



## POSTMODERNISM IN THE SELECT WORKS OF HARUKI MURAKAMI

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### Abstract

*The present research paper is a modest attempt to examine the opposite and contrasting perspectives towards postmodernism and its reflection in Haruki Murakami's select works. The research paper examines postmodern critics like Jean- François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Donna Haraway and their pessimistic and optimistic postmodern worldviews. The research paper also examines in depth Japanese writer Haruki Murakami's Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World and The Elephant Vanishes. Both these novels represent the anxiety and uncertainty resulted due to the loss of basic narratives. It also challenges the supposition that the postmodern condition necessarily demands the irretrievable loss of the past, the unavoidable loss of representational present-day realities and the sense of powerlessness that accompanies technological determinism.*

### Keywords

*Postmodernism, Representation, Realities, Anxiety, Powerlessness, Technological, etc.*

### Full Article

#### **Introduction:**

You have to endure. If you endure, everything will be fine. No worry, no suffering. It all disappears. Forget about the shadow. This is the End of the World. This is where the world ends. Nowhere further to go.

—Haruki Murakami, *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*

The first half of the twentieth century was marked by modernism in literature where grand narrative was honoured and celebrated. Technology and science were responsible for suffering and misery of large audience due to war, politics and commerce. The novelists of modern period articulated the larger queries and emotions of human existence. The novels written by writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway attempted to find order in the anarchy of the times following the First World War and integrated answers to questions regarding what comprises truth, information and mankind's place in an increasingly dystopian reality where trust in the power of religions, administration and Enlightenment ideologies were perishing. With the ever growing frustration for the answers to those questions, a loss of belief in over-arching political and economic ideologies, the increasing assault of replicated and arbitrated images, and the delegitimization of scientific knowledge to explain our objective and material reality, a novel and new postmodern style of fiction has emerged which often caricatures the quest for a complete meaning.

As a response to the political, religious, cultural, and economic worries of postmodern societies, the postmodern writers wrote novels. Postmodern novels search for an expression—not of the bigger, more dramatic emotions to which modernist fiction is keyed but of an



unexpected range of small, banal dissatisfactions (McHale 22). This paper analyzes selected works of Haruki Murakami from postmodern point of view. Murakami employs a variety of similar literary techniques in order to articulate the anguish and nervousness in managing the chaos of modern western societies but with different attitudes and approaches in order to review previously accepted ideas of a option of integrated meaning. Murakami's novels tend to express the loss of hope felt by individuals in society and the inadequacies of human interaction in describing the reality of our times. His novels tend toward a postmodern consciousness as abandonment or at least a deferral of...responsibilities in real life (F. Murakami 31).

Before discussing Murakami's fictions in depth, it is essential to define postmodern condition. Postmodernism, being encouraged and hastened by, or merely developing parallel to the forces of globalization has altered the vision of reality. Firstly, the astounding technological progression of global digital communications, the interconnecting networks of production, commerce and utilization, and the continuous surge of capital and labor through the world's financial institutions have caused many - largely in developed Western societies - to interrogate and re-evaluate long-held assumptions regarding knowledge, truth and the very nature of reality. According to Charles Lement, the post- modern condition has emerged largely due to the collapse of the global domination of Euro-American colonialism, the defeat of Communism and Marxism at the hands of global capitalism, and the resistance to the idea of an essential global culture based on a perceived superiority of Western cultural values.

Brian McHale, in *Postmodern Fictions*, states:

The space of a fictional world is a construct, just as the characters and objects that occupy it are, or the actions that unfold within it. Typically, in realist or modernist writing, this spatial construct is organized around a perceiving subject, either a character or a viewing position adopted by a disembodied narrator (McHale, 45).

The changing notion of realities in postmodern period plays most important role in understanding postmodern society. Both truth and knowledge are highly questioned and interrogated in postmodernism.

Post-modernism is arguably the most depressing philosophy ever to spring from the western mind. It is difficult to talk about post-modernism because nobody really understands it. It's allusive to the point of being impossible to articulate. But what this philosophy basically says is that we've reached an endpoint in human history... Like it or not, we humans are stuck in a permanent crisis of meaning, a dark room from which we can never escape (Lasn and Grierson, 32).

