LONELINESS AND ISOLATION IN MEN WITHOUT WOMEN BY HARUKI MURAKAMI

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ABSTRACT

“Murakami’s weird stories often celebrate the incalculable. They deal in empty spaces and phantom presences.” – Catherine Holmes. The recurring theme in most of Haruki Murakami’s writings is loneliness and alienation. His characters are devoid of psychological peace, they often find themselves going in spirals leading to existential crisis. This paper will study the theme of loneliness in accordance with his work, ‘Men Without Women’. In order to gain a broader perspective and delve deeper into the theme of loneliness, Lars Svendsen’s work, ‘A Philosophy of Loneliness’ will be parallelly studied. The conclusion of the research will show the manifestation of Svendsen’s theory if Murakami’s works. The study also brings out a scope for future research in the field.

KEYWORDS: Loneliness, Isolation, Haruki Murakami, Lars Svendsen, Men Without Women, Existential Crisis, Alienation, Solitude, Existentialism & A Philosophy of Loneliness, Jon Morris & Lonely

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INTRODUCTION

Catherine Holmes states, “What stands out in Murakami’s field is the staggering loneliness of his men. He understands a world of deep feeling among people who can’t find words and images to match it.” Haruki Murakami is one of the most prominent writers of the contemporary times. Critics and reviewers believe that he could be the next Nobel Laureate. Born in 1949 in Japan, he experienced the community life of the Japanese populace. Multiple tragedies surrounded the Japanese land during the 20th century. The world wars, gas attack, earthquakes and the atomic bomb disasters in Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Amidst such challenging times the Japanese found their power in their community lifestyle. On the other hand, Murakami has always been an aloof writer who chooses to depict the individualistic perspectives. In all his works he employs magic realism, out of the world narrative which is deeply encrypted with psychological notes. It is considered canonical to the Japanese literature which is full of anecdotal stories related to their culture and tradition. Great writers like Kōbō Abe, Banana Yoshimoto, Ryu Murakami, Kenzaburō can all go back to the tradition of solidarity, community, love and culture in Japan. Japan was a society that had always known and practiced unity. They kept their beliefs still close to their cores. Japanese school of thought was always rich in religion and culture.

Kenzaburo Oe states, “the role of literature, insofar as man is obviously a historical being, is to create a model of a contemporary age which encompasses past and future, a model of the people living in that age as well.” Murakami in his works does the exact same thing, he vividly delivers the psychology of characters for his readers to relate to. At the other hand, Murakami takes the readers into a new world. Murakami has also used topics such as loneliness and existential crisis, not failing to inculcate the concepts of mystery, magic and Japanese mythology. He has created beautiful works that converge at the historical and current cultural points. When discussing the horrific

impact of the war on Japan, he not only depicts the collective thought of the nation, but also delves into individualism and the psychology of the affected individuals. He also finds the everyday challenges of a human mind and life apart from writing about social problems and Landmark events such as the war. His characters are seen to be engrossed in everyday life, faced with the challenges that any other average person would face. His characters are going through the difficulties of life, facing issues such as depression, insomnia and many other disorders. They are loners, who observe the society with occasional interaction from a distance. The backgrounds and circumstances of all these characters may vary but they always end up alone, pointing to the bitter truth of life that at the end of the day everyone is lonely.

This paper will study the themes of isolation and loneliness in context of his 2014 work, *Men Without Women*. Theories of Lars Svendsen as explained in his book 'A Philosophy of Loneliness' are parallelly studied to give a broader perspective to the characterization done by Murakami.

MEN WITHOUT WOMEN

This short story collection by Murakami is a narrative of various men who have lost the women they loved in their lives. Pertaining to death, illness, adultery and many such reasons these men find themselves in the arena of loneliness and constantly fighting and delving into mysterious existential questions which arise identity crisis and lay foundation to bigger questions. Haruki Murakami brings his powers of insight through seven tales to bear on the lives of people who find themselves trapped in their own ways. Here are vanishing cats and smoky bars, lonely hearts and enigmatic people, baseball and the Beatles, mixed together to tell stories that speak to us all. Marked by the same wry humor that characterized his entire body of work, Murakami has created another contemporary classic in this series. "Drive My Car" is the first story in Murakami's series. This story is about a stage performer, Kafuku, who hired a weird, not conventionally beautiful young girl named Misaki to be his chauffeur. After his wife died, he hadn't had a woman in his car and watching Misaki drive him around town made him think about his wife more often than usual. As Kafuku gradually started to feel at ease with Misaki, he began to open up about his history to her. He was married to an actress who died from cancer in the ovaries. He still knew about her affairs, but never questioned her about them, or asked why she did it. But, after she died, he became obsessed with the reasons behind her infidelity, so much so that she had friendship with the last lover, Takatsuki, until she got sick. Kafuku and Takatsuki became drinking pals, but Kafuku never discovered why he had slept with his wife. Misaki said Kafuku's wife had been sleeping with Takatsuki for her own purposes and had nothing to do with Kafuku.

Tanimura's the next story, "Yesterday." Tanimura had been working at a student coffee shop in town and had met his friend Kitaru while he was there. Kitaru was an unusual boy who failed the college entrance exam twice, and he couldn't get his girlfriend, Erika, out on dates. One day he asked Tanimura to take her out so she wouldn't go out with anybody else, and Tanimura did as requested. He figured out she was seeing someone already but didn't tell Kitaru. Kitaru left the coffee shop a few days later and vanished. Seventeen years later, Tanimura ran into Erika and found out she had been sleeping with the other boy, and Kitaru found out. He traveled the world now and worked as a sushi chef, and she was a single girl in her life.

Third, 'An Independent Organ' is also narrated by a character called Tanimura, although the same narrator is not clear. Tanimura said he once met Dr. Tokai, a famous plastic surgeon with a perfect life, who had been a bachelor until he was fifty-two. One day, Tokai came to the gym where he worked out with Tanimura, claiming he fell in love with a

married woman who had a son for the first time. They had been together for nearly two years, and Tokai was not able to hide his love for her, but she was not going to abandon her husband. He realized that he no longer knew who he was. Tanimura never sees Tokai again, but Tokai's secretary, Goto, calls him and tells him that after he found out that the woman he loved had left her husband for another man, Tokai starved himself to death.

'Scheherazade', the fourth tale in the collection is about a man named Habara who for some mysterious reason had hidden himself away. The only contact he had with the world was with a woman he called Scheherazade who came to see him once a week to deliver supplies. She narrated multiple stories to him post physical intimacy. One day she told him she had in the past been a lamprey eel. He told him the next time she visited, that when she was in high school she broke into a building. She had liked a boy who ignored her, so thrice she left her class and snuck into his house before his mother realized what was going on and switched the locks off.

'Kino' is about a man of the same name who left his job as a sports shoe traveling salesman after finding his wife was having an affair with one of his colleagues. Kino opened a bar in an estate that his aunt had given him. His only customer was a cat at first, but then people started to come in, including a mysterious man called Kamita who always ordered the same drink and a woman in an abusive relationship who one-night seduced Kino. Shortly after that, all over Kino's property snakes started to appear and Kamita came into the bar and told Kino he had to leave town. Kino did as told, but he could not refrain from sending his aunt a letter. Something knocked at his hotel room door that night, and then on the window. Kino had his under the covers before he realized it was his own repressed feelings that came to him.

The sixth story of the collection brings a rather interesting perspective on the table, 'Samsa in Love' is a play on The Metamorphosis by Kafka. Within the story of Murakami, a bug woke up to find that he had transformed into Gregor Samsa. Samsa was gradually going through the painful and frustrating process of being human. When all his physical needs had been met, a hunchback woman appeared in his house to fix a lock leading for them to fall in love. He called for her to see again and she agreed.

