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A Postmodernist Comparative Study: Haruki Murakami and Bijan Najdi

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Abstract

This present comparative study is devoted to the various concepts and themes of postmodernism in Haruki Murakami from Japan and Bijan Najdi from Iran. Although Murakami's novels and Najdi's short stories have been vastly studied from numerous perspectives, there have been only a few concerted attempts to investigate the postmodern concepts and themes that are present in their short stories. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate traces of postmodernism in the following short stories of Murakami: "The Elephant Vanishes" taken from *The Elephant Vanishes* (1993); "Landscape with Flatiron" and "Super Frog Saved Tokyo" taken from *After the Quake* (2002); and

“The Birthday Girl” and “Blind Willow Sleeping Woman” taken from *Blind Willow Sleeping Woman* (2006) and in the following short stories of Najdi: “Entrusted to the Earth”, “Darkness in a Boot” and “A Pool Full of Nightmare” taken from *The Leopards Who Have Run with Me* (1994). This study is aimed at unearthing postmodernist concepts such as minimalism, magic realism, focalization, fragmentation, a lack of grand narrative and postmodern themes such as isolation, a lack of communication, mystery and absurdity. In doing so, this study hopes to showcase Murakami and Najdi as literary postmodernist celebrities. The study via a close reading of the selected texts of these two writers is set to provide a greater understanding of Murakami’s and Najdi’s short stories and to establish that they are also pioneers in postmodernist writings in their own countries.

Keywords

Minimalism; Magic Realism; Fragmentation; Focalization; Isolation; Mystery; Absurdity.



Introduction

Haruki Murakami began his illustrious career as a novelist and is considered as the pioneer of postmodernist Japanese writing. As such, postmodernism concepts were also prevalent in many of his novels. No doubt Haruki Murakami is considered as one of the greatest contemporary Japanese postmodern writers as he tries postmodern concepts; such as minimalism, magic realism and fragmentation. He also attempts postmodern themes such as isolation, lack of communication, mystery, dreams and imagination in his literary works. His novels and short stories are sold internationally and translated into different languages. His famous literary works include: *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1982), *Norwegian Wood* (1987), *Kafka on the Shore* (2002), *After Dark* (2004), *1Q84* (2009), *The Elephant Vanishes* (1993), *After the Quake*

(2002) and *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman* (2006). Although he was a Japanese writer, he preferred to follow American culture and its writings. As Mussari claimed, “the young man who loved American culture was about to revolutionize Japanese literature and become one of the world’s most admired novelists” (9)

In a conversation with Ishiguro Kenzaburo he has stated that “Murakami Haruki writes in Japanese, but his writing isn't really Japanese. If you translate it into American English, it can be read very naturally in New York” (61). As Chozick claimed, Murakami himself professed that Japanese culture had become unfamiliar to him due to a “self-imposed exile [from Japan]” (62).

Accordingly, in the field of postmodernism he is inspired by the American postmodern novelists such as Kurt Vonnegut, Richard Brautigan and Thomas Pynchon rather than Japanese writers, Japanese culture and background. Iwamoto states that

As a Japanese growing up in a post-industrial, a late-capitalist society already permeated with so-called postmodern properties from the traditional culture, Murakami (whose parents were teachers of Japanese literature) imbibed [osmotically] the tendency toward postmodernist modes. (296)

Najdi, like Bahram Sadeghi had a short presence in Iran’s literary atmosphere but his works had a powerful impact on the future literary currents after him. In contrast to his contemporaries, Najdi was never affected negatively by the language of work. Stories and narrations have had special places in his works. The language of Najdi’s stories had other characteristics while applying numerous similes and metaphors. Bijan Najdi’s new view to nature, human and objects around him are accompanied prominently by his personal experiences and tend to create images which inform us about his modern-minded opinions. He is a researcher author that goes beyond his views in his surroundings and discovers the links among the concealed elements. In

fact we cannot find a long space between real images and the images that are formed in author's mind. The author's mind has not interfered the truth of the affairs for making images but rather has attempted to highlight the different angles of images which are in front of every viewer and its hardly paid attention. Imaging is one of the most important ways to decorate the outer layer of the work. This outer decorated layer prioritizes the causes of the reader's mind that stops on that image initiating deeper thought and finally discovering the motif of that work. Although it should be noted that Najdi's stories' images are one of important bases of creating an atmosphere in his stories, it is not made merely to decorate the appearance of work.

