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MURAKAMI'S *AFTER DARK*: FEMALE REPRESENTATION AND TRANSITION

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Abstract

The paper intends to conduct a study of the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami's novel *After Dark*. Though being a male writer, his novel can be analysed from a feminist perspective. The attack on the Chinese prostitute, Guo Dongli, in the novel, stands as a symbol of the lunacy of male chauvinists against the women of the society. The main character of the novel, Mari Asai, though cannot find a way to help the young girl, derives a mental strength and this later results in her psychological rebirth. Mari's new mental state helps her to create a new relationship with her sister. The female characters are interconnected to one another with an invisible thread of life that helps them to overcome their state of hardship. The world after the dark is presented to be daunting to the women of the city. Even the characters like Kaoru and Korogi, though minor characters, plays an important role in the movement of the novel. All the women characters are shown to be running from one thing or the other. Darkness is also presented as an ally to male violence and they use the shadows to bring out their violent psyche. Thus this novel portrays the realistic situation of the contemporary world. The women become the vessels of their violence. Women are also subjected to prostitution which makes them inferior to the men in the sexual outlook. These issues are studied and analysed in the research paper by drawing parallels from the novel *After Dark*.

Keywords: feminism, male violence, female objectification

Feminism is always misjudged as a revolt against the men in society. A woman voicing her concerns about womanhood is labelled to be wrong. But the new era of feminism focuses on recovering the lost cultures of women. "No longer is feminism presumed to have a single set of assumptions, and it is definitely no longer merely an "ism" of white, educated, bourgeois, heterosexual Anglo-American women, as it once seemed to be" (Guerin 222). Every decade had brought forward new theories, and practices into the feminist movement;

beginning with the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, and later moving to many other writers, new feminist theories were always received. For instance, Betty Friedan's "female self", and Showalter's three phases of women's literary development, saw a new domain of feminism. Even then an appropriate definition for feminism cannot be identified. As Rebecca West says "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is. I only know that other people call me a feminist

whenever I express sentiments that differentiates me from a doormat or a prostitute" (Guerin 222).

The Japanese writer, Haruki Murakami's writings always have a philosophical aspect. An existential crisis is another aspect that is prevalent throughout his writings. The characters in his works always move towards perfection through which they try to gain spiritual rebirth and salvation. His two distinct styles, according to his friend Kazuo Ishiguro, are "the bizarre, anarchic style" and "the very controlled, melancholy approach" (Murakami, *In Dreams* 1).

The incidents of a single night are focused by Murakami in *After Dark*, where several people find themselves connected to an attack on a Chinese prostitute. A well-dressed man who seems to be perfect in society imbibes the darkness and violently attacks the young girl. The chapters begin with a clock telling the time; the novel beginning at 11:55 p.m., and the last chapter set at 6:55 a.m. The narrator of the novel is an omniscient camera that lingers in all the scenes of the novel. The lead character, Mari Asai, finds herself connected to all the characters in the novel, through an invisible thread of life. These connections, especially the one with Takahashi, help her in correcting her tense relationship with her sister Eri Aasi, who seems to be in a state of perpetual sleep and thereby obtaining a rebirth in herself. The novel presents the harsh realities of a women's life after the dark. The nighttime, in the novel, constantly shifts between two scenes: the isolated life of Mari Asai, and her encounters with complete strangers, and Eri Asai's bedroom, where she travels from reality to a dream-like state.

This paper studies the novel on three different levels: first, it analyses the novel on the basis of the sexual objectification of women; second, male violence, and supremacy; third, the rebirth of a feminine character. All these aspects are analyzed by drawing parallels from the lives of the characters in the novel.

The Chinese prostitute in the novel, Guo Dongli, is an example of the objectification of women, and sex. Kaoru, manager of the love hotel Alphaville where the prostitute was brutally

attacked, comes to know from Takahashi that Mari can speak Chinese, and thus being in need of a translator urgently, takes Mari to the hotel. Thus she helps Kaoru to get information from the Chinese prostitute about the person who attacked her. The state of women in the modern world of being nothing more than a commodity is revealed through the character of the young Chinese girl. As Kaoru says "A Chinese gang. They run prostitution around here. They sneak women in by boat from the mainland, and make them pay for it with their bodies. They take phone orders, and deliver the women to hotels on motorcycles—hot 'n' fresh, like pizza." (Murakami, *After Dark* 48).