The last story in the book is, 'Men Without Women.' The unnamed narrator, who slept with his wife in bed, learned that her former girlfriend had murdered herself. The news causes him to think about the woman he named M. She wasn't his first love but his first love was someone he wished. The narrator reflects that sometimes a woman's loss signifies the loss of all women, thus giving the collection thesis.

Jon Morris believes, "these tales have more to do with solitude and alienation than they do with gender." At the face value it might appear that the stories merely deal with the theme of lost love and the sadness which comes along with the absence of women in men's life. In the other perspective when the text is studied through the lens of theoretical understanding it can be observed that the stories are not just love stories, they explore the themes of loneliness which leads to isolation and solitude which results in depression and sadness.

LONELINESS AND ISOLATION

Lars Svendsen in his book 'Philosophy of Loneliness' (2017) states "almost all I thought I knew about loneliness proved false. I thought more men than women were lonely, and that lonely people were more isolated than others. I assumed that the significant increase in the number of single dwellers would notably impact the number of lonely individuals. I also believed that loneliness, despite being a subjective phenomenon could be better understood in the context of social surroundings than individual disposition." He further elaborates on his assumption that this increase was connected to late

modern individualism and that individualistic societies had higher rates of loneliness than collective societies. Loneliness is a phenomenon which can get as complicated as one wants it to be. Its roots can delve deeper and deeper into the mind of a person and never let him/ her leave. Often a desire to escape it might also lead to a frustrated attempt leading to hopelessness and thus further deepening the yearning for solitude.

Loneliness can come in variety of forms as Murakami also states in his novel 'Kafka on the Shore', "solitude comes in verities." Isolation and loneliness can go hand in hand as well. A person might be isolated due to various reasons and thus experience loneliness. While on the other hand even after being surrounded by people one might feel lonely, eventually leading the person into isolated lifestyle. Murakami's characters have faced isolation due to loneliness, Kafuku does not see a point in socializing since his loneliness does not disappear even after being around multiple humans. He lives in the shadow of his life partner's departure from the world, pertaining to his loneliness.

Jon Morris believes that Murakami's lonely characters feel "divided from self and others, they feel lonely (alone) even when they are with others, though occasionally, for one fleeting exquisite metaphysical moment, they manage to bridge the gulf that separates us all." The way loneliness works is that it separates the loner from the society, even his loved ones. The constant feeling of being alone further pushes the person into feeling that no one could ever fill the void or understand how they truly feel. Some characters in Murakami's other works like 'Sputnik Sweetheart' (2001) isolate themselves after meeting multiple people and finding out that no one matches the one they lost. Aomame in another Murakami novel, '1Q84' (2009) leads a reclusive lifestyle for the work she does. Tsukuru Tazaki in 'Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and his years of Pilgrimage' (2013) was isolated because of his friends, who chose to leave him. Thus, Murakami portrays a plethora of characters who have isolated themselves for multiple reasons which could be related to their own thinking or the environment they were in and people they were surrounded by. The characters in 'Men without Women' are no different in nature. Vogue described the short story collection as "A disconcertingly funny portrait of modern loneliness."

THE LONELY WORLD OF THE MEN (WITHOUT THEIR WOMEN)

Throughout these seven stories Haruki Murakami brings his wry humor and a sense of surrealistic streak to the lives of men who are alone in the world in their own ways. Starting from the first story where Kafuku is taken into a spiral of existentialist questions after meeting one of his dead wife's lovers. Murakami sets the tone of the stories which follow. A silent scene between him and his driver with scattered conversation raise various important questions in his mind.

