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A Critical Analysis of Haruki Murakami's "The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women" and "The Elephant Vanishes"

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Abstract. Haruki Murakami is one of the most renowned writers of contemporary literature. He enchants readers with his ability to seamlessly blur the lines between ordinary and extraordinary, reality and imagination. In this paper, we shall critically study two of his short stories, titled 'The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women' and 'The Elephant Vanishes' (both collected in the short story collection *The Elephant Vanishes*), examining their thematic elements, symbolism, and literary significance. This study centres on Murakami's thematic preoccupations, which include his cosmopolitanism, exploration of death and socio-political stance. As we uncover recurring motifs and symbols that underscore Murakami's concerns, these motifs, such as disappearing elephant, serve as entry points into the labyrinthine landscapes of the human condition. Moreover, our analysis delves into multiple shades of Murakami's style. He creates a narrative tapestry that defies traditional categorization, inviting readers to question the boundaries between reality and illusion, subjective and objective. Furthermore, this paper draws parallels from his other works, through which we observe his literary aesthetic and the enduring themes that resonate throughout his oeuvre.

Keywords : Cosmopolitanism; labyrinthine landscapes; multiple shades; narrative tapestry.

Haruki Murakami is a Japanese author who has garnered global acclaim and readers for his often ambiguous and magic-realistic storytelling. His debut novel*, Hear the Wind Sing,* won the best prize for new writers in fiction in 1979. His third novel, *A Wild Sheep Chase,* first brought him international success, and his *Norwegian Wood* sold millions of copies domestically, making him a literary celebrity and a household name in Japan. He has won several prestigious international awards, such as the Franz Kafka Prize (Czech Republic, 2006), the Jerusalem Prize (Israel, 2009), the 23rd International Catalonia Prize (2011), the Hans Christian Andersen Literature Award (Denmark, 2016), and the very latest one,

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Spain's Princess of Asturias Award for Literature 2023. Furthermore, his works have been translated into more than 50 languages worldwide. In 2015, he was named one of Time's 100 Most Influential People. So far, Murakami has authored fifteen novels (his latest novel, *The City and its Uncertain Walls*, was published in 2023) and ov4er fifty short stories. (Britannica; "Haruki Murakami Books"; "Haruki Murakami: Princess of Asturia")

What makes *The Elephant Vanishes* stand out from the rest is that it was Murakami's first short story collection published in English (1991), and it further strengthened the global recognition of Murakami not just as a novel author but also as a short story writer (Rubin, 301-302). "The Elephant Vanishes" bears all the traits that are inherently Murakamiqesque: his bizarre storytelling, metaphors, symbolism, cosmopolitan cultural references, disassociated characters, etc. David Leavitt writes in the review of the book:

> In fact, all the stories in "The Elephant Vanishes" take place in parallel worlds not so much remote from ordinary life as hidden within its surfaces: secret alleys that afford unexpected – and unsettling – views. Mysteries are offered that defy solution or analysis. Their purpose, rather, is to point out not only how much we don't know but how much we can't know. As a result, the tendency of certain people and situations to defy description – to most writers a bane – becomes for Mr. Murakami something to revel in.Specifically, the first and last stories of this collection have been chosen to be critically analysed in this paper because they not only encapsulate the essence of the entire book but also provide a profound look into Murakami's thematic elements, which are prevalent in his literature (33).

"The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women" narrates the story of an unemployed house-husband as a mysterious call from an anonymous woman troubles him. The story itself begins with Murakami's signature

cosmopolitan style, depicting a protagonist who listens to Rossini's symphony and is also well-versed in it. The word 'cosmopolitan' is derived from the Greek word 'kosmopolitēs', meaning 'citizen of the world'. Originating in ancient Greece, the concept was fully propagated by Immanuel Kant, who advocated world peace through global citizenship (Kleingeld & Brown). The non-Japanese global narrative style has always been a fundamental characteristic of Murakami's literary works since his debut, which particularly sets him apart from the rest of his peers. The anonymous protagonist reads Len Deighton's novel, Clarence Darrow's autobiography, listens to Robert Plant's new album, and eats at McDonald's. Murakami metaphorically presents this conjunction of the orientalist idea of Japan and the modern Japan he narrates through the imagery of the back alley, into which the narrator ventures to find his lost cat. Noticing these two different aspects of Japan converging together in the back alley, the narrator notes:

