'DANCE DANCE DANCE', A METAPHOR FOR SELF-DISCOVERY

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Abstract: 'Dance Dance Dance' is a page turner where characters are constantly negotiating their identities between a real dimension and a fantasy world. Living primarily concerns one's arduous quest for a genuine soul-commitment. 'Do not make the same mistake twice!' sounds promising, yet it turns out to be more like a challenge rather than a fact for most of Murakami's shipwrecked-off-life's-shore characters. In Haruki Murakami's case, the boundaries between reality and unreality do not mistakenly melt away; on the contrary, they are shaped as a road running zigzags among human beings' errors, recurrent faults, inaccuracies, and all sorts of inherent blunders.

Keywords: postmodern fiction, unravelling mysteries, hope

1. Introduction

To Haruki Murakami, writing transgresses the mundane touch, the quotidian minutiae of existence, thus acquiring the power to heal, to reveal unsuspected meanings, to raise awareness with regard to fundamental matters, to set readers' curiosity agog, while also engaging their interest in relation to the emergence of a puzzling cosmos, defined by swiftly changing perspectives, and also inhabited by deftly portrayed characters.

All Haruki Murakami's protagonists seem to follow the same pattern: they set the stage for their topsy-turvy universe to be reconsidered in the light of an excruciating quest, fantastically devised to secure the missing object of their desire. Ultimately, their search is tantamount to a genuine *rite of passage* as well as to self-discovery.

In view of the Japanese writer's literary creed, it would be remiss of us not to embark on the enticing journey of reconfiguring the protagonist's chaotic present through the lens of a splintered past, suffused with ambiguity and vagueness.

2. Haruki Murakami, a Postmodern Japanese Writer

A ground-breaking voice, 'Haruki Murakami is an internationally known Japanese writer, with many of his works being translated into different languages.' (Shelley, 2012: 100)

He is not only arguably the most experimental Japanese novelist to have been translated into English, he is also the most popular, with sales in the millions worldwide. His greatest novels inhabit the liminal zone between realism and fable, whodunit and science fiction. Murakami's world is an allegorical one, constructed of familiar symbols–an empty well, an underground city-but the meaning of those symbols remains hermetic to the last. (Wray, 2004)

Murakami was born in 1949 in Kyoto, Japan's ancient capital, to a middle-class family with a vested interest in the national culture: his father was a teacher of Japanese literature, his grandfather a Buddhist monk. When he was two, his family moved to Kobe, and it was this bustling port city, with its steady stream of foreigners (especially American sailors), that most clearly shaped his sensibility. Rejecting Japanese literature, art, and music at an early age, Murakami came

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to identify more and more closely with the world outside Japan, a world he knew only through jazz records, Hollywood movies, and dime-store paperbacks.

Ironically, 'Haruki's null and cool atmosphere is created by remembering the time beyond the abyss. Nihility is the feeling that replaces passion after passion disappears. Coolness comes after nihility cools down. Both are based on memories'. (Baik, 2010) Haruki's novels are a narrative of the times and memories. Even though his works are full of meaningless words, lost time, individuals with no identities, and unnamed places, they contain a consistent allusion to memories.

3. When? How? Why Did He Start Writing? A Plethora of Literary Creativity–Related Questions That Haruki Murakami, Being Given the Floor, Will Shed Some Light On

Who else, if not the writer himself, is the most suitable person to provide us, the readers, with priceless insights into Haruki Murakami's writing process?

As John Wray claims, 'throughout the interview, which took place over two consecutive afternoons, he showed a readiness to laugh that was pleasantly out of keeping with the quiet of the office. He's clearly a busy man, and by his own admission, a reluctant talker, but once serious conversations began I found him focused and forthcoming.' (Wray, 2004)

John Wry's interview with Haruki Murakami's revolves around pivotal questions like: 'How does the writer find his narrative voice?'; 'At what age did Haruki Murakami become a writer? Was it a surprise to him?'; 'Is it true that Haruki Murakami's protagonists serve as projections of his own point of view into the fantastic world of his narratives –the dreamer in the dream?'; 'Does Haruki Murakami agree with the type of characterization according to which almost all his novels demand to be read as variations on a theme – a man has been abandoned by, or has otherwise lost the object of his desire, and is drawn by his inability to forget her into a parallel world that seems to offer the possibility of regaining what he has lost?'; 'Is disappointment depicted as rite of passage throughout Haruki Murakami's novels?'

The answers elicited by the aforementioned queries render obvious Haruki Murakami's commitment to escape the conspicuous aspects of his life in order to tackle its limitations and to pursue the intricate path of uncovering camouflaged dimensions within the daily routine: 'When I start to write, I don't have any plan at all. I just wait for the story to come. I don't choose what kind of story it is, or what's going to happen. I just wait.'; 'When I was twenty-nine years old. Oh yes, it was a surprise. But I got used to it instantly.'; 'I started writing at the kitchen table after midnight.'; 'When I make up the characters in my books, I like to observe the real people in my life. I don't like to talk much; I like to listen to other people's stories. I don't decide what kind of people they are; I just try to think about what they feel, where they are going. I gather some factors from him, some factors from her. I don't know if this is realistic or unrealistic, but for me, my characters are more real than real people.'; 'When my protagonist misses something, he has to search for it. *He's like Odysseus.* He experiences so many strange things in the course of his search.'; 'He has to survive those experiences, and in the end, he finds what he was searching for. But he is not sure it's the same thing. I think that's the motif of my books. Where do those things come from? I don't know. It fits me. It's the driving power of my stories: *missing and searching and finding.* And disappointment, a kind of new awareness of the world.'

4. Insights into Boku*'s Presence, One of Haruki Murakami's Literary Signatures*

A first person, unnamed narrator instantly captures our attention when he maps his deep-rooted beliefs, angst, and disillusions. The existentialist remarks invite readers to decipher

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the narrative algorithm, to delve into Haruki Murakami's inextricably connected threads of *'Dance Dance Dance.'*

Furthermore, from the very first lines, readers are tempted to cross the threshold of a world imbued with suspense, with the anxiety of designing a new order, of tracing some new, almost imperceptible axes: "I wake up, but where? I don't just think this, I actually voice the question to myself: 'Where am I?' As if I didn't know: I'm here. In my life. A feature of the world that is my existence. Not that I particularly recall ever having approved these matters, this condition, this state of affairs in which I feature." (Murakami, 1995: 5) Readers are introduced to a matrix-like place that emanates a primordial energy; Murakami's choice of *the Dolphin Hotel* hints at a place, which eludes both the spatial and temporal coordinates, leading to an outburst of the paradox.

The dichotomy *coagulation-disintegration* of the vital impetus comes out as a propelling force in *'Dance Dance Dance'.* A concise, accurate style with apophthegmatic accents runs, therefore, through the novel: 'A mysterious hotel. What it reminded me of was a biological dead end. A genetic retrogression. A freak accident of nature that stranded some organism up the wrong path without a way back. Evolutionary vector eliminated, orphaned life-form left cowering behind the curtain of history, in The Land That Time Forgot. And through no fault of anyone. No one to blame, no one to save it. […] Sad hotels existed everywhere, to be sure, but the Dolphin was in a class of its own. The Dolphin Hotel was conceptually sorry. The Dolphin Hotel was tragic.' (Murakami, 1995: 6-7)

'Dance Dance Dance' continues 'the story of *Boku*', first introduced in Murakami's first three novels (the so-called *Rat trilogy*). In particular, 'it reintroduces a number of characters first featured in Murakami's third novel, *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* (*A Wild Sheep Chase*, 1982). As '*Dance Dance Dance'* begins, *Boku* reveals that he has been dreaming about the *Iruka* Hotel featured in this earlier work, and has the distinct impression that there is someone there crying for him.' (Dil, 2010)

To understand the nature of *Boku*'s psychological journey in *'Dance Dance Dance'*, it is first necessary to briefly retrace where he has come from. Murakami's early trilogy, the so-called *Rat trilogy*, including *Kaze no ua o kike* (*Hear the Wind Sing*, 1979), *1973, Pinbōru* (*Pinball, 1973*; 1980), and *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* (*A Wild Sheep Chase*, 1982) loosely traces *Boku*'s story from childhood into young adulthood. *Boku* is learning to mourn and let go of the past, while at the same time creating a new form of identity for him from the lost fragments of this past.

According to Nihei (2013), 'one of the essential elements in the popularity of Murakami's work is his description of his main character. In his works, especially his early works, Murakami's protagonist is always the same kind of character - a nameless man in his late twenties or early thirties, known as *Boku*, the Japanese first person male pronoun. In contrast to another male pronoun, *ore*, *Boku* evokes an image of a gentle and good boy. Compared to *watashi*, a first pronoun for both genders, which has a formal tone, *Boku*, particularly the *Boku* in Murakami's work, is casual and unpretentious.'

The elements of fantasy, mystery, adventure, and detective story, all presented with suspense and humour in a smooth, sophisticated style, nudge the novel in the direction of the 'popular.' There is enough of the 'pure' and 'serious' about the work, however, to have held critics back from dismissing it merely as popular stuff- enough, it might be said, of the adversarial role against established norms of all sorts that the distinguished writer Kenzaburo Ōe sees as the defining feature of 'pure literature.' In other words, it seems to register a concern, albeit in a playfully oblique manner, over the human condition in the contemporary world. (Iwamoto, 1993) Anything requiring sustained thought, spiritual input, or a committed stance bores him, perhaps

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even frightens him. What he finds hard to handle or bothersome, he dismisses with slick, flippant aphorisms. It bears reiteration that *Boku* is by no means a despicable man, out to perpetrate evil. Neither is he coldly indifferent toward those around him.

Besides this universal appeal to cynicism, there are three other survival strategies operating in *'Dance Dance Dance'* that can also be seen as ideologically suspect: a new age 'go with the flow' attitude, a turn towards careful consumption and new forms of discipline, and a tendency to enjoy through the Other. (Dil, 2010) Associated with this reverence for consumerism[1] is the driving need in late-capitalist societies to maximize pleasure, for even pleasure can be a burden when people are not sure if they are doing it right.

Given 'the ubiquity of Murakami's *Boku* and the self-reflexive quality in his use of the hard-boiled detective genre, it is necessary to revise the critical discussion of Murakami in one respect. The hard-boiled tradition is not one of the key elements of Murakami's literary cosmopolitanism; it is the key element. It is a means for Murakami of mapping out a narrative position from which writing fiction becomes possible.' (Hantke, 2007)

As Boku dreams of the hotel he will eventually need to return to, he has the undeniable feeling that he is somehow a part of it: 'I often dream about the Dolphin Hotel. In these dreams, I'm there, implicated in some kind of ongoing circumstances. All indications are that I belong to this dream continuity. […] The hotel envelops me. I can feel its pulse, its heat. In dreams, I am part of the hotel.' (Murakami, 1995: 5) Indeed, the hotel can easily be read as a metaphor for his sense of self. The woman who is there crying for him provides the invitation to begin his journey of individuation one more time. The hotel, as he had first encountered it, reminded him of an organism somehow stalled in its development.

He constantly ridicules his job as freelance journalist, for example, as nothing more than cultural snow shoveling, even though he also realizes that such acts are a large part of what keeps the larger economy going. *Boku*'s cynicism reflects a common attitude of his day, an uneasy acceptance that despite the obvious problems he sees around him, things are not really going to change: "My only concern was to do things systematically, from one end to the other. I sometimes wonder if this might not prove to be the bane of my life. After wasting so much pulp and ink myself, who was I to complain about waste? We live in an advanced capitalist society, after all. Waste is the name of the game, its greatest virtue. Politicians call it 'refinements in domestic consumption.' I call it meaningless waste. A difference of opinion."(Murakami, 1995: 15)

In Dil's view (2010), '*Boku* will constantly have to wrestle with the idea that polished veneers and flashy displays of wealth may simply be covering a more sinister core, though ultimately he realizes this too late. As he first makes his way to the hotel, however, he still has little idea of what he is actually searching for, and so he simply has to wait. The process of

