



SUICIDE, MEMORY AND TRAUMA IN HARUKI MURAKAMI'S NORWEGIAN WOOD

Md. Shafiqul Islam

Lecturer, Department of English
University of Barishal, Bangladesh
Email: mshaislam@bu.ac.bd
www.shafiqul-islam.com

[Citation: Islam, M. S. (2018). SUICIDE, MEMORY AND TRAUMA IN HARUKI MURAKAMI'S NORWEGIAN WOOD, *Journal of ELT and Education*, 1(1): 23-28.]

Abstract

Article History:

Received:
02.12.2018

Accepted:
27.12.2018

Published:
31.12.2018

Death is an inveterate theme in the narrative of Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (1987). The current paper analyzes *Norwegian Wood* (1987) from the perspectives of different literary and psychological theories to measure the impacts of death and formations of trauma on the psyches of different characters of the novel. It shows how Toru Watanabe, the narrator gets recovered from his trauma through a purgatory solitary journey while Naoko, the main female character develops post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and ends up killing herself. The study also scrutinizes how 'memory' functions in the cognitive system of the human brain and gives a study of how and what affects the brain to develop trauma. In doing so, it draws references to contemporary Japan and literary pieces from different parts of the world.

Keywords: Post-modern fiction, trauma theory, suicide, memory, PTSD

1. Introduction

Haruki Murakami's seminal novel *Norwegian Wood* (1987) is narrated in the form of flashback from the point of view of 37 years old protagonist Toru Watanabe. The novel is set in the post-Second World War Japan of the 1960s. Naoko, a psychologically imbalanced girl who the narrator is in love with is one of the central characters of the novel. Naoko, the central female character, faces dire consequences of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and goes through different stages of psychological disorientations after bearing the pains of losing her boyfriend Kizuki and her sister, and Naoko eventually kills herself. But the reality seems different for Toru. Although he is attached to Naoko romantically, but that does not stop him from sleeping with other girls until he visits Naoko at the sanatorium. After Naoko's death, he goes out in the wilderness to 'purify' his mind by being close to the nature. This purgatory journey helps him get his traumatic memory of Naoko rid of his mind.

2. Objective

This paper critically scrutinizes incidents of suicides in the novel, examines the impacts these incidents leave on the formation of memory and the development of PTSD in the characters (i.e.: Naoko, Toru and Midori) and observes to what extent trauma impacts upon these characters.

3. Literature Review

Based on the criticism of Haruki Murakami, several critical essays and analyses were collected for the study. Different books and literary journals have also been very useful as the supporting materials for further study. Different creative and critical writings composed by Beck (1967), Carl (1933), Claves and Lyman (1999) Gleitman (1991), Kundera (1984) and Nayar

(2009) etc remained helpful for the development of the study. Moreover, the some literary websites were also supportive in this regard.

4. Methodology

The present study collected relevant information both from secondary and primary sources. The researcher consulted different online sources (i. e.: jstor.com, tandfonline.com, scholar.google.com et. al) and the library of the University of Barishal while conducting this research. Afterwards the researcher applied conceptual frameworks to develop the main idea into further analyses.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Kizuki's Suicide and Naoko's Kizuki Complex

Death is a recurring event in the novel *Norwegian Wood*. Upon reading the novel, the readers would feel that Murakami is obsessed with death, more precisely with suicide. Kizuki, Naoko's childhood friend and boyfriend and Toru's 'only' friend commits suicide at the age of 17. Kizuki's suicide for no apparent reason brings an end to the friendship triangle among the three. His death traumatizes Toru and Naoko so deeply that it changes the courses of their lives for the rest of the narrative. As Toru narrates,

Until that time, I had understood death as something entirely separate from and independent of life. The hand of death is bound to take us, I had felt, but until the day it reaches out for us, it leaves us alone. This had seemed to me the simple, logical truth. Life is here, death is over there. I am here, not over there. (Murakami 31)

The image of *Yin and Yang* can be worth considerable to understand the inseparable psychological and emotional connection between Naoko and Kizuki. In *Yin and Yang*, without the white counterpart, the black cannot exist. Similarly, Naoko's existence becomes a mere 'living' without Kizuki's presence. So, upon Kizuki's death, Naoko encounters a psychological vacuum that impacts on her deeply. This traumatic experience impacts upon her so much that she develops a psychological condition clinically known as post-traumatic stress disorder. American Psychiatric Association defines PTSD as, "psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape or other violent personal assault." Kizuki's and Naoko's sister's suicides can be referred here. To fill the void, Toru and Naoko develop a *less romantic more habitual* relationship. As Toru says,

"Naoko never loved me." (Murakami 10)

Her obsession with Kizuki and now his absence created a kind of complex in her. Carl Jung (1933) defines 'complex' as the building block of human psyche. Complexes are important features of the personal unconscious. A complex refers to attitudes, feelings, memories and thoughts that focus on a single concept "autonomously and interfere with the intentions of the will, disturbing the memory and conscious performance". Naoko cannot get past the thought of her deceased boyfriend because much of her past memories were occupied by his presence.