It is upon this Murakami's novels are set and studied. Murakami's novels focus on the changing nature of knowledge and human nature and dystopian attitude. Haruki Murakami has appropriated a wide range of plans in order to construct and reconstruct his tales. The loss of meanings and fear of loss of realities in the world saturated with mediated images are most important in postmodern studies. The important strategies incorporated by Murakami in his works are in the areas of spatial representation and temporal development.

Haruki Murakami wrote two most important novels which can be studied from postmodern point of view. These novels include *Hard-boiled Wonderland* and *The End of the World* published in 1985 and *The Elephant Vanishes* published in 1993. The past stories,





memories and stories are not seen in these novels. The loss of uncertainty in postmodern period is most important contribution and claim made by Jean Francois Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* published in 1979. He writes that Post-modernity is

characterized by a loss of certainty and a God's eye point of view in the sphere of knowledge, a loss of a central, organizing principle governing society and a unitary standard of cultural excellence or morality, and a decline in the belief in a unitary, coherent self (Lyotard qtd. in Seidman, 5).

Lyotard describes this loss of central as metanarratives and describes postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives (Lyotard, 509). The universal standards especially European notion of reality has been denounced and denied and new notion of reality came into existence where marginal plays pivotal role in defining reality.

Haruki Murakami's novel *Hard-boiled Wonderland* depicts the relationship between brain and the world it perceives (Rubin 128). Murakami explores the nature of self and the way in which our identity and sense of reality are defined by the memories and experiences that populate our consciousness. The novel unfolds the protagonist's story two separate storylines and two parallel realities. In the original Japanese version of Murakami's novel, the two narrators are easily identifiable by the fact that they are each addressed by a different pronoun. *Watashi* - the formal - I, narrates the *Hard-boiled Wonderland* storyline, the-more realistic world of a vaguely futuristic Tokyo (Rubin, 117), where information is the paramount currency. *Boku* – the informal - I narrates the reality of the – End of the World 'the—inner, fantastic world of The Town and its Uncertain Walls (Rubin, 117). The continuous present tense has been employed to narrate the End of the World chapters. Thus it foregrounds and emphasizes the postmodern condition in which contemporary chapters of *Hard-boiled Wonderland* and human beings are pushed 'into a nostalgic past tense. These two narratives echo each other at first through vague connections and references – perfume scents and paper clips – then more pronounced with parallel stories of unicorns skulls, librarians and songs, until finally, these two totally different stories overlap and become one (Murakami qtd. in Rubin 130). It is through the representation of these two worlds that the unease and rootlessness created in a postmodern society are brought to life.

In the *Hard-boiled Wonderland* reality, Calcutecs of the System and the Semiotics of the Factory are involved in a war for the ownership and utilization of information. The power of the nation-state has failed as a valid foundation for society, and the state is replaced by the quasi-governmental System/Factory. Knowledge has also lost its ability to define permanent truths and reality and has surrendered to capitalism, becoming a commodity and currency. The course of information and knowledge has been guided by the consumerism, militarism and criminality. When *watashi* questions the reasons for and legitimacy of the information war being fought, he is told that, "Nobody would win a war if they stopped to calculate the cost... Whose war don't matter. Whose money don't matter either. That's what war is (Murakami, *HBW*, 155). This prevailing sense of being denied to a system outside of one's control permeates the reality of the *Hard-boiled Wonderland*.

The sense of the nervousness and incredulity in modern Japanese society continues throughout the *Hard-boiled Wonderland* chapters and is depicted from the beginning of the novel. In the beginning of the novel, *watashi* visits a Tokyo office complex and upon entering the elevator experiences:



It was so slow that all sense of direction simply vanished. It could have been going down for all I knew... Maybe I'd circled the globe... No floor numbers to press, no DOOR OPEN, and DOOR CLOSE, no EMERGENCY STOP. Nothing what so ever. All of which made me feel utterly defenseless (Murakami, 1-2).

The protagonist further affirms:

Turning corners, going up and down short flight so stairs, we must have walked five or six ordinary buildings' worth. We were walking around and around, like in an Escher print. But walk as we might, the surroundings never seemed to change (Murakami, 10).