Postmodernist Studies

"The elements of fantasy, mystery, adventure, and detective stories have all presented suspense and humor in a smooth, sophisticated style, nudging the novel in the direction of the 'popular'" (Iwamoto, 296). These statements of Iwamoto present Murakami's postmodernist style of writing. Basically, elements of postmodernism are often in contrast to modernism. Indeed, postmodernism means "the end of modernity, a lack of mind, and violence and empathy" (Murakami). Unlike modernism, postmodernism does not concern itself with rationality and logical thinking; hence it does not attempt to provide a clear meaning. In other words, postmodernism deals with the unconventional notions by challenging modernist writings. As a matter of fact, postmodernist techniques, concepts, and themes dismantle the traditional style of writing by adopting unconventional forms in language. Accordingly, this study hopes to uncover these unconventional forms in the analysis of the selected short stories.

Postmodernist Concepts

Murakami's short stories do not have postmodern concepts such as "disappear into walls, take elevator to different worlds and become possessed to

animals” (Mussari 97). They deal with everyday life, isolation, mystery, talking to animals and living with their imagination. In a parallel writing mode, human obsession which means a lack of identity concealed in the motifs of Najdi’s stories. Postmodernist elements; such as short connections, an author’s lack of authority, a riot of characters, paradox, extravagance, focalization, playfulness, metafiction, irony, pastiche, manifestation, a lack of grand narrative and ontological content are generally visible in Bijan Najdi’s short stories. The selected short stories of this article deal with focalization, metafiction and a lack of grand narrative in Najdi’s short stories. The following illustrates postmodern concepts used by Murakami and Najdi in their selected short stories.

One of the postmodern concepts used by Murakami in his works is minimalism; a style of writing in which the writer demonstrates characters that are unremarkable and events that are intentionally taken from everyday life. Lack of a protagonist or hero is one of the concepts of postmodernism. Indeed, characters in this style of writing are ordinary. In the selected short stories of this article most characters are unremarkable and ordinary and the events that occur from them are taken from everyday life. Katagiri in “Super Frog Saved Tokyo”, Junko, Miyake and Keisuke in “Landscape in Flatiron” and others are all ordinary characters and the events in their lives are not very special but taken from their everyday lives. Murakami's protagonists

are invariably male, urbane, often unemployed, and either bored with life or caught up with little things such as food or clothing. Further, they are not at all interested in much less committed to, social or political struggles; they constitute the antipode to the protagonists of the heroic narrative (Kawakami 309).

Like Murakami’s characters, the characters in Najdi’s “Entrusted to the Earth”, Taher and Malihe, are an old couple. When they are not in the mood to refresh themselves they stand on the balcony of their house and listen to the sound of

the train which passes from their district. They cannot see it however, because it is far-fetched. Taher, who is the protagonist of the story, is an ordinary man who listens to the radio although most of people watch television. This shows he is a humble and simple man.

In “Darkness in the Boot”, another short story by Najdi, Taher’s father is sorry for the death of his son and continues to wear a black shirt for four years as a ritual for his son’s tragic death. The youth of neighbourhood swim in the river every day and Taher’s father goes to watch them frequently.

The term magic realism refers to the fantastic elements of the narrative. It also “refers to any extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science” (Bowers 19). The characteristics of magical realism include becoming part of the narrative or complicated plot where anything can happen either ordinary or extraordinary. Using mythology and fairy tales, time shifts or dream life in which “reality” represents having strange, mysterious, or “magical” qualities (Mason 191). Sim states that “magical realism is a form founded on the juxtaposition of two modes of representation which normally exist in opposition: realism and the fantastic” (161).

This co-relation between realism and fantastic is obvious in “Super Frog Saved Tokyo” in which a human being talks to an animal. The element of a dream hallucination and alternate reality in this short story begins with a frog which comes into Katagiri's dream and asks him to save Tokyo from an earthquake. One day when Katagiri returns home he encounters a huge frog in his apartment waiting for him. He is confused and overwhelmed seeing such a huge frog in his apartment. The frog suggests him to save Tokyo from a terrible earthquake that will be caused by an angry worm that is awakened from its long sleep by a recent earthquake and wants to take revenge on the people of Tokyo. At first, Katagiri refuses to accompany the frog but after much insistence Katagiri accepts to accompany the frog to the underground to fight

the worm and stop him from causing the earthquake. On the agreed night someone attacks Katagiri before the frog joins him. When he regains consciousness he finds himself in a hospital. Katagiri asks a nurse about the frog and the earthquake in which all these events are revealed coming only from his imagination.

He remains confused whether this was a dream or reality so he declined to help the frog. However, after the frog's assertiveness, Katagiri accepted to help the frog as though helping real people. At the time of them going underground, Katagiri was attacked by someone but the frog was not hindered from going alone underground to fight with the worm in order to avoid the cause of earthquake.

