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Magic Meets Philosophy in Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the shore*

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Abstract:

Kafka Tamura is a 15 year old boy who is accursed by his father in a way that Oedipus was. Attached with his fate are the lives of Nakata and Seiki. While Nakata is devoid of memories and lives in the present, Seiki stopped living since her beloved died and hence buried herself in the past. When the lives of these three characters intersect, the story brings about profound meanings. The author has buried several philosophical notes in the never ending riddles of the plot.

The author of the novel, Haruki Murakami is a Japanese writer who seeks to create a magical world while spreading deep rooted thoughts of existentialism in his work. Several of his novels are bestseller, and have been translated in more than 50 languages. Though he creates a magical world that people tend to love, but only few are able to decipher the underlying meaning.

Keywords: Magical realism, existentialism, love, emptiness, philosophy.

Professors of literature are often found saying that you need to read a work of literature more than once, to be able to understand it better. What they actually mean is that a pure work of art never ceases to exhaust itself and brings about new truths and revelations as one goes on reading and re-reading. However still, not many of us do go through the novels that run across 200 pages, let alone 615.

The very fact that Haruki Murakami's book *Kafka on the shore* is undecipherable by most of the readers, in the very first reading, is a proof of it being a work of art. While reading the book one is reminded of the magical world of Gabriel Garcia Marquez when he sketched a magical realm out of *Macando*, his village in the novel *One hundred years of Solitude*. Ghosts, spirits, fishes falling from the sky, talking to the cats are all accepted as real. A dream like fantasy is what surrounds the novel.

MAGICAL REALISM

Kafka On the Shore is written in the genre of magical realism. Magical realism consists of several elements like myth and magic woven into the plot, which appear true, but

have no valid explanation. For instance, when Nakata tells Hoshino that he could make things fall from the sky (and so he does) and could talk to the cats (so he does), Hoshino doesn't doubt it and takes it as an extraordinary ability of Nakata. In magical realism, the characters don't doubt but except the magic as real¹. Colonel Sanders who comes as a pimp and an agent delivering the entrance stone, calls himself 'a concept', therefore deemed to be unreal.

In this world where magic and reality co exist, the characters live in a time bound existence. Kafka, the protagonist lives in future (his life driven by the prophecy), Nakata, the alter ego of Kafka lives in present (because of loss of memories) and Ms. Seiki, in the past (in the memories of dead lover). This is what makes these characters so incomplete without each other that, it is when they come together that the story bears a meaning.

Moreover, the novel also contains another space where there exists a limbo. Here people don't age, time doesn't move and dead take a stopover before dying. This complexity of existence, is what drives the novel and creates magic.

Intertwined with magic is, myth. The oedipal myth of Oedipus killing his father and marrying his mother is exactly what Kafka's father (Koichi Tamura) cursed Kafka with. This prophecy becomes the corner stone in the story.

While Murakami confesses on portraying a world of magic and dream, he is surely hinting at a profound meaning beneath the plot-

"For me, writing a novel is like having a dream. Writing a novel lets me intentionally dream while I'm still awake. I can continue yesterday's dream today, something you can't normally do in everyday life. It's also a way of descending deep into my own consciousness. So, while I see it as dreamlike, it's not fantasy. For me the dreamlike is very real. However, inside the portrayal of fantasy and dream like drowsiness, are very profound realities of human existence." (Murakami)

The book is an intertwined set of two tales that seem to run parallel to each other, yet seem to converge and yet pass each other unnoticed.

The novel runs through the story of a 15-year-old boy who has 'taken up' the name 'Kafka' Tamura (Tamura being his real surname), as a means to try and shun away the curse

¹ Magical realism- Thamarana, Simhachalam. (2015). Magic Realism in English Literature and its Significant Contribution. International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies. 2. 263-266.

that lurks upon him. Running parallel is the story of Nakata, a 70 year old who lost the ability to read, write, remember and is what he himself calls “an empty vessel” because of an incident in his childhood. Another character Ms. Seiki is the one who connects the two, though not a very clear connection gets established.

The story moves like a labyrinth; through “the uninhibited expression of imagination, beauty and inspiration” (P.259); with beautiful twists and turns but no clear path. Many themes revolve in the novel, intermixing, creating a meaning, yet undecipherable, like a labyrinth.