> The homes that sandwich the passage are of two distinct types and blend together as well as liquids of two different specific gravities. First there are the houses dating from way back, with big backyards; then there are the comparatively newer ones…The houses themselves are of all different architectural styles: traditional Japanese houses with long hallways, tarnished copper-roofed early Western villas, recently remodeled "modern" homes.
>
> (The Elephant Vanishes,18)

And precisely, this is the Japan that surfaces in Murakami's writing, along with society, culture and modernity. His characters embrace cosmopolitanism just like the evolving global culture, where the barriers and distance between races and nations are rapidly disintegrating in the cyber age. Rebecca Suter rightly points out that Americans have for long harboured two distinct stereotypical images of Japan: the samurai and he geisha. However, in Murakami's text, none of them is epitomized. Instead, they represent Japan in a less exotic and more understanding manner. Furthermore, Murakami's works portray the successful modernization of a non-Western country (37–38). Apparently, Murakami also voices the same. He further emphasises that "there is a very natural exchange of

information between the East and the West." (Sputnik Sweetheart by Haruki Murakami).

Death is another major thematic element of Murakami's fiction that has remained quite distinct in his writings since his very debut novel. His very first novel, *Hear the Wind Sing* opens up with the imagery of death. So does "Norwegian Wood". As Murakami writes in *Norwegian Wood*, "Death exists, not as the opposite but as a part of life" (30). Interestingly, Japan as a nation and culture has considered suicide and death as one of the highest acts of honour, be it the seppuku (disembowelment by sword) committed since the mediaeval period or the infamous Kamikaze attacks of the Imperial Japanese Air Force during World War II, in which the pilots would deliberately crash their planes upon enemy targets. Murakami deviates from these romantic notions of death that Japanese culture has consciously or subconsciously always cherished and revered. His depiction of death is mostly gruesome grotesque and repulsive. There is no honour in it, and neither is there any passionate endeavour for a noble cause. To Murakami, it only evokes unimaginable horror, grief and loss. That is why in "The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle", we notice people getting brutally skinned alive, and civilians are disembowelled with bayonets. The horrible war crimes of Imperial Japan return recurrently in his writings. Furthermore, death breeds further death; Naoko commits suicide after witnessing the deaths of her near and dear ones in *Norwegian Wood*. Tsugohiko Amada, in *Killing Commandatore* commits suicide after witnessing all the horrible war crimes in Nanjing. All the people involved in the Hsin-ching Zoo massacre in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* are killed later. "The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women" in this aspect is not an exception. The mysterious girl the narrator meets in the back alley narrates her conception of death in the most repulsive imagery; there is no beauty in it but a sense of horror. The girl talks about this very abstract image, or the 'lump of death':

> There's got to be something like that in there somewhere, I just know it. Dull like a softball—and pliable—a paralyzed tangle of nerves. I'd like to remove it from the dead body and cut it open. I'm always thinking about it. Imagining what it'd be like inside. It'd probably be all gummy, like toothpaste that cakes up

> inside the tube…All gooey around the outside, getting tougher the further in. That's why the first thing I'd do once I cut through the outer skin is scoop out all the glop, and there inside where it starts to firm up would be this teeny little core. Like a superhard ball bearing, don't you think? (*The Elephant Vanishes,* 29)

Interestingly, Murakami also repurposes this obnoxious imagery of death in the adapted novel version- *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. In the narrative, when Noboru Wataya rapes Malta Kano, she experiences the splitting of her flesh in two and something wet and slippery like a newborn baby crawling out of her split flesh. She further elaborates: "I know this will sound strange, but I felt as if I had turned into a bowl of cold porridge – all sticky and lumpy, and the lumps were throbbing, slowly and hugely, with each beat of my heart" (301). Strecher identifies this as the 'core identity', something akin to her soul (46). However, regardless of its non-physical or spiritual nature, it is directed towards only one thing, which is death and the very tangible abomination of it that manifests in Haruki Murakami's narrative.

