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## Murakami's Universe: Men's Existential Questions in a Postmodern World

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### ABSTRACT

Haruki Murakami's literary universe is a mosaic of postmodern elements intertwined with profound existential questions. His unique narrative technique, characterized by its blend of surrealism and introspection, allows for a nuanced examination of the predicaments and the existential crisis in a postmodern world. This paper examines how Murakami's literary works delve into the existential questions of identity, alienation, solitude and the search for meaning in a fragmented world. Delving into Haruki Murakami's *Men Without Women*, the paper looks at how Murakami's characters portrayed in two short stories "Drive My Car" and "Yesterday" depict the predicament of men particularly undergoing solitude, alienation and identity crisis. By emphasizing on the existential questions of modern man this study reaffirms Murakami's unique ability to capture the complexities of the men psyche and solitude. The study not only enriches our understanding of Murakami's corpus but also highlights on the enduring relevance of existential inquiry in contemporary times.

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### Introduction

Haruki Murakami, the Japanese writer is a living legend and one of the most celebrated authors of this age. His work consist of 15 novels along with short stories, essays and collections, all of which have been proven futile for adaptation into movies. With his surreal or magical realist settings and references to western culture, Murakami is the most "Un-Japanese" Japanese writer. He is often criticized, especially in his home country, for his derivation from Japanese literary tradition and



detachment from reality. One could say that his protagonist's strong sense of isolation with surreal dreamscapes resonates with his experience as an author in Japan. Murakami confessed in an interview with literary academic Rebecca Suter that he has “always wanted to write novels that are extremely readable and highly incomprehensible.”

### **Western influences on Haruki Murakami**

Murakami's struggle with identity and belonging as a Japanese author is explored through his protagonist's westernized lifestyles, his writing style which western writers heavily influence, his childhood preference for western literature and his exposure to European and American writers including Franz Kafka, Gustave Flaubert, Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and, Jack Kerouac. He openly acknowledged the impact of western authors on his writings such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Raymond Carver, Franz Kafka, etc. Murakami's Western inspirations distinguish him from the majority of other Japanese writers. Murakami frequently incorporates elements of Western literature, especially magical realism, into his writing. He blends the everyday and the spectacular, blurring the distinction between truth and fantasy. This approach is reminiscent of authors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jorge Luis Borges. Murakami employs Western analogies, visuals, pop music, jazz, and classical music, and his characters' clothes and attitudes are modernised. His point of view, issues, and storytelling approaches established him as a renegade and outcast in Japanese literary tradition. Western influences played a significant role in shaping Murakami's literary style making his work stand out within Japanese literature. Western pop culture references are added creating a cross-cultural dialogue. His characters often read Western literature, watch Hollywood films, and engage with Western philosophies blending Japanese settings with global elements. His work is influenced by Western postmodernism with non-linear storytelling and fragmented plots, blurring lines between reality and fantasy, and exploration of existential questions similar to those found in Albert Camus or Jean-Paul Sartre.

### **Japanese-Ness in Murakami's Work**

Despite heavy Western influences, surreal plots, existential themes, and global appeal there lies a profound exploration of 'Japanese-ness' - the cultural, social, and historical elements that define Japan's identity. Murakami's work incorporates elements of traditional Japanese aesthetics in subtle, modernized forms. While Murakami's urban settings often dominate his story, nature frequently plays a symbolic role, reflecting traditional Japanese sensitivity to impermanence. Murakami also frequently critiques aspects of modern Japanese society, particularly its conformity, collectivism, and loss of



individuality. After the Second World War and the incident of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan established its domain among the developed nations of the world. The nation started to concentrate on a wealthy future forgetting about the loss and calamities of war. A high-tech culture was built to outperform any Western nation, and the country thrived as a result of economic and industrial expansion. In terms of social, economic, industrial, and educational development, Japan served as a role model for other countries. People's lives altered dramatically, and Murakami, a representative writer of Japanese society, provides a different perspective on these events through his fictional world. Being a member of a generation influenced by a culture that was too materialistic. Consumerism and American culture have a significant impact on the Japanese worldview. Divorce and suicide rates rose, and those who were leading tranquil lives became threats. Workaholics who operate like robots were dissatisfied with their lives and surroundings. Desperation, unhappiness, violence, and teen prostitution increased. This difficult situation gives the study of Murakami's book a realistic backdrop. When the younger generation discovered they were alienated from everything, they rebelled against the system and were known as the "Lost generation." Corporate culture's excessive rigidity, monotony, and politeness affected Japanese society as a whole. The topic of missing "something" in human minds runs throughout Murakami's writing, and this has had a significant impact on Japan's youth. Since the start of his writing career, Murakami has been the face of Japanese youth, and this has been constant.