NO CONTROL ON ONE’S FATE

A 15-year-old bears the name Kafka and runs away from home to escape a curse and inadvertently searching for his mother who bears a role in the curse. No matter he tries to escape killing his father or abusing his mother, he ends up doing both. The first one is made true by Nakata who acts as an agent in the scheme of things and the second one by his own dream and later by himself, wavering between consciousness and conscience. Murakami dwells well upon this theme of Predeterminism or the inability to alter one’s fate, throughout the novel. Either one is not able to change his fate or one is driven by the hands of the cosmic world.

When Kafka tried to run away from killing his father, Nakata had to be the vessel in which Koichi Tamura’s spirit entered and forced him to kill Koichi who had taken up the ‘appearance’ of Johnny walker, a cat killer, to convince Nakata (cat lover) that he deserves to die. Nakata later confesses saying “the 15 old year old should have been there. I never wanted to kill johnny walker”. The very fact that Koichi Tamura was naked upon death, proves he was wearing the garb of a Johnny Walker, to be fit enough to be killed by Nakata. No matter Kafka tried, but the blood stains of his father Koichi Tamura, fell on him rather than Nakata who was spotless.

Where Kafka is unable to change his fate, Nakata and Ms. Seiki have no authority in driving their fate or lives. Nakata doesn’t know his next move because it comes ‘intuitively’ to him. He gets on the road with a vague idea of a destination and gets driven by ‘his destiny’. While Seiki spends her days waiting in vain, for a day to arrive when she will be transported to a much -awaited land which “is beyond time, at the edge of the world”. This theme dwells well with the idea of pre-determinism where man has no power over his fate and has to bear whatever comes across him as fate, unchanged, unhindered.

EMPTINESS

This inability of determining one's life leaves a meaninglessness and a void that is another significant theme in the story. Every character in the story at one point or the other says he/she is 'empty'. Nakata calls himself "an empty vessel", Kafka feels "a void inside", Hoshino feels "a hollow existence", Ms. Seiki feels "empty". This utter lack of any meaningful existence is what comprises of all the characters in the novel. No one is wholesome but everybody is a broke. Oshima feels a different kind of emptiness where he is a hermaphrodite, can neither feel like a man nor a woman.

One can easily weave a connection with Jean Paul Sartre's work *Being and nothingness*. This existential crisis of living without a fruitful existence is what makes all the characters in the story broken and injured. They act as Sartre would call 'unconscious actors' living their lives as it comes. Kafka, tries hard to control his unconscious sexual desires, that however grows on him more and more. He acts on them, as if he bears no control. Franz Kafka knew this struggle too. This existential crisis lies in the fact that when struck with possibilities, choosing one act over the other becomes difficult, where none of it seems the true fit (Cliff notes)

LOVELORN LIFE

In this uncontrolled environment, and a void, man needs something to fill himself up. Love apparently is the feeling everybody in the novel is craving for. Each character embodies the other person with a loved one he/she craved to have. Sakura feels Kafka is her 'lost brother', Kafka feels Sakura is her 'lost sister', Ms. Seiki sees her 'dead lover' in Kafka, Kafka sees her 'lost mother' in Seiki, for Hoshino, Nakata resembles his grandpa and for Oshimo, Kafka reflects his childhood. Whether Seiki is the real mother of Kafka or not, one cannot be sure of. But one can be sure of the fact that for Seiki, Kafka filled the void left behind by her dead lover, and for Kafka, Ms. Seiki filled the void left behind by his mother who had abandoned him. Oshima, who is neither male nor female also feels the need to be loved and accepted as she is.

IMPORTANCE OF MEMORIES

When life itself felt loveless, only memories could offer respite. Memories are the reservoirs of such feelings of love and affection. That is why the lack of memory in Nakata is a pain point in his life but too many memories of love is ironically, a pain point for Ms. Seiki.

Perhaps that is why she says “Memories warm you up from the inside. But they also tear you apart.” These very memories are what Nakata craves for and has no idea how does it feel. It is the very reason he feels no ‘anguish or sadness’ because he never felt what love and memory feel like. While he stopped living at the age of 9, Ms. Seiki stopped living at the age of 19. Both are struck in time and long for that time to come back. However, Nakata can only live in present and Seiki only in past, both of which create “half shadows” in them. They aren’t complete but half of their selves. This is what a Kafakaen hero would represent- a person who lives “between a vanished one to which he once belonged and between a present world to which he does not belong” (Cliff notes). Only Nakata, who knew nothing about memories was suitable to burn those of Seiki before she could pass over to the other world, as a clean slate.