The existence of the frog in Katagiri's imagination is normal and real, however, the frog is an imaginary creature and his actions and reactions are based on extraordinary and fantastic issues rather than on reality. Indeed, Katagiri has trouble differentiating between reality and imagination. He is preparing himself to fight with the worm along with the Frog and when he recovers in the hospital he is searching for the Frog to finish his mission in killing the worm that will cause earthquake in Tokyo. Katagiri's dreams, imagination, and hallucination cooperate with the postmodern concept of magical realism in this short story. In order to make Katagiri feel that it is real, the Frog tells him that there is no metaphor or allusion (*After the Quake* 57). However, he is an unreal creature in Katagiri's imagination. Only he can see, talk and communicate to the Frog where other human beings cannot.

In Najdi's "Entrusted to the Earth", an old couple (Taher and Malihe) have a private and sad life. They do not have any children and wish to have one although they are old and barren. One morning they hear that a dead body is found under a bridge in their neighbourhood. They decide to care for the body which is unknown to them but no one comes for him. They adopt the boy as their dead son and order a tombstone for him.

In “Darkness in the Boot”, a part of this story happens when Taher’s father speaks with himself. He pulls his fingers which were a bit far from his hands towards his direction and says, “Come on old man!” He then sends out a small glass. (*Leopards* 30)

In “A Pool Full of Nightmare” when Morteza returns to his city after 20 years he was arrested and charged with killing a swan. He was not aware whether he did kill the swan deliberately or if the swan was dead before being caught. Although killing a swan caused a great disaster in the city he was finally acquitted of all charges. The existence of a swan on a pond is a usual scene but accusing and handcuffing a suspected person for killing a swan causes further concern of the mayor which explains the story as being extraordinary and fantastic. One part of the story is allocated to a lieutenant’s internal thoughts:

During this break he was thinking “If this old man had been killed, (by the way, how old is he?) now instead of this flesh and skin in the overcoat a swan would sit in front of me on the seat.”

He said,

“It is easier to speak with a swan.” (*Leopard* 17)

Another postmodern concept used by Murakami is focalization. This is a refusal of only one type of point of view through one character whose point of view is third person limited omniscient to several characters that have several points of view. Murakami’s narrators tend to be everyday people facing everyday challenges of living in the modern world (Mussari 97). In the short story “Birthday Girl”, the narrator’s parts ‘a’ and ‘b’ are different. In part ‘a’ the beginning of the story shows the point of view as omniscient: “She waited on tables as usual that day, her twentieth birthday. She always worked on Fridays, but if things had gone according to plan that particular Friday, she would have had the night off. The other part-time girl had agreed to switch shifts with her as a matter of course...” (*Blind Willow* 21). However in part ‘b’

the point of view changes to the first person's point of view and the narrator is the main character of the story: "Somehow she and I had gotten on to the subject of our twentieth birthdays—what sort of day it had been for each of us. Most people remember the day they turned twenty. Hers happened to be more than ten years earlier" (*Blind Willow* 22). The points of view in different parts shift between omniscient and the first person. For example in part 'c', the point of view is omniscient: "When the owner's meal was ready at eight o'clock, she pushed the room service cart into the elevator and rode up to the sixth floor. It was the standard meal for him: a half bottle of red wine with the cork loosened, a thermal pot of coffee, a chicken entree with steamed vegetables, rolls and butter" (23). Part 'd' has an omniscient point of view: "The old man raised both hands, palms toward her. "No, miss, don't *you* give it a second thought. The kind of 'present' I have in mind is not something tangible, not something with a price tag. To put it simply"—he placed his hands on the desk and took one long, slow breath—"what I would like to do for a lovely young fairy such as you is to grant a wish you might have, to make your wish come true" (*Blind Willow* 27) and part 'e' has first person point of view: "I quit the job after New Years, and I've never been back to the place. I don't know, I just felt it was better not to go near there, kind of like a premonition" (*Blind Willow* 29).

In fragmentation the postmodern writer disrupts the traditional elements such as a narrative, plot, character, theme and setting of the literary work. This disruption is called fragmentation. Lewis (2001) showed fragmentations through "breaking up the text into short fragments or sections, separated by space, titles, numbers or symbols" (127).

In "Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman" the narrative and plot are fragmented as the narrator tells us that he took his cousin to hospital to check his ears but all the time he changes his narration from reality to memory:

One of the older buses I remembered. A sign with the number 28 was hanging on the front. I tried to stand up from the bench, but I

couldn't. Like I was caught up in the middle of a powerful current, my limbs wouldn't respond. I'd been thinking of the box of chocolates we'd taken when we went to that hospital on that long ago summer afternoon. (*Blind Willow* 20)

Fragmentation in "Entrusted to the Earth" related to time order which is broken in this short story. For example, the occurrences happen on Friday (*Leopard* 7), Sunday (*Leopard* 8), again on Friday (*Leopard* 11) and on Monday (*Leopard* 11).