Henry Gleitman (244) discusses three fundamental aspects of how memory functions. The first stage is 'acquisition' where "the relevant experiences leave some record in the nervous system, the *memory trace*." As Naoko and Kizuki have maintained an intimate relationship with each other since early childhood and their homes are within the proximity of 100 yards, her nervous system is full of his 'memory traces'. The next aspect is called 'storage' where "the memory traces are squirreled away and held in some more or less enduring form for later use". The experiences Naoko and Kizuki shared have contributed to this aspect of memory. The final phase is 'retrieval' where we 'try to remember' "to dredge up this particular trace from among all the others we have stored." The last stage throws a challenge to Naoko. Her inability to remember anything but Kizuki and her eventually becoming schizophrenic later on attests to the fact that she could never get rid of her Kizuki Complex ever since Kizuki commits suicide.

Naoko's attempt to 'repress' her memory of the time she spent with Kizuki torments her deep down. As Nayar defines, "Repression is the hiding away of something in our minds, what is hidden away exists in our unconscious. Guilt-inducing desire and traumatic events such as the death of a loved one...The unconscious is the greatest threat to our identity as rational humans." (65) Firstly, despite Kizuki being dead for three years, he still remains at the center of Naoko's psyche. She 'hides' away Kizuki in her 'mind' and the thought of him, therefore, exists in her 'unconscious'. Secondly, Naoko feels 'guilty' at times because she happened to be Kizuki's girlfriend at the time he had committed suicide. As *why* he killed himself remains unknown, Naoko feels guilty of her ignorance concerning his plans to kill himself. It is not clear from the narrative whether Kizuki showed suicidal tendencies before he actually killed himself, but it is understood from Naoko's statements that his demise 'traumatized' and tormented her. Thirdly, Naoko's 'unconscious' affects her in such an antagonistic way that she loses her rational self and cannot differentiate between the present (i. e.: being with Toru) and the past (i. e.: her memories).

Nayar writes that according to Freud human life is driven by two principles – the pleasure principle and the reality principle. The former one deals with attaining 'pleasure' and avoiding 'un-pleasure', whereas the latter one inspires us to 'seek other routes of attaining pleasure' as our pleasures cannot be fulfilled in ways we want them to. (65) Despite Naoko's lack of 'libido' during sexual encounters with Kizuki, she was could 'attain pleasure'. This 'pleasure' might not be sexual, but the emotional connection she has with Kizuki filled the void. So, when he committed suicide and Naoko developed intimacy with Toru, she looked for an alternative of Kizuki and found Toru who could 'rechannel' her thoughts towards Kizuki. So, instead of following the pleasure principle when being with Toru, Naoko emphasized more on the reality principle. There comes Naoko's fear of being forgotten by Toru as she 'never loved him'. As Toru states, "She knew that my memories of her would fade. This is precisely why she begged me never to forget her, to remember that she had existed." (Murakami 10) However, American Psychiatric Association presents four symptoms of PTSD that include intrusive thoughts, avoiding reminders, negative thoughts and feelings and arousal and reactive symptoms. Naoko's complex psyche shows all four of the symptoms. (American Psychiatric Association, 2017)

5.2. Dystopian World of Ami Hostel

Ami Hostel is the sanatorium Naoko is shifted to after she starts showing symptoms of PTSD. The name of the sanatorium seems somewhat paradoxical. As the narrator describes, "I thought about it for a few minutes, concluding that the 'ami' must be from the French word for 'friend'." (Murakami 116-117) It seems ironic because a 'hostel' is built for providing accommodation to ones in need of a place to reside. Added to it '*ami*' or friend gives the idea that the place is not built for curing patients with psychological conditions, rather it is built to facilitate them with accommodation for their sound stay as long as they want. We get a clearer picture of the sanatorium from a letter Naoko writes to Toru,

