

Societal Norms in Modern Japan and Murakami's English-language Collection, *The Elephant Vanishes*

Although Japanese author Haruki Murakami "has established himself as... the primary source, for many millions of readers, of the texture and shape of his native country," (Anderson) it is often argued that Murakami's stories are not anchored to their country of origin, as he has "always considered himself an outsider in [Japan]" (Anderson). As a result, Murakami's works often emphasize the concepts of "place" and dislocation through his illustration of the universal dilemma of urban ennui. Despite Murakami's personal rebellion against the Japanese society, as he immersed himself in the Western culture at a young age, stories such as "The Wind-Up Bird and Tuesday's Women" and "Sleep" within the collection *The Elephant Vanishes* function as a response to the conformity to modern Japan's societal norms – such as employment, ambition, class, gender, and collective identity – as well as the resulting lack of communication and connection between his characters and the world that surrounds them.

Murakami utilizes characterization and symbolism within his short story "The Wind-Up Bird and Tuesday's Women" in order to illustrate the confines of Japan's highly expectant culture. Murakami highlights the emptiness within his protagonist's life despite his initial conformity to Japanese societal standards in order to emphasize the entrapment strict cultures – such as that of Japan Murakami personally experienced – may create. Furthermore, Murakami imbues the narrator's environment with symbolism in order to more deeply characterize the protagonist as representative of the typical Japanese "salaryman". As a result, Murakami's combined use of characterization and symbolism enable him to comment upon the Japanese society and its members as a whole.

Murakami provides his protagonist with the stereotypical makings of a successful Japanese lifestyle – a wife and a home – except for a job, in order to emphasize the impact of Japan’s suffocating cultural expectations. Murakami expands upon this idea through the narrator’s resignation from his occupation, in that Murakami suggests that in the Japanese society the lack of a job equates to a lost identity. Much like the modern, but vacated homes of a nearby neighborhood, which lack “any visible occupants” and reflect “not a sound, not a hint of life,” the narrator possesses everything needed to facilitate life, but cannot rid himself of the emptiness that consumes his own (Murakami 18). Through this parallel, Murakami presents the reader with the double standard of Japan’s culture in that conformity to societal expectations is required to attain an identity, rendering individual happiness nearly unattainable.

Additionally, Murakami creates a metaphoric passage within “The Wind-Up Bird and Tuesday’s Women” in order to symbolize the narrator’s life as well as that of the Japanese “salaryman”. The narrator states that the passage within his community is “not the corridor you’d expect a passage to be; that’s only what we call it for lack of a better name. Strictly speaking, it isn’t a corridor at all. A corridor has an entrance and an exit, forming a route from one place to another” (Murakami 16). Just as he remarks that the passage is not truly a passage because it lacks direction, the life the narrator is living remains meaningless as long as it has no direction. Murakami connects this lack of a destination to Japanese culture through the statement “thus, the path went neglected and untrafficked, like some abandoned canal, merely serving as a kind of buffer zone between the houses” (17). Similarly, the protagonist once had a concrete job but now floats through life without a distinct purpose. Therefore, Murakami’s use of symbolism serves to represent the lives of those who rebel against Japanese norms, such as the narrator.

Although seemingly unusual in comparison to his other works, as it is presented from a female's point of view, Murakami's short story "Sleep" also comments upon the oppression within Japan's society and traditional culture, simply from an alternate perspective. Despite her gender, the story's narrator suffers from an existential crisis similar to that of Murakami's male protagonist within "The Wind-Up Bird and Tuesday's Women," as she struggles to find a sense of belonging and meaning within her mundane life. Even so, her troubles become more complex than those of her male counterparts in that her oppression is caused by others rather than herself – as she is a woman living in a society dictated by men. Consequently, this unique perspective enables Murakami to explore Japanese gender roles and elaborate upon the expectations for women.

Murakami creates a duality within his female protagonist through which he emphasizes the emptiness imbued within the lifestyle of a typical Japanese homemaker. Just as a male would be, within her daytime life the narrator is simply expected to "push the buttons [and] pull the levers" as she serves her family and conforms to the expectations of the Japanese machine (Murakami 99). As a result, her life becomes merely a continuous routine – leading her to "wonder what kind of life this was," as she was "very simply – amazed. At the lack of demarcation between the days" (Murakami 81). Therefore, the separate life she begins to live under her own command during the night is representative of a life without the oppression of men, as she remarks, "I could use this time in any way I liked. No one would get in my way. No one would make demands on me" (Murakami 100). Through creating a stark contrast between her monotonous daytime life and her blissful nighttime routine, Murakami underlines the entrapment experienced by women struggling to abide by standards set by men.

Murakami's conclusion of "Sleep" portrays a symbolic attack that highlights the confines of society while representing the narrator's inability to control her own life. Because the police officer mentions a rape previously carried out by three men, whereas the narrator is assaulted by "two dark shadows," the attackers may be perceived as the husband and son that dictate the events of her daily life (Murakami 108). Similar to the manner in which her car has become a "little box" she is trapped within during the attack, because her life is controlled by others, it has become a box from which she cannot escape (Murakami 109). Although she attempts to find liberation from the men that govern her life, Murakami's ominous ending suggests that she will "never get the key" to escape the box she is trapped within (109).

In conclusion, although Murakami's works are not anchored solely to Japan, they often serve as a means to comment upon the confining nature of Japanese culture and its societal norms. Murakami's stories "The Wind-Up Bird and Tuesday's Women" and "Sleep" narrate rebellion against society in order to demonstrate the consequences of not conforming to Japanese societal expectations – often a loss of one's own identity and their relationships with others. As a result, Murakami's works enable him to analyze the oppression faced by Japanese citizens – men and women alike – due to the strict standards they are expected to live by.