All of his characters are suffering individuals who struggle against the establishments and system; they are victims of advanced capitalism who are unable to recognise their own plight; and they are people who valiantly attempt to find their identity but fall short. The difficulties that Murakami presents through the lives of his characters are the loss of social reality and, consequently, the loss of one's relationship with oneself. Murakami identifies another Japan that resides behind the surface level of wealth and infrastructure development.

### **Murakami's impact on the literature**

Murakami has established a distinctive trend in literature that blends Eastern and Western influences while pushing the boundaries of conventional storytelling. His contributions have significantly shaped both Japanese and global literary landscapes. Murakami has brought Japanese literature to the forefront of global discussions, appealing to a diverse audience and breaking stereotypes about Japanese fiction. By merging the ordinary with the fantastical, he creates a dreamlike atmosphere that reflects inner realities. He popularized the use of ambiguous endings and unresolved plots,



encouraging readers to interpret the story themselves. These open-ended narratives mimic real life, where clarity is rare and meaning is subjective. Murakami's works resonate with readers worldwide due to their exploration of universal human concerns. Beneath the surreal and dreamlike narratives, Murakami addresses deeply rooted existential, emotional and societal issues.

### **Existential questions of modern man in a postmodern world**

Men's Predicament and their existential crisis is never polemic in the works of Haruki Murakami. Murakami always has a story or stories to tell, narratives to weave, so that the reader is often left with a work that causes a profound sense of melancholy to understand the characters and feel what it feels like to be alienated, feel solitude mirroring the existential crisis or predicament faced by the characters which is a recurring theme in his work.

Mukherjee and S.K. Swamy's article "Redefining Masculinity in Haruki Murakami's Men Without Women" makes an effort to comprehend how ideas of masculinity are evolving and what exactly qualifies as masculinity. By exposing his masculine characters to suffering and grief, Murakami subverts conventional ideas of masculinity. According to their work, which highlights Australian sociologist R.W. Connell's definition of masculinity, being a man is now more than just having a lot of physical and emotional strength. Their ability to examine their emotional behaviour and attempt to handle it maturely, as opposed to repressing it or acting aggressively, is what makes them strong. Understanding the evolving conceptions of masculinity and what defines masculinity has been the focus of the paper's research.

The present paper shall focus on Murakami's character who struggles with existential questions of profound emotional struggles, depicting a disconnect between their internal realities and external performances. Murakami's men undergo numerous existential crises and alienates themselves from society and the world in different ways. This juxtaposition aligns with Butler's assertion that the performance of masculinity is not a straightforward expression of identity but rather a complex series of enactments. A range of male experiences from vulnerability and loneliness to solitude is depicted, analyzing the plight of men.

In *Drive My Car*, Kafuku's solitude and alienation from self are depicted explicitly through the character focalization and narration. It has been ten years since his wife's death, and Kafuku still lives by himself. Though being an actor, he didn't have many friends. He remained alienated from his fellow friends and colleagues. He decided to hire a driver after being diagnosed with a blind spot in his eyes. He is introduced to Misaki, a young woman who ends up working as his driver. Misaki on their drive,



questions him, “Why don’t you have any friends?” (Murakami, 2017). Misaki his driver, has noticed Kafuku’s loneliness and alienation while driving him around for almost two months. Kafuku is filled with grief and experiences emotional turmoil. His wife had multiple affairs during their marriage and betrayal which deeply affected his psyche, causing him to doubt the authenticity of their relationship and reflect on whether he ever truly knew her after all those years. Kafuku failed to receive closure from his wife before her death and was left with a life full of regrets that tormented him. “He regretted that he had not summoned his resolve while she was still alive to question her about her affairs. It was a regret that visited him frequently”. (Murakami, 2017)

It hurt to see his wife in the embrace of another man, and the memory of her adultery kept coming back to him. At times, he felt that it would have been far better to never know. But he kept going back to his fundamental belief that knowledge was always preferable than ignorance. However, to know and pretend was the most excruciating for him. Beneath the external performances he had to put up pretending to be ignorant of his wife’s betrayal, Kafuku was bleeding internally:

“The most excruciating thing, though, had been maintaining a normal life knowing his partner’s secret- the effort it required to keep her in the dark. Smiling calmly when his heart was torn and his insides were bleeding. Behaving as everything was fine while the two of them took care of the daily chores, chatted, made love at night. This was not something a normal person could pull off. But Kafuku was a professional actor. Shedding his self, his flesh and blood, in order to inhabit a role was his calling. And he embraced this one with all his might. A role performed without an audience.” (Murakami, 2017)

The only friend Kafuku remembers ten years ago was his wife’s lover. The reason he made friends with him was because he was his wife’s lover. Kafuku was filled with regrets and questions about why his wife cheated on him and the thought kept tormenting him so he decided to befriend Takatsuki, his wife’s lover to get a source of closure. The emotional turmoil and complexities Kafuku underwent can be seen in his failure to connect and have authentic friendships with people:

“I made him my friend precisely because he had slept with my wife.” “How can I put this...I wanted to understand. Why she slept with him, why he was the one she wanted.” (Murakami, 2017)



Kafuku in the process of their friendship tried to find out more about his wife from Takatsuki and judging from the way Takatsuki spoke, Kafuku's wife was the one to call a halt to their affair. Takatsuki could not handle such a casual and quick break-up. He too failed to get any sort of closure from Kafuku's wife and had been undergoing emotional torture. As both men reminisced about her, it hit Kafuku that he was the one doing most of the consoling. Kafuku noticed that Takatsuki was trying to get rid of something which he could not share and this shows the internal turmoil that all men try to hide beneath their outer exterior. Maybe it was a weakness in his character or trauma in his past and he was trying to forget it or numb the pain it caused through his drinks. Whatever, the predicament was, he hid it well behind the drinks. Both the men cannot confront each other and communicate and this exacerbates their misery and loneliness contributing to their solitude, alienation, and despair.

Similarly, in "Yesterday" the male characters Tanimura and Kitaru both struggle with societal pressures and isolation. Tanimura reflects on his experiences with a sense of longing for connection, admitting:

"But when I look back at myself at age twenty, what I remember most is being alone and lonely. I had no girlfriend to warm my body or my soul, no friend to warm my body or my soul, no friends I could open up to. No clue what I should do every day, no vision for the future. For the most part, I remained hidden away, deep within myself. Sometimes I'd go a week without talking to anybody. That kind of life continued for a year."  
(Murakami,2017)

Tanimura's character reflects the conventional male identity placed upon men in Japanese culture. His move from Kobe to Tokyo shows his desire to reshape himself and begin anew which is evident by his conscious decision to adopt a Tokyo accent, distancing himself from his Kansai roots. The internal conflict between his authentic self and the identity society expects of him shapes much of his character arc.

In contrast, Kitaru represents a different aspect of masculine identity, actively reflecting societal norms. His refusal to pursue college, his unorthodox expressions of desire, and his emotional detachment from Erika challenge the expectations held by mainstream society.

Tanimura's and Kitaru's pursuits of identity lead them to a place of emotional ambivalence, revealing how societal expectations can wrap up personal desires and lead to profound loneliness. The



intricacies of masculine identity represent the existential dilemma faced by men caught between societal norms and personal fulfilment is reflected in society. Through their relationship and choices, identity, social expectations, and unfulfilled desires are illustrated.

## Conclusion

In both “Drive My Car” and “Yesterday”, solitude is a double-edged sword for the characters, symbolizing suffering and a path to discovery. Furthermore, the interplay between isolation and connection reveals how solitude can intensify emotional pain and emotional turmoil, simultaneously facilitating deep introspection and personal growth. Characters in “Drive My Car” and “Yesterday” are intricately intertwined with Japanese cultural norms and societal expectations surrounding masculinity. In Japanese society, expressions of vulnerability are perceived as weakness, leading men to isolate themselves rather than confronting or seeking help. Their suppression of feelings, emotions, and desires leads to their despair, pain, and isolation. Murakami skilfully depicts male predicaments through his writings, which ultimately capture the complexities of navigating traditional masculinity in contemporary society, revealing the emotional turmoil, introspection, and longing for a genuine relationship.

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