The female body is seen as nothing more than a sexual object. As mentioned by Fredrickson and Roberts in their "Objectification theory: Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks", "The common thread running through all forms of sexual objectification is the experience of being treated *as a body* (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for the use to (or consumption by) others."(2). Thus the female body is seen as nothing more than a commodity to be consumed by the men to show their superiority.

Hidden in the darkness of the night, the businessman, Shirakawa attacks the young girl. When his wife calls him asking where he was at night, he says that he had gone out for a snack. When his wife enquires about the snack, he says that it was Chinese and that it was not good. Here, he is referring to the Chinese girl; for him, the young girl is nothing more than a meal to fulfil his sexual appetite.

Darkness, in the title, stands as a metaphor for the male violence directed towards women. In the contemporary world, women find it difficult to travel at night; they are violently attacked. Women become an object of male desire. It is this same truth that Murakami mentions in his novel. Shirakawa is like most men of today's world. They dress up like a gentleman, but the darkness of the night brings out the primitive self of humans. "He does not look like the kind of man who would buy a Chinese prostitute in a love hotel—, and certainly not one who would administer an unmerciful pounding to such a

woman, strip her clothes off, and take them away. In fact, however, that is exactly what he did— what he had to do” (Murakami, *After Dark* 88). He had beaten up the young girl just because she could not satisfy him.

The image of the businessman, a violent male figure, is used throughout the novel. When Eri Asai is in her perpetual sleep, a masked man, “Man with No Face” (Murakami, *After Dark* 56), is found to be sitting on a chair near the bed. If this is a reality or a dream is not confirmed by Murakami. The man’s dressing is similar to that of Shirakawa. All the time he is found to be staring towards the sleeping figure of Eri Asai. “We trace this hypothetical line of vision with great care. Yes, there can be no doubt about it. What the man in the mask is staring at with his invisible eyes is the sleeping form of Eri. It finally dawns on us: this is what he has been doing all along” (Murakami, *After Dark* 57). When she wakes up in her dream (though she feels it to be a reality, “a different kind of reality”, as she calls it), she is in an entirely different setting, a locked room that is very similar to the office room that Shirakawa was working late night. She finds a pencil on the floor with the inscription “VERITECH”, similar to the one Shirakawa was using.

Though Murakami has not made it clear about the appearance of the masked man, and the reason for Eri Asai’s perpetual sleep, the readers are forced to make conclusions. The masked man stands as a symbol of the male violence directed towards women in society. The presence of the masked man indicates that women are always haunted; they are always exposed to male violence. Even the character Eri Asai must have been a victim of male violence, and thus the author must have created the “Man with no Face”. Takahashi seemed to have recognized this; “She’s carrying around so many problems all by herself she can’t make any headway, and she’s searching for help” (Murakami, *After Dark* 139). Eri Asai is stuck inside a TV screen; this suggests that her modelling career must have gone wrong because she was attacked by a businessman similar to Shirakawa. Eri’s thoughts must have been similar to that of Korogi, “When I finish work, and get into bed, I always think: let me not wake up. Let me just go on

sleeping” (Murakami, *After Dark* 169), and this must be the reason for her slumber.

The image of the mirror, in the novel, is also an indicator of the animal inside a man. Late at night, after the violent attack on the young girl, he stares into the mirror, in his office. He transforms himself into the gentleman and covers up the violent side inside him. “His image in the mirror remains just that: an image of himself in reality. A reflection of what is there” (Murakami, *After Dark* 143). Even after he leaves the room, the reflection remains there, inside the mirror. The reflection stares back from the mirror without any change in expression; it does not move.

Even after Shirakawa has left, our point of view remains in the lavatory, and, as a stationary camera, continues to capture the dark mirror. Shirakawa’s reflection is still there in the mirror. Shirakawa—or perhaps we should say his image—is looking in this direction from within the mirror. It does not move or change expression. It simply stares straight ahead. Eventually, however, as though giving up, it relaxes, takes a deep breath, and rolls its head. Then it brings its hand to its face and rubs its cheek a few times, as if checking for the touch of flesh. (143)

Though he had tried very hard to conceal his real self of the violent being, he fails. When he dressed up as a gentleman, he left behind his violent psyche in the mirror. It is not the reality, but merely an image, and it searches for its own existence when the image touches its own face to feel itself. Thus this image keeps staring in from the other side, trying hard to find out why it was left behind, not recognizing that when dawn comes, the violent side of a man is to be hidden.

