

An Existential Reading of Haruki Murakami's "Men Without Women"

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ABSTRACT : This paper aims at finding out the existential crisis and alienation of human beings in the modern world through a study of Haruki Murakami's short story "Men Without Women". Philosophy of Existentialism and Alienation from Heidegger and Sartre have been used by the researcher to analyze the narrative of Murakami's "Men Without Women". Following the qualitative approach of research, the analysis is done through the discussion of the Existentialism theories and in-depth analysis of written or printed information related to the research topic. This research focuses on three essential components of human being's alienation; alienation from self, alienation from fellow human beings and alienation from social institutions.

KEYWORDS: Murakami, Agony, Existentialism, Alienation

I. INTRODUCTION

Men Without Women is a collection of short stories by Haruki Murakami, written originally in Japanese in 2014 and then translated in English for the global readers in 2017. *Men Without Women* consists of seven short stories and every story has a captivating plot. The titular story "Man Without Woman" is narrated by a character who can be characterized as passive, takes the reader through a journey of modern alienation, imagination, agony and dream. Known primarily for his novels, Murakami's earlier works revolutionized Japanese literature to the global readers. Murakami's earlier works such as *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1982), *Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985), *Norwegian Wood* (1987), *Kafka on the Shore* (2002) became immensely popular among the young readers for the bitter-sweet plot and engaging narratives. While talking about Murakami's story-telling, Welch (2005) notes that, "his works seemed to capture disillusionment, disconnection, and confusion that lingers close to a placid surface even during halcyon days". *Men Without Women* creates a spark in the mind of the reader as Murakami explores love, dream, agony, angst and many experiences of human lives in the modern world. The story's powerful depiction of the narrator's behavior consists of several aspects which are "fundamental for understanding the modern man's crisis, his solitude, inner suffering, and conflicts." (Pavlikova 2015: 194) The danger of alienation or isolation of a human being can easily be overlooked by the society. Sometimes human beings who are suffering severe alienation may not understand the consequence in the long run of their life. Pappenheim (1959: 15) points out "thus, as long as they continue, engender a certain numbness, which makes it hard for him to realize his own estrangement. Only in the times of crisis does he start to sense it." In line with Kon (1967), the definition of alienation in the UNESCO dictionary of Social Sciences: "Alienation, as most generally used in social science, denotes and estrangement or separation between parts or the whole of the personality and significant aspects of the world of experience." (Kon 1967:509) Humans are bound to rely on self-belief, society and social institutions. Human beings fail to function when all the necessary aspects are declined by the circumstances in life. The existential philosophy has often generated several criticism "yet there has been considerable protest against the tendency to isolate man's cognitive function from the rest of his being and to destroy his unity and his universality by divesting him all but his intellectual qualities, thus reducing him to a mere epistemological subject." (Pappenheim 1959:25) This study examines the existential philosophy and alienation of modern man through the analysis of Murakami's unnamed narrator. The emotional turmoil of the characters in the short story are the essential source of looking into the story from an existential point of view.

II. THEORETICAL REVIEW

A. Short Story

Telling a story is a medium of expressing the thoughts and ideas which may not be expressed in a statement. The purpose of fiction is to create a narrative that can be perceived by the audience in multiple ways. According

to Viorica Patea (2012: 1), “You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. When anybody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story. The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but experienced meaning.” Short stories are short fictions where authors express their views in a few narrative pages. Short stories promote an idea of unified plot and have been one of the significant genres for centuries. While talking about the traditional view of the short story, Patea (2012: 3) argues that the short story is ‘compressed, unified, and plotted form’. Although often being left out from the major genres of literature, short stories are the powerful tool to express society and human beings in a concise manner. According to Pasco (1991: 472), “the critics argue that the short story thrives in societies with no fixed cultural framework, especially in colonial contexts, and is linked to marginal people, women, or outsiders. All of whom are plagued by a sense of exile and existential isolation”.

B. Existentialism and Alienation

Often regarded as a movement, rather than a theory by several critics, existentialism came into the prominence in the 1940s and 1950s. Philosophers from all around the world promoted existentialism in their literature from the mid-20th century. Prominent philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Heidegger, Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche contributed to the field of existentialism ideology. Jean-Paul Sartre is often credited as the pioneer of introducing existential philosophy to the world. While defining Existentialism, Johathan Webber (2018:2) said, “as originally defined by Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, existentialism is the ethical theory that we ought to treat the freedom at the core of human existence as intrinsically valuable and the foundation of all other values”. The theory promotes that the human mind does not work like a scientific machine. Human existence cannot be contextualized using the exact science. The concept of alienation in literature has often been regarded as a characteristic of an individual who is forced to doubt his own existence from society. The categorical division of alienation has been developed by several critics where human beings can be alienated in several forms. Daronkolae and Bakhtiari (2012: 202) pointed out that, “On a whole, there are three types of alienation common in literature.”

1. The man’s alienation from himself.

Modern man often finds it hard to be himself; he has become a stranger to himself. The self-alienation creates a hollow inside a human being and starts questioning his existence and worth as a human being.

2. Alienation from his fellow man.

A human being experiences alienation from the world in which he lives. The person fails to reason with the world and feels disconnected from the other human beings.

3. Alienation from god/social institution.

The sense of existence of a human being in society has become difficult after the two World Wars in the 20th Century. The sense of freedom was traumatized by the two great wars where people were never and nowhere safe. Sartre talked about freedom and linked it with human being’s identity and presence in society. When we fail to have a sense of presence or become ‘other to ourselves’ our existential crisis starts and alienation begins. (Existentialism 2009)

III. METHODOLOGY

This research is literary research which follows the qualitative approach. The qualitative approach aims to understand the reasons behind a difficult phenomenon which cannot be done using another research method. Silverman (2020) defines qualitative research saying, “Qualitative research is the type of research that finds out about people’s experiences. It helps us understand what is important for people”. The qualitative method helps to understand the hidden agenda of a particular issue which is unique in nature. While analyzing the data for the research, secondary materials about the topics were reviewed and analyzed. The research takes aim at the works of the sociological literary approach to analyze data using appropriate context. Literary theories were analyzed extensively to understand the text from existential philosophy and modern alienation views and apply them in text.

In order to conduct the research, several techniques were used to make a successful triangulation. This research uses extensive reading of the text and taking notes of the primary text *Men Without Women*. The data were then analyzed based on the plot, setting and the narrative of the story. The data analysis process was done using the source and method triangulation. When a researcher collects data using various texts and secondary materials to conduct the research is known as the source triangulation. On the other hand, according to Sutopo (2002), method triangulation is the researcher collecting similar data using different data collection techniques or methods. The documentation process included the thorough analysis of the data in printed and digital written format.

IV. RESEARCH AND FINDINGS

The data of various types of existential alienation were found in Haruki Murakami’s “Men Without Women” and can be seen in the following tables:

Table 1: Data of man's alienation from himself

No	Alienation from himself
1.	"Truthfully I like to think of M as a girl I met when she was fourteen. That didn't actually happen, but here at least, I'd like to imagine it did.... Thinking this way about it makes all sorts of things easier to accept" (Murakami 215)
2.	"I'm not exactly sure what I'm trying to say here. Maybe I'm trying to write about essence, rather than the truth." (Murakami 218)
3.	"I'm not exactly sure what I'm trying to say here. Maybe I'm trying to write about essence, rather than the truth." (Murakami 218)
4.	"I can barely recall it myself. How much did I suffer? How much pain did I go through? I wish there was a machine that could accurately measure sadness, and display it in numbers that you could record." (Murakami 219)
5.	"When I learned of M's death I felt sure I was the second-loneliest man on the planet. The loneliest man had to be her husband. I reserve that seat for him. I have no idea what kind of person he is." (Murakami 220)
6.	"No premonitions of foreboding, no knocks or clearing of throats. Turn a corner and you know you're already <i>there</i> . But by then there's no going back. Once you round that bend. That is the only world you can possibly inhabit. In that world you are called "Men Without Women." Always a relentlessly frigid plural" (Murakami 221)

Table 2: Data of Man's Alienation from his fellow men

No.	Alienation from his fellow men
1.	"A man's low voice informed me that a woman had vanished from this world forever. The voice belonged to the woman's husband. At least that's what he said. As far as I could make out, there was not a drop of emotion in his vice. It was like he was reading lines meant for a telegram, with barely any space at all between each word". (Murakami 212)
2.	"My wife, of course, didn't buy it., for my own voice was now tinged with the dead too. The kind of unsettled feeling the newly deceased bring on is highly contagious." (Murakami 212)
3.	"But before I knew it, M was gone. Where to, I have no idea. One day, I lost sight of her. I happened to glance away for a moment, and when I turned back, she had disappeared." (Murakami 216)
4.	"I don't know where, or how, or why, or what the point was, but M decided to end her on life, and end it she did." (219)
5.	"Suddenly one day you become Men Without Women." (Murakami 220)
6.	"Why that place? Why a unicorn? Maybe the unicorn, too, is one of the Men Without Men. I mean, I've never seen a unicorn couple." (Murakami 223)

Table 3: Data of Man's Alienation from god/social institutions

No.	Alienation from social institution
1.	"This woman was the third woman I'd gone out with who'd killed herself. If you think about it- and you don't really need to, since it's obvious- this is an extremely high fatality rate." (Murakami 214-215)
2.	"No matter how many you collect, fragments are still just that. Her essence always vanished like a mirage. And from land, the horizon was infinite. As was the horizon at sea. I busily chased it, moving from point to point- from Bombay to Cape Town to Reykjavik to the Bahamas." (Murakami 217)
3.	"There was always, in the background, the unambiguous shadow of a sailor. A single dark, autonomous shadow gliding up the wall of a building." (Murakami 219)
4.	"As I sat there in front of the unicorn statue I prayed that someday her husband would recover. I prayed,

	too, that he would never forget the really important things- the <i>essence</i> - but would be able to forget everything else that was unimportant, and secondary.” (Murakami 221)
5.	“Maybe we should adopt him as the symbol of Men Without Women, of the loneliness we carry as our burden. Perhaps we should sew unicorn badges on our breast pockets and hats, and quietly parade down streets all over the world. No music, no flags, no tickertape.” (Murakami 223)

1. Man's Alienation from Himself

The narrator of Murakami's "Men Without Women" discovers that a former lover of his, has committed suicide and the message is delivered by the woman's husband in a cold and emotionless voice. The crisis of the modern human beings has been portrayed in the story through the first person narrative through Murakami's magical words. Lost in the complicated world where finding meaning of death and mourning becomes difficult, the narrator of the story finds imaginative ways of narrating the story. "Truthfully I like to think of M as a girl I met when she was fourteen. That didn't actually happen, but here at least, I'd like to imagine it did.... Thinking this way about it makes all sorts of things easier to accept" (Murakami 215) The alienation of the narrator from himself forced him to think of a story which is not true but he fails to find a difference to share his story in other forms. The alienation from himself drove the narrator in finding comfort in a fictional story rather than sharing the original one with the reader. The narrator whose name is never mentioned in the short story often tries to differentiate the truth and imagination throughout his story about his former lover. Adopting the fictional storyline of how he met with M, the classic syndrome of man's alienation from himself is presented in the "Men Without Women". The narrator is perplexed while remembering the affections he once shared with M which seem unnatural for a married man. The human psychology cannot be explained through science. The human emotion does not work like a machine. The existential philosophy advocates human being's inability to function like a machine is also mentioned by Murakami through the narrator. "I can barely recall it myself. How much did I suffer? How much pain did I go through? I wish there was a machine that could accurately measure sadness, and display it in numbers that you could record." (Murakami 219) The alienation from himself has created a language barrier in the narrator's description about his recollection of the memories he had with M. He often tries to justify the fragmented memories he had with M. The existential crisis of the narrator forced him to recollect only the essence, rather than the whole truth about a person he shared an affectionate relationship with. "I'm not exactly sure what I'm trying to say here. Maybe I'm trying to write about essence, rather than the truth." (Murakami 218) Finding comfort in the lies and recollection for the fragmented part of a vivid experience of the modern human being is not unique. Murakami shows the common misery that is shared by the human beings in the contemporary world. While talking showing remorse for the death of M, the narrator talked about the loneliness he is suffering but his crisis is far from unique and thinks that his former lover's husband pain much more than the pain he is suffering. "When I learned of M's death I felt sure I was the second-loneliest man on the planet. The loneliest man had to be her husband. I reserve that seat for him. I have no idea what kind of person he is." (Murakami 220). The alienation from the freedom of expressing the agony with M's husband which is created by the social norm proves that the characters will never be able to share it with each other. The process of suffering alone will reinforce the existential crisis in the narrator. The inevitability of the modern men's sufferings have been depicted in the story by Murakami in an excellent expression of language. Murakami suggests that the progression of modern alienation is unwanted but inevitable and common in the society. "No premonitions of foreboding, no knocks or clearing of throats. Turn a corner and you know you're already *there*. But by then there's no going back. Once you round that bend. That is the only world you can possibly inhabit. In that world you are called "Men Without Women." Always a relentlessly frigid plural" (Murakami 221)