The one real problem with this place is that once you're here you don't want to leave - or you're afraid to leave. As long as we're here, we feel calm and peaceful. Our deformities seem natural. We think we've recovered. But we can never be sure that the outside world will accept us in the same way. (Murakami 115)

A sanatorium is ideally a place that is supposed to cure patients of sickness and send them to the outer world after recovery. On the contrary, Ami Hostel makes it more comfortable to the patients to stay inside. In addition, if anyone leaves the sanatorium and wants to come back a while later, there is no coming back. As Naoko writes, "Each person is completely free to leave this place, but once you've left you can't come back. You burn your bridges. You can't go off for a couple of days in town and expect to come back." (Murakami 133) The sanatorium is located in an untraceable isolated mountainous place. In addition to that, Toru notices the sign displaying "AMI HOSTEL PRIVATE NO TRESPASSING" at least twice while entering the sanatorium territory. It is also guarded. During Naoko's stay at the sanatorium, instead of getting cured, her condition

gradually deteriorates. So, taking all these into consideration, this paper compares Ami Hostel with a dystopian world.

Clayes and Sargent define 'dystopia' as "a utopia that the author intended to contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society which the reader lived". Upon returning to Tokyo from Ami Hostel, Toru has hard time adjusting to the environment in the city even though the duration of time he stayed in the sanatorium is only three days. He says to Midori, "'I probably still haven't completely adapted to the world.' I said after giving it some thought. 'I don't know, I feel like this isn't the real world. The people, the scene: they just don't seem real to me.'" (Murakami 225) This shows that the sanatorium leaves a far-reaching impact on the minds of the people who reside over there. This might be so for Toru because of Naoko's presence at the sanatorium, but as Reiko says "lots of people don't get better" at the sanatorium. As found in the narrative, it is hard to distinguish between patients and staff at the Ami Hostel, and the therapy sessions include music and group discussions. All these happen in the midst of the nature, and the nature has healing power. However, it is a subject of debate whether Naoko's eventual suicide resulted from her prolonged stay at Ami Hostel or not. As Nayar writes, "Jean Jacques Rousseau argued that the state of nature was the purest and best form of human existence." (244) Japan, the country where the story of *Norwegian Wood* is set at, is known to be very notorious for suicide-prone people. Aokigahara, a dense forest, located on the northwestern part of Mount Fuji is known as the 'suicide forest'. While the reasons are unknown why people commit suicide in this forest, it is believed that the nature of the forest has something to do with people choosing to die within the Aokigahara forest.⁸ So, instead of healing Naoko, the environment surrounding Ami Hostel impacted into her psyche and caused her to commit suicide. For her, committing suicide was an opportunity of reincarnation. As Reiko tells Toru what Naoko had said before she killed herself, "I'm getting rid of everything from the past so I can be reborn in the future." (Murakami 372) Although at that point of time Reiko could not understand her motifs of committing suicide, Naoko had planned to kill herself long ago.

5.3. Naoko's Split Personality and Schizophrenia

At the beginning of the novel, Toru says, "Memory is a funny thing." (Murakami 2) This gives a hint towards the kind of struggle the characters would have to deal with throughout the narrative. Gleitman (754) specifies some of the most common symptoms of split personality and schizophrenia. *Disturbance of thought* is the most common symptom of this psychological condition. He writes that the schizophrenic cannot 'think straight'. "He can't maintain one unified guiding thought, but rather skips from one idea to the next." A clear indication of Naoko's psychological disorientation can be traced at the beginning of the novel *Norwegian Wood*. She starts developing this condition after Kizuki commits suicide. She says,

"I try to say something, but all I get are the wrong words - the wrong words or the exact opposite words from what I mean. I try to correct myself, and that only makes it worse. I lose track of what I was trying to say to begin with. It's like I'm split in two and playing tag with myself. One half is chasing the other half around this big, fat post. The other me has the right words, but this me can't catch her." (Murakami 25)

Losing contact is another common characteristic schizophrenic's show. This can happen for a number of reasons. Gleitman (755) writes, "One possibility is that it is a defense against the overstimulation to which they are exposed because of their inability to filter out the irrelevant." He shows another possibility that this might happen due to 'pathological family relations during childhood and adolescence'. If we trace down Naoko's family relation during her childhood, we see that she had a conflicting relationship with her sister on the ground of getting comparatively more attention from her parents. Her sister eventually committed suicide at the age of 17, as did Kizuki, and Naoko was the one who found her sister dead, hanging from the rooftop in her room. On another account, Naoko cuts all contacts with the outer world except through writing letters. Exchanging of letters eventually stopped after her mental condition deteriorated. However, the letters can be seen as the only bridge between her and the 'real world'.