The last story in this collection is the titular "The Elephant Vanishes." In Murakami's fiction, zoos have always had a place for something extraordinary, something unreal, where strange things occur beyond the scope of explanation and logic, be it the Hsin-ching Zoo in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, where massacre takes place, prophecies are envisioned, and people come back from death. Or in "The Kangaroo Communique" (also collected in *The Elephant Vanishes*), where a department store worker writes a lengthy and intimate letter to a customer after getting inspired by kangaroos in a zoo. In another short story entitled "New York Mining Disaster", Murakami introduces a character who visits the zoo whenever there is a typhoon; he further provides a glimpse of the surreal things that occur there in the dead of night. Precisely, this characteristic becomes the pivotal theme of the story "The Elephant Vanishes", in which an elephant vanishes not from a zoo but from an elephant house quite mysteriously under unexplainable circumstances, as the title suggests.

One must keep in mind that the elephant here is a mere symbol, a metaphor for something even more profound and abstract. And so has

always been the case with Murakami's narrative. Just like the severed whale penis in *A Wild Sheep Chase* serves as a manifestation of the narrator's existential confusion and anxiety, so does the elephant in "The Elephant Vanishes" function as an image to make one question the actual purpose of the story. To begin with, the elephant sheds light on Murakami's socio-political ideology. In Murakami's fiction, political corruption and bureaucratic machinery have always been a major concern, and he has always remained vocal about them through both his fiction and nonfiction. In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, he notes how a capitalist manipulates the political and economic scenario from the shadows. In his non-fiction book *Underground*, which deals with the Tokyo Subway Sarin Gas Attack, he criticises the strictly regimented but essentially impotent bureaucracy that led to this major man-made catastrophe. In *1Q84*, he again takes a dig at this covert 'system' through the symbolism of mysterious beings called the Little People. Murakami writes that instead of the Big Brother that George Orwell portrayed in *1984*, the Little People have usurped real power, as they control the world from the dark (338). It is evident that Murakami has always been against this 'system' that is inhumane and that always exploits and oppresses. Therefore, despite his recurring portrayal of disassociated protagonists who are strangely disconnected and nonchalant about society and the world around them, Murakami's approach to his overall narrative is definitely altruistic.

This is also very apparent in the story, as we find the possession of the elephant and the inauguration of the elephant house to be major publicity stunts for the ruling political party, and its disappearance to be a major blunder. Murakami, in his humoristic style, mocks this, "The elephant endured these virtually meaningless (for the elephant, entirely meaningless) formalities with hardly a twitch…" (The *Elephant Vanishes,* 312). Just like how the system that governs society tends to disperse and distract the masses with rather frivolous matters in order to keep the leash of power in their own hands. Takagi Chiaki defines this manipulative trait of the system, "Today's Japan is a highly controlled society, in which individuals function to maintain the system, and its controlling force is still the same imperial energy that is hidden under that mask of democracy" (8). On the contrary, Murakami treats the disappearance of the elephant with greater importance than the elephant itself (noted by the extensive and almost laughable coverage of it by the press). The absence of the elephant, in fact, points to the presence of the rather critical issues that

are shadowed deliberately by the combined socio-political system to address 'the elephant in the room'. What Murakami portrays is quite similar to 'the divisionary theory of war', which suggests that when a country is facing internal issues, it may try to shift the focus of its citizens by engaging in conflicts with other nations. These internal issues could be of a political or economic nature, or they could stem from ethnic divisions within the country. In all these scenarios, it's theorized that leaders use diversionary tactics, mainly to maintain their position of power or to strengthen their domestic backing. In such instances, the motivation behind the use of force is not primarily the nation's security concerns, but rather the personal or political interests of the leader or other influential individuals (Butcher). This is rather significant in terms of the rather pacifist Japan as well, as the dispute and political tension between China, South Korea, North Korea, and Japan still exist to a considerable extent.