In the second story, 'Yesterday' the protagonist exclaims. "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 friends I could open up to. No clue what I should do everyday, no vision for the future for the most part I remained hidden away, deep within myself. Sometimes I'd go for a week without talking to anybody. That kind of life continued for a year. A long, long year. Whether this period was a cold winter that left valuable growth rings inside me, I can't really say." The college boy protagonist Tanimura, of the second story found it almost 'pointless' to strive for so much in life and to thrive on the desire of gaining a status in the society. Even though he had friends, but he chose to dwell in the streets of solitude as he found them to be more appropriate for himself. Yet when Kitaru asks him if he ever feels lonely without a girlfriend he answers in the affirmative. Kitaru is also defined by his girlfriend as someone who could not make friends.

An Independent Organ, the third story of the collection represents Mr. Tokai, a plastic surgeon's plight. "if you

took away my career as a plastic surgeon, and the happy environment I am living in, and threw me out into the world, with no explanation and with everything stripped away- what in the world would I be?" the story of this surgeon who is happier in casual relationships compared to finding love screams loneliness. Throughout both of the stories there's a strong feeling of isolation. The men often look for answers to questions that are troubling their minds. Without the women they are incomplete, or maybe only modified from what they used to be. This story is a great example of the quote "real loneliness is not necessarily limited to when you are alone." Even after being with multiple women, the void is never filled for Tokai.

Scheherazade, the story of a man who is confined in his house only escapes his loneliness when a woman enters his isolated bubble twice a week. Full of stories and tales inspired from the Arabian nights this story gets to the more dark and existential side of things. "like dry ground welcoming the rain, he let solitude, silence and loneliness soak in."

Murakami's work deeply explores the different aspects of loneliness. In the story Kino the sadness and isolation which comes along with divorce is depicted. "Kino," the main character in the best story of the book, begins to believe he's the root cause of the darkness around him. After he comes home to find his wife in bed with his friend he forces himself into a solitary life. Samsa in Love is a very unique and interesting take on the most prestigious work of Franz Kafka, 'Metamorphosis'. After living the struggles and life of the insect, this story beautifully depicts what happens when he wakes up as a human. Feeling stuck in the body of a human, this insect deals with the ideas of humanity, loneliness and existential crisis. "Mysteries about lost loves become mysteries of the self which are ultimately transcended by the absurd mystery of existence."

The final story which also lends the name to the collection states, "once you've become men without women, loneliness seeps deep down inside your body like a red-wine stain on a pastel carpet." Catherine Holmes in her review believes, "Even when they are with women, Murakami's men are without them." The stories of Murakami don't just reflect the loneliness of his characters but also raises questions. Alike Lars Svendsen's book, these stories do not provide a definite answer as well. They all just complicate the idea of loneliness and isolation leading to a lot of questions for the reader and for the characters themselves. Keeping both the texts parallel, it can be studied that what Svendsen believes about loneliness is being manifested in Murakami's stories. The belief that loneliness can exist even in the presence of others is depicted in Mr. Tokai. Svendsen argues that loneliness is a phenomenon which works in spirals and gets tangled till the point of confusion. Murakami's characters experience this phenomenon in its complete glory.

CONCLUSIONS

"If Lars Svendsen helps one to understand loneliness cognitively, Haruki Murakami allows one to experience it affectively, giving it a slow, desperate pulse." This argument by Jon Morris clearly juxtaposes the two texts. The ideology which Svendsen theorizes in his book can be employed in the reading of Murakami's writings. All his characters can be understood as a testament of loneliness as explained by Svendsen. Where he believed that people who followed the western ideas of individualism were more prone to loneliness but later found out that individuals who were a part of societies or community sense of living were equally lonely. In the Japanese society which considers itself as a singular unit or a family, believing in a set of ideas and cultural practices, Murakami takes the different route and gives a voice to the individual perspectives. He believes that individual perspectives matter, even in the accounts of communal histories. For him "solitude is a freedom space, and establishing a private sphere is key to securing such freedom." Ed Siegel thus states, "it's how Murakami investigates themes of loneliness and loss, creating a special world enlivened by his own unique form of

magic realism.”

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