Another stage of schizophrenia is *hallucination*. Reiko describes Naoko's deteriorating condition as, "Whenever she would try to write a letter, she would hear people talking to her, which made it impossible for her to write. The voices would interfere with her attempts to choose her words." (Murakami 323) The voices Naoko used to hear were mostly of her dead sister and Kizuki. They would invite her to join them. So, Naoko committed suicide having been guided by the voices she heard. This problem is not a unique one for Naoko though. "For all of us here, these kinds of symptoms come in cycles, more or less. In her case, they got quite serious after you left", said Reiko to Toru.

Depression can be lethal for any person suffering from psychological disorder, and this can lead to suicide. Gleitman (766) writes, "Probably no patient in real life has described his preoccupation with death, suicide and dissolution as eloquently as that greatest depressive in all of English literature, Prince Hamlet."

O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't! ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; (Hamlet, Act I, Scene ii)

This might sound interesting that hardly any patient commits suicide during the depressive phase. "The risk increases as the patient begins to come out of the worst phase of his depression. Suicide rates are greatest during weekend leaves from hospital and shortly after discharge." (Beck) Naoko is sent to a hospital when her condition deteriorates. She then comes back to Ami Hostel when she feels a little better. And, in the middle of night one day while Reiko was sleeping Naoko took a piece of rope, went out and hanged herself.

5.4. Toru's Purgatory Journey into Solitude

In the narrative of *Norwegian Wood*, Toru Watanabe can be seen as a Sisyphian tragic hero for whom the readers feel a sense of 'pity and fear'. The news of Naoko's death shocked Toru so intensely that he went on a month long purgatory journey into solitude. Toru narrates, "Death in that place was not a decisive element that brought life to an end. There, death was but one of many elements comprising life. There Naoko lived with death inside her. And to me she said, "Don't worry, it's only death. Don't let it bother you." (Murakami 360)

Toru has every reason to be called a 'Sisyphian tragic hero' for a number of reasons. First of all, like Sisyphus whose task was to roll a stone uphill all through the day everyday only to find it rolling down towards the bottom of the hill at evening, Toru's desperate attempts to be with Naoko, to save her from the inevitable death were of no use. Secondly, Toru is a tragic hero, but he is a modern one. Like the modern man, Toru had his dilemmas and perplexities. At one stage, he wrote to Reiko,

"What I feel for Naoko is a tremendously quiet and gentle and transparent love, but what I feel for Midori is a wholly different emotion. It stands and walks on its own, living and breathing and throbbing and shaking me to the roots of my being. I don't know what to do. I'm confused."

The duality in Toru is a duality that exists in every modern man. But, this duality raises a moral dilemma and a question on the face of modern love. Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* deals with similar kind of a dilemma concerning the characters of Thomas, Tereza and Sabina. Like Toru's struggle to decide whether to plan a live ahead with the certainty of Midori or to wait for Naoko to recover, Thomas faces tough time deciding whether to accept Tereza, his wife or Sabina, his mistress. The dilemma came to an end due to Naoko's death. Toru's statement of "Naoko was a mound of white ash, and Midori was living, breathing human being"; then again questions the very foundation of the idea of love. (Murakami 363)

6. Conclusion

Death is a naturally occurring event, but suicide is treated as an unnatural way of ending a life. The person who commits suicide gets an escape route to flee from the hardship of the materialistic world, but s/he leaves behind a torrent of memories that the ones close to him/her have to browse through for a very long time. Yet, death or suicide does not impact on everyone equally. Naoko failed to bear the pain of the memory she had of her sister and Kizuki, Toru took a purgatory solitary journey to erase Naoko's memories; and for Midori, death of her parents meant nothing.

References

- Murakami, H. (2010). *Norwegian Wood*, (translated by Jay Rubin), USA: Vintage International.
- Beck, A. T. (1967). *Depression: Causes and Treatment*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Carl, J. (1933). *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, London: Mariner Books.
- Claeys, G. and Lyman T. S. (1999). *The Utopia Reader*, New York: NYU Press.
- Gleitman, H. (1991). *Psychology*, W.W. Norton & Co.
- Kundera, M. (1984). *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Nayar, P. K. (2009). *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: from Structuralism to Ecocriticism*, UK: Pearson.
- Shakespeare, W. (2002). *Hamlet*, In Roma Gill (Ed), UK: Oxford University Press.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2017). What Is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?. Retrieved December 01, 2018, from <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd>