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Memories, Loss, and Alienation in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*

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Abstract:

Haruki Murakami is a contemporary and Japanese writer. He is an author of short stories, novels, non-fiction, and essays. Murakami wrote *Norwegian Wood*, as his fifth novel, published in 1987. He gained great fame and success with *Norwegian Wood*. Haruki Murakami, considered this novel very personal and autobiographical one. From its start, the novel is structured by the question of memory. Directly related to one's own considerate, memory is one of the vital aspects of the love that nearly all of the characters feel. In a way the innermost problem of this work of fiction is the existential question of staying alive, put candidly, this comes to something like, Why not commit suicide? Almost, all characters in the novel face this issue. This paper is an attempt to understand the elements of memory, loss and alienation or loneliness in the most famous novel of Japanese writer Haruki Murakami.

Keywords: Memory, alienation, pain, loss.

Norwegian wood is based on Haruki Murakami's short story "Firefly". This was later on included in his collection of short story '*Blind widow, sleeping woman*'. After the publication of this novel, he became an instantaneous success and a public idol. This book or novel, became so popular, that he decided to leave the country for several years to avoid the recognition and popularity he received from its publication. At the time when Murakami wrote, *Norwegian wood* in the year 1986- 87, he was in Italy and Greece. This novel of Murakami has been translated two times into the English language. Firstly, it was translated by Alfred Birnbaum and secondly by Jay Rubin. Murakami's books have been popular not only in Japan but worldwide. His work is being translated into more than 30 languages and selling number of copies outer his inhabitant nation state. Haruki Murakami is influenced by actually many American writers like Raymond Chandler, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Richard Brautigan. Murakami wrote this novel, while in abroad when he visited Europe. Nearly all of Haruki Murakami's works make use of first person narrative in the institution of the Japanese work of fiction.

Toru, a young college student in Tokyo, is faithful to Naoko, which is his love but their joint passion is marked by the tragic death of their close friend 'Kizuki' a few years ago. This striking and melancholic novel by the author Murakami has sold more than 3 million copies in Japan only. Toru, the main protagonist started to get used to university life

and the seclusion and loneliness he faces there. On the other hand, Naoko finds pressures of life and its responsibilities completely intolerable. Romantic coming-of-age novel, *Norwegian Wood* takes us to that far-away place of the first love of a young man, his fruitless love; an emotional and heart touching story. *The Great Gatsby*, a novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Toru calls his pet and favourite, is followed by two other books that play a key role as they equivalent the action of the narrative as well as Toru's fight for his identity. Both the books, by German authors, i.e. *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann and *Beneath the Wheel* by Hermann Hesse. These similarities found inside fiction help Toru in his fight.

The viewpoint of 37 years old Toru reveals to the reader that he is writing the novel from his memoirs. The narrative begins immediately with the issue of memory, with Toru remarking that he has visited Germany "again" and imply that he heard "Norwegian Wood" multiple times previous also, but never with such great concentration (1). From the beginning, Toru with difficulty reminds his time, and the playing on the airplane speakers "Norwegian Wood", that transports him back to a view which is missing from him. Readers can fairly connect the memory to the sting of seclusion that is felt even by the lifeless such as Toru's friend Kizuki, and Naoko too by the closing stages of the narrative. In this novel, almost all characters are lost in their painful memories of love and relationships. They have a painful past, an empty past, a bitter past that has taken away something extremely important from them. As a result of which, the characters find it difficult to make an adjustment into the world and so, suffers alienation. The novel itself is framed in the Toru's effort to write down about his reminiscences. He writes how reminiscences of Naoko disallowed him from writing about her, and how with the passage of time everything has gone away. This type of memory is called as episodic memory. "Episodic memory is connected with episodes and events. It may consists of personal events and experiences associated with one's life. What even has happened during one's life is stored in the shape of episodic memory traces organized according to the time, space and other characteristics of the events" (Mangal 262).

Toru generally finds a way to state himself with ample clarity, due to his behaviour full of truthfulness and honesty. But, here Naoko has a problem expressing her position or emotions in her words so that she can share it with others. And, this is an important part responsible for her pain and alienation. The mode with which that characters talk in the novel, tells us more and in great depth about their states. In order to understand *Norwegian Wood* better and to know of the masterpieces of modernist writing, one should read *The Magic Mountain* (1924) by a famous German novelist Thomas Mann. Every person who reads, paying special attention will remember that Toru was reading the similar book. The novel *Norwegian Wood*, like many Murakami novels, focuses more on confidential and private loss, which is given less weight in the novel, *The Magic Mountain*.

"Where could we have disappeared to? How could such a thing have happened?" (4) Toru just asks this out of his memory. Toru considers this question from a kind of passive patient. The main puzzle and dilemma, which Toru faces, is Naoko, whose later suicide, is already evident in the general sense of loss. Despite Toru's plain positive assurances to Naoko, there is a strong sense that all in the end will, in fact, turn out quite faultily and

poorly. Toru admit the uselessness of missing Naoko which indicates that their bond too was fated to fail. "I guess I don't really understand you yet," I [Toru] said. "I'm not all that smart. It takes me a while to understand things. But if I do have the time, I will come to understand you—better than anyone else in the world ever can" (9).

Most of the novel is prepared as the narrator's later introspections on the disturbing events of his past, such as Kizuki's and Naoko's suicide, and the night when he sleeps with Naoko. An insightful character with a disturbing past, Toru can never view his memory as a middle-of-the-road act. Toru remarks on his second date with Naoko: "We talked about whatever came to mind—our daily routines, our colleges; each a little fragment that led nowhere. We said nothing at all about the past. And mainly, we walked—and walked, and walked. Fortunately, Tokyo is such a big city, we could never have covered it all" (26).

By moving from Kobe to Tokyo, both Toru and Naoko, have gained some relief from the tragedy of Kizuki's suicide. But in spite of all that, neither gap nor time has eradicated the sadness within each of their hearts, which Toru describes as a "hard kernel in my heart" that prevents him from adoring and which he sees in Naoko as "a clarity (in her eyes) that had nowhere to go" (28). He lives a very empty and aimless life. Toru thinks, "I had no idea what I was doing or what I was going to do," "There was nothing I wanted to be", and constantly questions himself, "What did I want? And what did others want from me?" (29). Every character has got a reason, a different one to go sadly. Their past is lurking in their minds all time, turning them into lifeless bodies. Toru his search for stability, and Naoko her painful plight, their confused relation left them all in a perplexing situation. In order to grow healthier one has to detach himself from his past. But contrary to this, the inability of characters to get themselves detached from their respective past became the reason for their alienation and loss.

Toru meets Midori in his class of Drama. She was having a short haircut and carries an attractive personality. Both Midori and Naoko, are a kind of incomplete women, they both fight to find love and relief, suffered great family tragedies and many more. Midori tells Toru: "I was always hungry for love. Just once, I wanted to know what it was like to get my fill of it, to be fed, so much love I couldn't take it any more" (76). Naoko constantly tries to reach for something through her words which she actually never reaches, and on the other hand Midori gushes the wit and feeling of her. Toru tells Midori Kobayashi "I've never met a girl who thinks like you," Midori responds, "A lot of people tell me that... But it's the only way I know how to think. Seriously. I'm just telling you what I believe. It's never crossed my mind that my way of thinking is different from other people's. I'm not trying to be different. But when I speak out honestly or fairly, everybody thinks I'm kidding or playacting. When that happens, I feel like everything's such a pain!" (77).

One day Naoko tells Toru that the main principle of the sanatorium, whether a person is normal or not, has got deformities; and in reality these deformities vary from being to

being. The core tension in a person's life is figuring out how to be at ease and comfort in their own self and life, in order to get used to their own deformities.

It is of significance citing Naoko's emotions and feelings on the will of this organization in length, for the grounds that it sums up the very effort that animates the narrative:-

“It may well be that we can never fully adapt to our deformities. Unable to find a place inside ourselves for the very real pain and suffering that these deformities cause, we come here to get away from such things. As long as we are here, we can get by without hurting others or being hurt by them because we know that we are 'deformed.' That's what distinguishes us from the outside world: most people go about their lives there unconscious of their deformities, while in this little world of ours the deformities themselves are a precondition. Just as Indians wear feathers on their heads to show which tribes they belong to, we wear our deformities in the open. And we live quietly so as not to hurt one another” (87).

Naoko in her pathetic plight sees the world from a different eye. Toru on visiting Ami Hostel converses with the doorkeeper about pork in Tokyo. All the people there in the hostel, have only memories as their connections with the outer world. Reiko Ishida, Naoko's roommate at Ami Hostel, has been disconnected from her family due to the disgrace of her mental sickness and as a result of which has no human contact with the external world except a few. With the feeling that they have come to a unworldly position, the patients are uncertain to go away. We might read this to mean that the sanatorium is such kind of place, which relaxes and relieves a person and so improves their condition and make them feel better in all respects. For some people, this solves their troubles and allows them to go back to the real world, but for many others this makes it hard, infact impossible for them to return.

Naoko tells Toru during his visit, that she is using all her capabilities and courage to keep herself collectively but, even then she cannot afford to relax; while her stay at the sanatorium seems to actually allow her to be more relaxed, she senses that there are still grave tensions within her mind and heart. And these tensions could be moved up at any flash by an external stimulus. All these things shows her inexplicable worse condition. Naoko lost her love and her beloved sister, which had left an indelible impression on her. So she is getting into more alienation and aloofness day after day. Reiko too has trouble in her mind. So holistically, the novel moves around the theme of pain, loss, loneliness and much more. Naoko one day, tells Toru about the voices that she listens from the shadows and gloom and get scared of them, which most likely come from her sister and Kizuki(her dead boy friend), both of whom died by the own hands out of alienation. Toru says about Naoko that, she makes the connection with her distinctive eyes "Strangely transparent, they seemed like windows to a world beyond, but however long I peered into their depths, there was nothing I could see. Our faces were no more than ten inches apart, but she was light-years away from me" (130).

Made to order by Kodansha, Alfred Birnbaum was supposed to translate several Murakami novels, Birnbaum's technique as a translator formed both critics and fans, for Lesser lovingly calls him a "cosmopolitan wastrel who loves jazzy rhythms and thinks of his life in the present tense" (4), and Kodansha cannot believe that "Murakami (or Murakami-plusRubin) is indeed running away from Birnbaum, consciously suppressing him, attempting to do away with this shadowy self" (40). Regarding Birnbaum's manner, Jay Rubin claims that Murakami's style is so close up to English that difficulties often occur for those who try to translate it, including for Birnbaum, whom Rubin argues loses "the single most important quality that makes [Murakami's] style fresh and enjoyable in Japanese . . . By introducing a certain exaggerated hipness of expression into the English text" (289). The following passage is from the Birnbaum's translated opening of *Norwegian Wood* illustrates both opposite types of comments:-

Here I am, 37 years old, seated in a Boeing 747. The giant plane is diving into thick cover of clouds, about to land Hamburg airfield. A chill November rain darkens the land around, turning the scene into a gloom, Flemish painting. The airfield workers in their rain gear, the flags atop the faceless airport buildings, the BMW billboards, everything. Just great, I'm thinking, Germany again. The plane completes landing procedures, the NO SMOKING sign goes off, and soft background music issues from the speakers. Some orchestra's Muzak rendition of the Beatles' *Norwegian Wood*. And sure enough, that the melody gets to me, same as always. No, this time it is worse than ever before. I get it bad. Really I swear my head is going to burst. (7).

And in the translation of Rubin, this paragraph goes like "I was thirty-seven then, strapped in my seat as the huge 747 plunged through the dense cloud cover on approach to the Hamburg airport. Cold November rains drenched the earth and lent everything the gloomy air of a Flemish landscape: the ground crew in rain gear, a flag atop an airport building, a BMW billboard. So, Germany again"(3).

Coming back to the novel, at the time when Midori falls asleep with Toru, she asks some promises of him, that were comparable to Naoko's desires to Toru "If you like me that much, you'll do anything I tell you to do, right? You won't get mad, right?' 'No, of course I won't get mad.' 'And you'll take care of me always and always.' 'Of course I will,' I said, stroking her short, soft, boyish hair. 'Don't worry, everything is going to be fine.' 'But I'm scared,' she said" (231-2). In spite of being courageous, Midori finds herself suffering and so asks promises from Toru to care and protect her. *Norwegian Wood* "is at once Murakami's most atypical and most commercially successful novel"(24) said by Paul Quinn.

All the characters in the novel are dependent on one or the other. In the absence of whom, their life seems meaningless. Toru says that he is separated from that of the rest of the world. Toru reflects while thinking back on the year 1969, "all that comes to mind for me is a swamp...Time itself slogged along in a rhythm with my faltering steps. The people around me had gone on a head long before, while my time and I hung back, struggling through them

mud. The world around me was on the verge of great transformations" (236). The remnants of his past are haunting him now, but he is still moving on. Also, the sudden declaration of Naoko's death may cause some readers to fall out of their chairs in shock and others to cry out at the substantiation of their fears. The amazing reaction that we have is not something different from Toru's response "I never answered her [Reiko]. What could I have said? What good would it have done? Naoko no longer existed in this world; she had become a fistful of ash" (271). Such was the grave reaction of Toru on Naoko's news of death. Toru while missing Naoko says, "Nights when it was impossible for me to sleep, the images of Naoko would come back to me. There was no way I could stop them. Too many memories of her were crammed inside me, the memories would slam against me like waves of an incoming tide, sweeping my body along to some strange new place—a place where I lived with the dead" (272).

So from all the above statements and evidences, it is clear that this novel is full of melancholy and sadness. This work of fiction travels deep down into the hearts and reveals the emptiness of the characters and discusses about their hard struggle with life. This novel is full of memories, loss of loved ones and nothing much more than that. We find almost every other character struggling with his/ her past, facing inevitable repercussions of it.

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