*Watashi* senses a second level of loss in the story. Not only have the universal truth failed him, but also he has literally lost the personal narrative of his own life. In the ongoing information war, Calcutecs are employed to encrypt data and store it within a subconscious fixed circuit of their brains to keep it safe from theft by the Semiotics. In the case of *watashi*, brain surgery has created a third circuit that plays, on an endless loop, the narrative of his life. In this way, the Calcutecs have—three different subconscious minds: the normal, frozen and visualized. The title of the visualized story of the protagonist in *The Hard-boiled Wonderland* is *The End of the World* (Murakami, F., 27). This narrative, created from *watashi's* own experiences and memories, is not accessible to his conscious mind and he will eventually become trapped within this circuit with no hope of returning.

In describing the *End of the World* reality, the Professor in charge of the brain circuit experiments states, "It's a peaceful world. Your own world, a world of your own making. You can be yourself there. You've got everything there. And at the same time, there is nothing" (Murakami, *HBW*, 286). The *End of the World* is peaceful because it is missing those characteristics that color *watashi's* material existence: human connections, emotions and values. The world of *watashi's* core-consciousness lacks the unifying ideals of the metanarratives that once held authority in society. *Watashi* himself seems resigned to this fate and reflects:

As a whole, humanity doesn't lend itself to generalizations. But as I see it, there are two types of people: the comprehensive-vision type and the limited-vision type. Me, I seem to be the latter. Not that I ever had any problem justifying my limits. A person has to draw lines somewhere (Murakami, *HBW*, 388).

For protagonist like *watashi's*, the all-inclusive, introductory metanarratives have been discarded, and what remains are the incomplete realities. *Watashi* is to exist in a reality where – the little narrative remains the archetypal form of imaginative invention of reality (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Turn*, 32). Unfortunately for *watashi*, entry into the imaginative reality of the *End of the World* means his mind must die in his own world.

In chapters of the *End of the World*, the protagonist *watashi* now referred as *boku* discovers himself ensnared within his own core-consciousness. The themes of restlessness and a longing for truth through this alternate reality, as *boku* reflects, "What is one meant to feel here? All is adrift in a vague sense of loss" (Murakami, *HBW*, 37).

The *Hard-boiled Wonderland* is symbol of modern Japanese society whereas the *Town in the End of the World* is about postmodern utopia. The *End of the World* represents





dystopian notion of the world and not utopian. The Town offers a peaceful protection from the collapses and uneases of modern life at the cost of high price.

In *Hard-boiled Wonderland*, the loss of reminiscences and human passions and emotions matches with being unclothed of one's shadow. *Boku* feels nervous and misplaced without his Shadow - his own reminiscences and association with the world beyond the Wall surrounding the Town. He only recollects that walls did not enclose the world where he once resided and that everyone was pursued by their shadows. *Boku* speculates, "Why have I cast off my past to come here to the End of the World? What possible event or meaning or purpose could there have been? Why can I not remember?" (Murakami, *HBW*, 109). *Boku* decides to run off the Town with his Shadow and come back to the world, a world where he will be led astray by his own mind, bear, agonize and pass away. It is at this point that the image of the River rematerializes, representing the continual unrest and flood of modern life. *Boku's* Shadow comprehends that the only flight from the Town is the River that cuts through its center and flows under the Wall. The Shadow states:

The River was full of life. I could feel this. There is nothing bad about it. I believe that if we give ourselves over to the water, the flow of the River will lead us out. Out of the Town and back to a real world... It's not the best of all worlds... but it is the world where we belong ((Murakami, *HBW*, 386).

The present research illustrates that the truths and realities presented in Haruki Murakami's *Hard-boiled Wonderland* sponges heavily from the gloomy themes presented in much of contemporary postmodern theories. From the denial of metanarratives to the loss of a permanent truth and reality due to the dominance of arbitrate images, Murakami's novel articulates a far-reaching displeasure with modern cultural realities. This disappointment is coupled with a feeling of hopelessness and powerfulness in the face of the failure to make meaningful connections and a resignation that history has come to an end.

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