[1] Ellis Cashmore, *Encyclopedia of Race and Ethnic Studies,* New York: Routledge Ltd., 2004, pg. 169:
"Consumption, communications, and production. Globalization may be understood as a tendency for routine day-to-day social interaction to be imbued with patterns that are, to an increasing extent, shared across the planet, which has in turn been brought about by the increasing interdependency of societies across the world and complemented by the expansion of international media of communications that has made people all over the world more conscious of other places and the world as a whole.
The twentieth century's 'holy trinity' of mass consumption, mass communication and mass production had, long before the world globalization came into use, brought about a trend toward the homogenization of culture in all sorts of ways. […] With Ford and his emulators in other industries, the twentieth century became the age of the consumer and what became known as 'the American dream' was aspired to by the rest of the world. Possibly, the spread of consumerism is as important and emancipatory, if not democratic, process as any of the others, social and political.
If the twentieth century, up to its last few decades, is seen as the century of mass society based upon production - communication-consumption, these last few decades have been labeled those of the communications revolution and the knowledge industry."

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individuation he is involved in is not one that can be forced; rather, it must be allowed to develop spontaneously.'

> 'We connect things. That's what we do. Like a switchboard, we connect things. Here's the knot. And we tie it. We're the link. Don't want things to get lost, so we tie the knot. That's our duty. Switchboard duty. You seek for it, we connect, you got it. Get it?'
> 'Sort of,' I said.
> 'So, […] you lost things, so you're lost. You lost your way. Your connections come undone. You got confused, think you got no ties. But there's where it all ties together.'(Murakami, 1995: 84)

As *Boku* searches for meaning behind the seemingly contingent array of characters and events in his life, he seems comforted by the fact that despite the waste and extravagances surrounding him, his real quest is somehow about reconnecting with himself and the things he has lost in his life. Putting aside the question of whether or not he believes there is really some innermost kernel to discover, he is willing to let go of his sense of conscious control and to follow the mysterious intrusions of his life wherever they may take him. The message is that if he just keeps moving, somehow things are going to work out:

> 'You lost lots of things. Lots of precious things. Not anybody's fault. But each time you lost something, you dropped a whole string of things with it. Know why? Why'd you have to go and do that?'
> 'I don't know.'
> 'Hard to do different. Your fate, or something like fate. Tendencies.'
> 'Tendencies?'
> 'Tendencies. You got tendencies. So even if you did everything over again, your whole life, you got tendencies to do just what you did, all over again.' (Murakami, 1995: 85)

5. Conclusion

'Dance Dance Dance' is much about grasping life through both mundane and epiphany moments. Furthermore, reality with postmodern Murakami is definitely more than what conventional parameters usually dictate. Suppressing time and space barriers leads to a sense of empowerment as some characters reach that part of their self, which they need to rescue. The protagonist comes across as being a tireless observer, while in search for some meaning in life.

Another motif comes into focus in Murakami's '*Dance Dance Dance'*, the one of fighting back the existential void as characters struggle to come to terms with themselves.

I would also like to foreground Murakami's deftness in depicting loneliness, alienation, a rapidly expanding public image (the *persona* myth), and consumerism as landmarks of a modern, late-capitalist society, that particular system to which people are gradually succumbing rather than showing any resistance whatsoever.

In my opinion, the inability to truly communicate, to express one's feelings, to commit to somebody, therefore a dense air of detachment seems to permeate every page of the novel. Moreover, losing one's capacity to feel, to enjoy life, to reach a deeper level of fulfillment in something resonates with many characters. There is a wide range of pessimistic moods that *'Dance*

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Dance Dance' thoroughly covers, among which *estrangement, physical, psychical, and spiritual exhaustion.*

Egotistic, self-absorbed people fail to nurture and care for their offspring, indulging, instead, their own artistic hobbies: in short, a bohemian lifestyle at odds with a healthy parental agenda. It is beyond doubt that the individual prevails over his/her family.

To conclude, I should underscore the fact that, underlying Murakami's text, there is also the propensity for amassing fame, fortune, fleeting glitterati moments; some characters literally cherish their image as if it were sacrosanct, at the expense of one's genuine self, and ultimately soul annihilation.

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