. In the few cases where Murakami creates a female narrator, they use the gender-neutral *watashi*. (37).

In Murakami’s postmodern universe, both his narrators and the women are nameless, but despite the anonymity, the narrators are guided by a greater sense of identity, one that is more personal and effective as is noticed by the use of “boku”. The word “unpretentious” used by Rubin may have interesting connotations. What does Murakami wish to achieve by making his female characters speak in a more formal and supposedly “pretentious” tone? It might mean that despite the inherent confusion which dominates all of his male narrators, they are essentially at peace with their existence while the women who seem confident and exquisitely alluring, sometimes even in a supernatural way, have problems dealing with the fragmented postmodern world of Murakami. Very often the women are found enmeshed in some personal tragedy and shedding tears profusely which unfortunately elicit no response from his detached postmodern narrators. The vulnerability of these women is brilliantly contrasted with the sham of their stark, secure exteriors, hinting ever so slightly that they are incongruous to Murakami’s postmodern world of aimless irrationality, isolation and apathy. The only way these women ensure a place in the narrative of Murakami’s “unpretentious” “Boku” is if they are enthralling enough to attract his fancy.

Toril Moi writes:

One specific argument within the study of sexism in language is the question of naming. Feminists have consistently argued that _those who have the power to name the world are in a position to influence reality. It is argued that women lack this power and that, as a consequence, many female experiences lack a name. (158).

She adds, “To impose names, is, then, not only an act of power, an enactment of Nietzsche’s ‘will to knowledge’; it also reveals a desire to regulate and organize reality according to well-defined categories.” (159). As informed earlier Murakami was wary of this “act of power” usually associated with male authors, which he voluntarily surrendered in order to infuse a fluid, anonymous and unconventional feel to his fiction. However, the question remains, whether he was also aware of the typical feminist notion of women “lacking this power” and thereby having “nameless experiences”. The depiction of women in his first three novels authenticate this position, bringing the women characters closer to Kristeva’s notion of a woman, “...that which cannot be represented, that which is not spoken, that which remains outside of naming and ideologies.” (Moi 162).

Hear The Wind Sing

If the impetus to write *Hear The Wind Sing* seems to have come out of thin air, the book also has an unpredictable, almost random quality. Murakami has said that he didn’t write it in chronological order but “shot” each “scene” separately and later strung them together. “There’s a lot in *Wind* that I

myself don't understand. It's mostly stuff that came out unconsciously...almost like automatic writing...I said just about everything I wanted to say in the first few pages, so the rest has virtually no 'message' as such...I never imagined it would be published or go on to become part of a trilogy." (Rubin 32).

While Murakami might claim its ultimate futility and regard it as a simple yet spontaneous exercise in expression, it is clear that his very first novel, with its fragmentary structure, irregular narrative, detached characters and a profound thrust toward mass appeal, creates a niche as inchoate yet exceptional postmodern literature. However, maybe because of its amateurish "stream of consciousness" type narrative pattern, certain attitudes to women related issues emerge as essentially stereotypical if not misogynistic. In fact, one of the favourite concerns of Murakami, that of writing as an earnest and honest activity, finds its inception in this novel. Predictably this is also fraught with absurd generalizations.

"Before this, the last time I'd read a book was last summer," said the Rat, "I don't remember who wrote it or what it was about. I forget why I even read it. Anyway, it was written by some woman. The protagonist was this thirty year-old fashion designer girl, and somehow she starts to believe she's come down with some incurable disease... Anyway, she goes to this beach resort and masturbates the whole time. In the bath, in the forest, on her bed, in the ocean, really, all kinds of places...Sorry for bringing it up, that's just how the story went. Made me wanna throw up." (Murakami, *Hear* 15/16).

What could be the justification behind Rat mentioning the sex of the author? Couldn't this inferior novel with crass subject matter emerge out of the pen of a male writer? Clearly the answer lies in the negative with Rat broaching the subject of authorship with the utmost sincerity which is contrasted with the lackadaisical attitude of the female author who composes vulgar novels serving no aesthetic purpose. This is supported by Rat's narration of an alluring love story which again proves to be a point of contention with the inane story of the female author.

While discussing Gilbert and Gubar, Moi states, "Since creativity is defined as male, it follows that the dominant literary images of femininity are male fantasies too." (57). It can be assumed that since the nineteenth century these "dominant images of femininity" have undergone a considerable change. From a "passive, docile and above all *selfless* creature" (Moi 57) the postmodern "male fantasies" often involve liberated women engaged in continuous and mindless autoeroticism. However, unlike her nineteenth century predecessor, the postmodern woman writer does not have to suffer in anonymity or behind male pseudonyms. Neither is she under any dire constraint to produce fiction converging with the prevalent "male fantasies". She has come a long way from being "defined" by a male author and is quite capable of composing whatever she deems appropriate. A postmodern woman writer thus has the necessary freedom to write about autoeroticism, not because it might be a "male fantasy" but she herself wishes to write about it. However, it is still unclear as to why would Rat discuss the merits of novel writing by bringing in the reference of such a novel and then dismissing it as a repulsive experience. If the sex of the author was so important, why wouldn't Rat allude to a better example of "proper" writing by any renowned woman author? Rubin writes:

The narrator of *Hear the Wind Sing* disarms the reader early on by denying any claims to be creating high art, although his book may contain "a lesson or two in it somewhere". From its title onwards, this light and playful novel is unmistakably didactic...delivering its message in a way that immediately appeals to young readers- and that older critics often find unbearable. (39).

Thus, there can be only one reason why Murakami brought in that reference. As per basic postmodern literature is considered, a blurring of "high" and "low" art is rendered inevitable. The trifling "masturbation" story is thus juxtaposed with Rat's refusal to write about "sex" and "death" and his stories of aesthetic redundancy. The question of sex of the author, however, still remains unanswered. This first novel also brings into the limelight the typical Murakamian narrator's peculiar attitude to love, casual disregard of his relationships and the cursory way in which he talks about his previous sexual partners. "When I was twenty-one, at least at this point I wasn't planning to die. At that point I'd slept with three girls." (Murakami, *Hear* 46). This is then followed by a perfunctory commentary about his relationships with these "three girls". In a few frighteningly sexist sentences Murakami mentions illegal sexual activity with a minor, "She was sixteen, flat

broke, and had nowhere to sleep, and as an added bonus she was almost nothing but a pair of breasts, but she had smart, pretty eyes.”, as well as “Every day, she’d wake up after noon, eat something, smoke, absentmindedly read books, watch television, and occasionally have uninterested sex with me.” (Murakami, *Hear* 47). It is perceptive that despite this girl’s indifference she craved something apart from basic humanity, something more which the unfortunately insensible narrator couldn’t provide, as is evident in her leaving him a note saying “rat bastard” (Murakami, *Hear* 48) before departing for good.

In a typical patriarchal fashion, Murakami not only makes the main woman character of the novel go through a painful abortion but also makes her prone to terrible hallucinations:

Keeping myself all alone, I could hear lots of people coming along and talking to me...people I know, people I don’t know, my father, my mother, my high school teachers, lots of people...Usually, they say nothing but terrible things...filthy things... (*Hear* 89).

Sayers notes, “Freud points out that neurosis affords the sufferer hallucinatory gratification of her (or his) repressed sexual desire.” (128/129). This is an essentially subversive explanation which is of no value here. She refuses the sexual offer of the narrator and longs for tranquillity and empathy. Despite her ordeal, she does not remember the face of the man whom she thought she loved and who made her pregnant. She is depicted as crying silently. Her tenderness infused with a sense of remorse is evident. In spite of her emancipated exterior, her subconscious is fraught with the guilt of abortion, which comes to haunt her in isolation by calling her vulgar names; names which she feels correspond to her “filthy” act. Murakami culminates her episode in a surprisingly poignant moment with, “Mom...’ she murmured softly, as if in a dream. She was sleeping.” (*Hear* 92). She is the first of the many nameless angst-ridden women who enter the life of the narrator for a short but essentially significant time but in the end are too evanescent to be a permanent part of his detached postmodern existence. She paves the way for the others who are similarly transmuted into the intangible. There is no visible remorse on the part of the narrator. Murakami writes:

When I go back to the town in the summer, I always walk down the street we walked together, sit on the stone stairs in front of the warehouse and gaze out at the sea. When I think I want to cry, the tears won’t come. That’s just how it is. (*Hear* 99).

Pinball, 1973

The second book of the trilogy plunges deeper and more effectively into uncharted and indefinable human emotions and once again brings all the Murakamian techniques and concerns to the forefront. Similar to its predecessor, it is marked by brevity and follows much of its disjointed narrative structure. However, the amateurish tone and desultory style has undergone a considerable change and though there are still passages of extreme colloquial vigour, there are also beautifully poignant sentences, carefully crafted to induce moments of desperately sought intensity in an otherwise insensitive world wilfully enslaved to mental apathy. Rubin writes:

The overall tone of the book...is far more sombre than that of *Hear the Wind Sing*, but rather than having Boku return to the most agonized chapter of his past, when his beloved Naoko died, Murakami has him embark on a self-consciously non-Arthurian quest for, of all things, a pinball machine on which, until it disappeared with the closing of a Tokyo arcade three years earlier, he spent many mindlessly happy hours... (50).

Naoko

What is curious is that throughout Boku refers to the pinball machine, “the Spaceship”, as “she”, “She was lined up between more gaudily made-up numbers, looking awfully demure. Like she’d been sitting on a flat stone in a clearing in the forest, just waiting for me.” (Murakami, *Pinball* 71). Speaking of Murakami’s magic realism, Strecher writes, “In virtually all of his fiction...a realistic narrative is created, then disrupted...by the bizarre or the magical.” (*Magical* 267). Strecher designates the “two worlds” of Murakami as “consciousness” and “unconsciousness”. The “unconscious” is obviously the part where the so called “magical” elements unfold, dominated by images of darkness, chill and inertia. Murakami speaks about this unconscious and names it the “black box” which is reminiscent of McHale’s description of Chinese boxes as having “the effect of interrupting and complicating the ontological horizon of the fiction, multiplying its worlds, and laying

bare the process of world-construction.” (McHale 112). Strecher associates Murakami’s magic realism with the repressed desire of his narrators. According to him the obsessions of his protagonists for some lost object are manifested in the form of paranormal or magical things. He discusses at length how in *Pinball, 1973*, the narrator’s repressed desire about his dead girlfriend is manifested in the obsession for a lost pinball machine and how the entry into the cold, dark store room is like a journey into his inner mind where he encounters his girlfriend in the form of the machine. Rubin writes:

Memory is the place where everything and everyone we have ever experienced still reside unchanged, long after they have been lost to us in reality; in this silent elephants’ graveyard of ours, a pinball machine may be just as real and important to us as a person who was once so real as to have that rare Murakami gift: a name- in this case...Naoko. (50/51).

It is significant that in the postmodern detached world of Murakami, there *is* a person important or rather priceless enough to emerge out of the anonymity. Undoubtedly it is the narrator who designates this importance to her and more than once indirectly refers to his inexpressible agony at her death and his indefinable devotion to her. On being asked “What were you doing when you were twenty?”, he answers, “I was crazy about a girl. Back in 1969, our year.” (Murakami, *Pinball* 48). Such is his love for this particular “girl” that he doesn’t hesitate to advocate “1969” as “our year”, claiming that, their intimacy provided meaning to the year, they owned the year. Such ownership and overwhelming emotion is, however, not possible in a postmodern world. Strecher writes:

It is an eerie, magical, intensely spiritual journey into the "other world" of his inner mind, a world of death and memory, but it grows even more bizarre when, locating "the Spaceship," he does not play it, but instead holds a conversation with it in the tones of lovers meeting again after a long separation. (*Magical* 278).

“Conversation” is, however, rendered ineffective with talk being reduced to hollow, incoherent chitchat. Despite being true lovers, they are unable to articulate their repressed emotions to each other. Real “conversation” is then impossible in a world which deems love itself as a part of those grandiloquent metanarratives which postmodernism is opposed to. In this sceptical world, language is similarly an overarching entity and is thus broken down into snippets of speech:

Why did you come here?

You called me.

I did? She was puzzled, then smiled shyly. Yes, I guess that’s true.

Maybe I did call you.

I looked all over for you.

Thanks, she said. Talk to me. (Murakami, *Pinball* 72).

The Nameless Twin Sisters

The most enigmatic characters in *Pinball* are the identical twin sisters. Rubin summarizes them as:

The most prominent feature of Boku’s present detached life is the twins, 208 and 209, with whom the action of the novel begins and ends. Although they insist on their utter distinctness, they are entirely interchangeable- to the point of assuming each other’s “identities” by exchanging the numbered sweatshirts by which Boku tells them apart. They do not count in Boku’s mind as girlfriends when he is asked if he has any. He sleeps between them, but their presence has nothing erotic or physical about it...Indeed, they hardly exist as human beings in the world of the novel, having far less personality than the longed-for pinball machine “herself” when he finally encounters “her”...They are...abstract...embodiments of the bifurcation principle that splits the author into Boku and the Rat. (54/55).

According to Rubin then the twins hold no tangibility in the real world and exist only as “figments of his imagination” (55). He also suggests that the narrator and the Rat is actually the same person. Though it is

never clearly mentioned when this split happens, it can be assumed that it occurred after the death of Naoko, itself a traumatic event causing a rupture of the secure ego. The narrator's psyche is thus split into three parts, each having its own debatable yet special identity: the narrator with his monotonous job, deep seated sorrow and a penchant for quest, the Rat with his excruciating identity crisis, "string of girlfriends" and a perpetual sense of loss and last but not the least, the nameless twin sisters.

Strecher's provides another analysis describing the possible association among the narrator, the Rat and the twins:

The metonymical connection between Rat and the Twins...seems obscure at first but in fact is quite discernible... the Twins, realizing that their lack of names is becoming problematic for the protagonist...provide some suggestions...This kind of naming is a source of controversy in Murakami's literature and has led Karatani Kojin...to argue that Murakami seeks to deconstruct meanings and realities in the world..."What Murakami Haruki tries so persistently to do is to eliminate proper names, and thus make the world more random." But the names the Twins offer, while unconventional, are neither random nor general; rather, they suggest very clearly a symbiotic relationship in which one half of the pair is meaningless without the other... At the same time, the Twins seem to represent the opposite, yet symbiotic relationship between the protagonist and Rat as well: the protagonist is a settled, fairly conventional man, whereas Rat is a rebellious, angry retro-hippie who has been out of place since the end of the Zenkyoto period. (*Magical* 275/276).

Though Rat's relationship with an elegant, mature, well-dressed woman "who smiled with that practiced look" (Murakami, *Pinball* 32) might be contrasted with the childlike demeanour and spontaneity of the sweatshirt wearing twins, the similarities are more than evident. Rat's feeling "Ever since he'd met the woman, (his) life had become an endless repetition, week after week." (40) almost echo the narrator's feeling of listlessness which is then portrayed onto the twins' feeling of lethargy, "Little by little, the twins grew silent, then subtly sad." (60). Rat's nonchalant breakup with the woman, "Breaking up with the woman was simple. One Friday night he just didn't call her up." (74) prognosticates the casual departure of the twins. Rat's grudging acknowledgement of his desire, "He knew she wouldn't call, but all the same he found himself wishing the phone would ring." (74) prepares the reader for Boku's "I don't really know how to put it," I said, "but I'm going to be really lonesome without you." (80).

What makes the twin sisters resemble phantasms of the mind more is the absolute lack of conflict in them. Unlike the nameless girl of *Hear the Wind Sing*, the twins have no dilemma to unfurl; their existence is bound in menial chores like preparing coffee, fussing about the narrator and engaging in elusive, epigrammatic one liners. Their giggling and playing with the switch panel using incomprehensible words infuse them with an almost childlike innocence and playfulness; at odds with the dark, sombre and perpetually introspective narrator. Even the dialogue of the three is almost rhythmically arranged, providing the idea that some innate mental connection binds them in an inexplicable bond.

The two early novels of Murakami give the readers a glimpse in the making of an exceptional author who would in the long run write the magnificent *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and the soulful *Norwegian Wood*. Through these two early novels, he was intentionally trying to break away from the traditional structures of narratives, plot and character formation in the then prevalent Japanese literary scene. The seemingly disoriented structure, the effervescent emotions and the cavalier interpretations of everyday realities have been essential to mark Murakami as a postmodernist novelist. The women in both these two novels appear as significantly different to the male narrator. The analysis of these women characters enables further questioning of the conceptions of postmodern womanhood in terms of Murakami's fiction.

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