2. Man's Alienation from his Fellow Men

The story "Men Without Women" talks about the agony of a person who is also the unnamed narrator who receives a phone call from a former lover's husband. A phone call created a hollow inside the narrator and a series of imaginative, yet emotional incidents are narrated through vivid descriptions. Murakami's magical narration of the human beings sufferings and indifference which is a product of the mechanical world is seen at the beginning of the story. While talking about the phone call which the narrator received at the middle of the night shows the first sign of modern alienation of human beings from other human beings. "A man's low voice informed me that a woman had vanished from this world forever. The voice belonged to the woman's husband. At least that's what he said. As far as I could make out, there was not a drop of emotion in his vice. It was like he was reading lines meant for a telegram, with barely any space at all between each word". (Murakami 212) The society has created a complicated space for the human beings where the husband has failed to show emotion after the death of his beloved wife. When the phone call ended and the narrator returned to his bed, his wife asked him what the phone call was about. The narrator of the story lies about the subject of the phone call. Showing indifference, the narrator said, "My wife, of course, didn't buy it., for my own voice was now tinged

with the dead too. The kind of unsettled feeling the newly deceased bring on is highly contagious.” (Murakami 212) The relationship between a husband and wife should have been a space where every information could have been shared. But because of the alienation from others in this they failed to communicate properly on the subject. The story is presented in a half imaginative form where the narrator creates a fantasy world where he met the former lover at the age of fourteen which he confesses to be a lie. Another significant proof of alienation from other fellow human beings is the description of how the relationship ended between the narrator and his former lover M in the story. The confident lover’s belief was shattered when without any warning his lover decided to leave him. “But before I knew it, M was gone. Where to, I have no idea. One day, I lost sight of her. I happened to glance away for a moment, and when I turned back, she had disappeared.” (Murakami 216) The sudden nature of ending the relationship is evidence that the communication between two human being has become complicated in the contemporary world. Human beings fail to establish a meaningful relationship with other human beings in the society where sharing the discomfort and problems becomes a barrier. The communication barriers often create a human being lonely and isolated. The alienation from other human beings is mentioned by Murakami saying “Suddenly one day you become Men Without Women.” (Murakami 220). The search for inner peace and connections with others in society continues for the human beings in the long run. Even the meaningless stare at a unicorn statue starts to make some meaning on a lonely exploration in a park. The narrator shares the story of wandering around the park and searching for the meaning of the mysterious phone call he received. The narrator often sits in front of a unicorn statue and starts to think about the reasons for the statue’s importance. The lifeless statue seems as lonely as a living human being to the narrator. He exclaims, “Why that place? Why a unicorn? Maybe the unicorn, too, is one of the Men Without Women. I mean, I’ve never seen a unicorn couple.” (Murakami 223) Since the narrator failed to establish meaningful communication with other human beings, this alienation forces him to find out meaning in a lifeless unicorn statue. The living human being could not establish the reason behind his thought process and it becomes hard for a human being to search for a new connection with others in the society. He would rather find the meaning in a lifeless object from a park which is pathetically easier for him. The description of the death of M is absent in the “Men Without Women”. The sudden burst of the information makes the reader think about the common miseries we face in our daily life and they make our life severely complicated. M’s faced the same complication and overwhelmed by the burden of the alienation forced her to end her life at some point. “I don’t know where, or how, or why, or what the point was, but M decided to end her on life, and end it she did.” (Murakami 219)

3. Man’s alienation from God/Social Institution

The form of social withdrawal is a dangerous component of a human being's life. The frequency of the withdrawals takes a scary shape in Murakami’s “Men Without Women”. The tendency of social abandonment of the characters can be seen in the first chapter of the story where the narrator talks about the tendency of committing suicide of young women. “This woman was the third woman I’d gone out with who’d killed herself. If you think about it- and you don’t really need to, since it’s obvious- this is an extremely high fatality rate.” (Murakami 214-215) The society has failed to create a safe space for the modern human beings and drastic steps are often taken by the sufferers. The alienation from the social institution puts a man at a state where other forms of alienation quickly takes over that psychology of him. The essence of life in a society starts to feel like a forced implication of his life. The narrator’s social alienation and his futile search for the meaning of life is explained by Murakami in the story. “No matter how many you collect, fragments are still just that. Her essence always vanished like a mirage. And from land, the horizon was infinite. As was the horizon at sea. I busily chased it, moving from point to point- from Bombay to Cape Town to Reykjavik to the Bahamas.” (Murakami 217) The narrator despised the role of destiny and the role played by God or society in taking away the essence of his existence through a series metaphorical use of fictional ‘sailor’. The ‘sailor’ always takes away the affectionate companions who are referred to as women in the story and make a man miserable. The happiness of a man is often destroyed by the arrival of the godlike ‘sailor’. “There was always, in the background, the unambiguous shadow of a sailor. A single dark, autonomous shadow gliding up the wall of a building.” (219) The narrator’s direct urge to God is to make M’s husband's life easier after the recent tragic loss shows the skeptical view of the narrator about the role god plays in these men’s lives. Based on the agony and angst of his own life, the narrator wanted God to show mercy and give strength to M’s husband so that he can remember the essence. “As I sat there in front of the unicorn statue I prayed that someday her husband would recover. I prayed, too, that he would never forget the really important things- the *essence*- but would be able to forget everything else that was unimportant, and secondary.” (221) Murakami’s depiction of loneliness of modern men from the society through the men’s effort to connect with the lifeless object is a striking component of his narrative. The breathing man thinks about connecting with lifeless objects when he fails to create a sense to connect with society and societal norms. The narrator’s emphasis on adopting the unicorn statue as a symbol of loneliness is a powerful portrayal of human misery in the modern world. “Maybe we should adopt him as the symbol of Men Without Women, of the loneliness we carry as our burden. Perhaps we should sew unicorn

badges on our breast pockets and hats, and quietly parade down streets all over the world. No music, no flags, no tickertape.” (Murakami 223)

V. CONCLUSION

The identity of human beings has suffered a lot in the contemporary world. The lack of social understanding between the human beings have often contributed to the alienation of them. The problematic identity crisis can be seen in many fictions and non-fictions of recent times. Lack of identity creates a sense of not belonging to the world and steps like suicide and self-harm is being seen frequently in the society. The technological advancement in modern society is reinforcing the lack of human communication which can be a dangerous aspect of modern life. Murakami’s demonstration of modern alienation in “Man Without Woman” shows the alienation of a man from himself, other human beings and social institutions. The powerful portrayal of the emotional struggle of the narrator shows yet another story that mirrors the human struggle in the contemporary world.

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