Mari, the protagonist of the novel, is not in good relation with her family, and especially her sister Eri Asai. Eri Asai, a very beautiful girl who sometimes also engages in modelling. She is even compared to Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty. Her sister Mari is very different from her; she is more of the quiet type. Eri, being in a night of perpetual sleep, is completely isolated from the outside world.

Eri was allergic to most of the things, and thus she had special food; their parents were more concerned about her as she was successful in her life. Both the sisters were living in two different worlds, and this increased the differences between them.

When the story moves further, this disturbed relationship seems to have regained its strength. The attacked Chinese girl, though a complete stranger to her, seems to share more connection to her than her sister. "The minute I saw her, I felt—really strongly—that I wanted to be her friend and if we had met in a different place at a different time, I'm sure we could have been good friends. I've hardly ever felt that way about anybody" (Murakami, *After Dark* 138). Both the Chinese girl, and Eri are said to be beautiful. Hence there is a certain connection between them. Mari, then, feels that by helping the Chinese girl, she can surely change the relationship with her sister. Takahashi explains the situation to her; if Eri was also stuck in a love hotel, and violently beaten up by a man, then she would feel the same concerns for Eri. Thus she overcomes the first step of detachment from her sister.

Korogi, an employee of the love hotel, is also a victim of violence. When she was the same age as that of Mari, she had found herself a perfect job. But then 'something' terrible happened. Here we can find that Murakami has again used an element of suspense in the plot. He has left that 'something' undisclosed, for the readers to visualize it for themselves. Korogi had to keep running because of this from one place to another, changing names. "Let me tell you something, Mari. The ground we stand on looks solid enough, but if something happens it can drop right out from under you and once that happens, you've had it: things'll never be the same. All you can do is go on living alone down there in the darkness." This makes her realize the situation of her sister: that Eri must also be in certain darkness.

Mari, later, takes Korogi's words into consideration; "That people's memories are maybe the fuel they burn to stay alive. Whether those memories have any actual importance or not, it doesn't matter as far as the maintenance of life is concerned. They're all just fuel" (179). She searches

for one such memory that will help to revive the relationship with her sister. She remembers a day when she, and her sister were stuck in a lift; it was a long time back.

Exactly how many minutes it lasted—five minutes, twenty minutes—really doesn't matter. The important thing is that during that whole time in the dark, Eri was holding me and it wasn't just some ordinary hug. She squeezed me so hard our two bodies felt as if they were melting into one. She never loosened her grip for a second. It felt as though if we separated the slightest bit, we would never see each other in this world again. (200)

She is able to retrace the lost relationship with her sister. She goes back home, crawls into the bed of Eri Asai, lies beside her. Then suddenly there is a slight movement; the warmth of Mari's body had brought a change in Eri. Thus with the coming of a new day, a new hope has emerged; "Unimpeded by other schemes, this hint of things to come takes time to expand in the new morning light, and we attempt to watch it unobtrusively, with deep concentration. The night has begun to open up at last. There will be time until the next darkness arrives" (Murakami, *After Dark* 212). By studying the lives of other people like the Chinese girl, Takahashi, and Korogi, Mari realizes her inner spirit and recovers it to strengthen the relationship with her sister. In the case of Eri, there is a birth of a new character.

Thus the paper focuses on proving different aspects of feminism in the work of a male author. Objectification of women, a serious issue of the contemporary world, is traced in the novel through the character of the Chinese prostitute. Men using the darkness as a shelter, and reflecting their violence towards women is another major aspect discussed here. The character of Shirakawa stands as a symbol for all the men who hide their true identity in the dark and wears a mask during the day. Another aspect discussed is the spiritual rebirth of Mari, a girl who is never able to accept reality, and runs away from all the problems. Her inner journey towards a new self, with the help of other female characters, also become a part of the paper.

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