Kafka is the one who walks in the shadows of his future (lurking curse). So, none of them is actually happy or wholesome. Kafka has lost the memory of his mother and wants to go back in childhood to recall how his mother looked like.

DREAMS, CONSCIOUSNESS AND CONSCIENCE

Between the world of past, present, future lies the realm of dreams, sexual fantasies and conscience that talks of another occult realm. Dreams are where Kafka gets most of his unconsciousness run. He could violate sadistically both her sister and her mother (supposed) in his dreams. Through explicit sexual fantasies, Murakami describes the uninhibited and often animal like nature of our unconscious mind. Kafka moves from an unconscious sexual fantasy with Ms. Seiki to a conscious sexual encounter with her, riding freely on his conscience. The trespassing seemed to get in the flow of things but was actually fatal to Ms. Seiki’s existence, though destined by fate.

DEATH- A REALITY

In this surreal scheme of things, Murakami also gives us a taste of death. The entrance stone which is a metaphor of death is what both Ms. Seiki and Nakata want to enter. At the age of 8, Nakata had a near death experience by which he had left ‘half of his self’ inside the stone, thereby robbing him of his memories/intellectual abilities and leaving him with a hollow existence. While Ms. Seiki, too might have tried to enter the stone (hence death) when her lover died, leaving her forever in the past. Both wish to be complete again and hence enter a realm where ‘there is no time’

THE MESSAGE

Once Nakata and Seiki stopped living for themselves, they merely became agents to fulfil the motive of the cosmos. Nakata brought about the death of Koichi Tamura (in the garb of Johnny walker) and Seiki became the mother of Kafka who had to be violated for the prophesy to be fulfilled.

In the end, Kafka Tamura realises that one can never run from fate because “in dreams begin responsibilities”. He realises how freedom is actually a curse, everybody wants to be tied so that he/she might not go far enough and trespass the boundaries of moral conscience. It is actually accepting the reality and moving on (rather than running away) that life could be truly lived. It is after accepting responsibilities, Kafka Tamura became “the toughest 15-year-old”. His father had died. He had buried his curse in Ms. Seiki and accepted her as his mother; by sucking her blood (metaphorically creating blood relation) and forgave her for abandoning him; and with her death the curse also died. So now, when Kafka Tamura woke up from his dream-he was a new man.

PATRIOTISM AND ANTI WAR

In the quagmire of existential crisis, Murakami has also planted several anti-war motifs. The reason why Nakata was deemed hollow was because of an accident that happened during WW2 which had some connection to the B-29, war weapon used by America on Japan. Two soldiers found in the forest of Kochi (where Kafka lives for sometime) talk of the futility of war ‘where either you get killed or you have to kill’. Several hints of hatred towards the American conquest of Japan could be seen in the way Murakami plots Colonel Sanders (American businessman owner of KFC) as a pimp for whom sexual act is important even near a shrine and Johnny Walker (symbolizing British whiskey brand) who kills and devours cats to collect their souls. Cat which is an important animal in Japanese culture, is devoured by the appearance of a British capitalist Johnny walker who had to be killed by a Japanese Nakata, to save the cats, hence Japan.

Even Hoshino who smokes a Marlboro and wears an aloha shirt (both symbolising America) is no more than a mule working in and out as a truck driver who took girls as sex objects, never heeding on to their nature. It is when he meets Nakata, he feels meaningfulness in his life.

The novel is full of wisdom wrapped up in a quagmire of riddles. But, there is no sense in reading the novel just to solve the riddles because, Murakami himself says

“*Kafka on the Shore* contains several riddles, but there aren’t any solutions provided. Instead several of these riddles combine, and through their interaction the possibility of a solution takes shape. And the form this solution takes will be different for each reader” (Murakami)

His riddles are things one might never understand because there may or may not be real solutions to them. But what is actually intended for the readers is to interpret the story and understand the message. Hence, to summarize, Haruki Murakami wrote *Kafka on the shore* with an outline sketched by the likes of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, while filling the picture with the wisdom of Franz Kafka and many more philosophers. He writes stories where a wealthy businessman acts as a pimp and a prostitute is so full of philosophies. The novel reads as magic and ends on enlightenment.

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