It could also be asserted that the elephant in the story refers to the general bewilderment, or in Murakami's own term, 'soft chaos' (though he uses this term, particularly in context to the Russia and Eastern Europe crisis) (*Novelist as a Vocation,* 201) that has come to cloud the Japanese society in the postwar and post-postwar period. Disillusioned of the combined political-economic system and fed up with the anarchical Zenkyoto movement of the 1960s (which is another recurring theme of Murakami's fiction), the mass has lost its identity and conscience, transforming into the mere cog of a hegemonical society that exerts constant pressure on individuality, preventing the flourishing of a substantial socio-political identity and awareness. Just as Takagi Chiaki writes:

> In postwar Japan, the State-system has been keeping people from their modern history, and suppressing their subjectivity. Instead, the State-system provides them with ready-made identities of hardworking middle-class and westernized high standards of living. The State-system's control makes Japan's modernity unreal and grotesque as a blooming flower with no stem to link it to its roots (1).

This allegory of Japan is even further apparent when the narrator narrates how the chained elephant vanished into thin air from within a heavily fortified elephant house (which he compares to a 'fortresslike enclosure'). This is in fact reminiscent of Japan's strict self-isolationist policy, 'Sakoku,' which severed it from the rest of the world from 1603 to 1868 CE (Munez). Despite its fortification from the outside world, at its core, Murakami finds it essentially hollow. The 'raison d'être of the nation is empty, the elephant is gone, and only the latent imperial ideology (represented as the fastened chain in the story) remains behind. The disappearance of the elephant signifies the loss of the national essence, the disintegration of a welfare state, and the failure to create the humane and democratic society that people dreamed of after centuries of living under autocracy.

Murakami weaves togetherthe story and Japan's national history in his usual magi-realistic manner, which defies logic, and breaks down the tight framework of reality. In the end the narrator not only notes the intimate relation between the keeper and the elephant, but he also finds that sharing and equilibration of their shape and size, "In size. Of their bodies. The elephant's and the keeper's. The balance seemed to have changed somewhat. I had the feeling that to some extent the difference between them had shrunk" (*The Elephant Vanishes,* 325). It is suggested that either the elephant had gotten smaller, or the keeper had gotten bigger, or both had happened simultaneously, and possibly the elephant kept shrinking till he could escape (325–326). The surreal act of synchronisation between these two beings suggests that the socio-political degeneration and the loss of conscience have not only grown intimate to the national identity, but they have become so essential that they have also started to seep into the subjective sphere of individuals—hence causing the disappearance or disintegration of both the subjective and collective identity. It refers to the silent, soft chaos that is brewing underneath the stable but superficial surface of society— ready to erupt and displace everything at any given moment.

That is why, at the end of the story, the narrator goes back to his job as a salesperson, selling commodities under the pretext of 'unity', as the narrator remarks, "That's probably because people are looking for a kind of unity in this *kit*-chin we know as the world. Unity of design. Unity of color. Unity of function" (327). It is the same homogenous unity that postmodern capitalist society practices and preaches in order

to exploit human productivity and efficiency. However, the narrator finds something inside him has broken, "Some kind of balance inside me has broken down since the elephant affair…" (327). This is perhaps indicative of the inexplicable emptiness that mindless consumerism has brought forth, infused into the very core of the societal fabric. This is perhaps even more relevant in the context that the narrator is also a victim of this consumerism as he becomes a slave to the 'pragmatic' method in order to sell more kitchen appliances. The story could only portray a black and bleak future that has gone beyond any opportunity or desire for redemption, where all hope has been lost. Just as Dante writes in *The Divine Comedy*, describing the command or lines engraved above the Gate of Hell, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter" (Gascoigne). Dante's vision may bear a resemblance to what Murakami envisions in the final line of the story, "The elephant and keeper have vanished completely. They will never be coming back" (*The Elephant Vanishes,* 327). Thus, the first and last stories of *The Elephant Vanishes*, namely "The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women" and "The Elephant Vanishes" provide us with an overview of Murakami's thematic endeavours, as they function as a looking glass through which we take a glimpse into the intricate social, political, and cultural ideologies of Haruki Murakami that have manifested recurrently in Murakami's literary landscape.

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