Lack of Grand Narrative is obvious in the narrative of the two writers. The characters in Murakami's short stories are ordinary and from a lower class in society and their narratives are low rather than grand. They are either a waitress ("The Birthday Girl") or a student ("Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman") or a clerk ("Super Frog Saved Tokyo"). The narrative of all Najdi's characters is simple and low rather than complex and grand.

Open-ended stories are other postmodern concept. Postmodern writers usually leave their stories open-ended with no adequate finishing. In the "Landscape with Flatiron", Murakami does not clarify to the reader whether at the end of the story Junco died or not is not clear, whether a deep sleep is death or not.

"So, what should I do?" Junko asked.

"I don't know. We could die together. What do you say?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Are you serious?"

"I'm serious."

She felt herself growing sleepy. Most of the burning driftwood had turned to ash and crumbled, but the biggest piece still glowed orange, and she could feel its gentle warmth against her skin. It would be a while before it burnt itself out.

"Mind if I take a little nap?" she asked.

“Sure, go ahead.”

Will you wake me when the fire's out?”

“Don't worry. When the fire goes out, you'll start feeling the cold. You'll wake up whether you want to or not.”

She repeated the words in her mind: When the fire goes out, you'll start feeling the cold. You'll wake up whether you want to or not. Then she curled herself against him and dropped into a fleeting, but deep, sleep” (*After the Quake* 31-32).

In “Entrusted to the Earth” it is not clear whether the couple decides seriously to order a tomb stone for the dead body or if it is an emotional whim.

Metafiction is one of the elements of a postmodern situation which tries to discover the point at which the story is not real. The most explicit aspect of meta-fiction is that the writer enters himself in the story and makes the audience aware that the story is not real (Payandeh 73). In Patricia Waugh's viewpoint the most explicit type of metafiction are the same conscious words by a writer who deliberately notes to the reader that the story is non-real (Metafiction 7-8). The appearance of metafiction in Najdi's stories is the tricks that writer applies in description and by this trick disobeys the realistic descriptions which is common for the reader. As it was said, metafiction does not follow from showing life real. Najdi violates these familiar rules by some methods such as writing long sentences. In his stories it has occurred repeatedly where Najdi sometimes shows ordinary and commonplace using long and boring sentences with the aim of applying this method to remind the audience that his text is a fictional story.

An example from “Entrusted to the Earth” is given hereunder:

He looked at the water that was descending with fast drops from hanging skin of his skinny arms. The scent of soap was exuding from his hairs. The foggy weather was rotating around old man's head. Water had embraced Taher. When he cast the towel on his

shoulder he felt a bit of oldness which belongs to his body has stuck to that long and red towel and the varicose veins of his legs are not aching at all. (*Leopard* 7)

An example from “A Pool Full of Nightmare” is “In the morning of that day as Morteza set off the bus, scent of tea gardens arrived to his shirt from between of his opened collar, although the weather was cold and had the taste of river, Morteza walked to the side of inn” (*Leopard* 15).

Uncommon and complicated descriptions is a weird characteristic of Najdi's stories which is a deliberate complexity and the ambiguity in his descriptions force the reader to pause and read it repeatedly to understand the writer's meaning showing contrast with real writings. “Its flowers were been plucked and there were no scene on the water except beam of lights. By the way... there were scene of sky too but it was too cloudy to be seen clearly” (*Leopard* 16).

The surroundings of pond was too private as only Morteza's footsteps were walking on the snow. The sound of water was not heard. In every pace a bench had sit beside the pond and snow did not let to recognize it is wooden, stone or made of cement.” (*Leopard* 16-17)

Impertinent causes is another of Najdi's tricks with readers is bringing an impertinent and wonderful cause for something in the description. The meaning of these types of causes is joking with real descriptions. “Morteza said, I waved my hands for the swan and yelled do not come close, do not come close for God's sake. But I suppose the swans do not hear anything or only that swan did not hear anything. It did not see me at all. So I went to the direction of boat”. (*Leopard* 19)

Selecting characters in Najdi's short stories is also worth dealing. Most writers try to show that their story is real by strategies like describing the physical characteristics of their personages and also their traits. Characters in postmodernism is an attack to identity supposition and causes making the

characters and their existence to be determined by some difference (Dorcherty 303). Najdi wants to show the readers that his personages are not real when faced with the characters in his stories :

1. Proper names: As it was investigated in this paper in his stories, “Entrusted to the Earth” and “A Pool Full of Nightmare”, the characters’ names are the same - Taher
2. Fancy characters: This is another characteristic in postmodern writings which tries to portray real world and fantasy in one line to reduce their confrontation.

Postmodernist Themes

1. Isolation

In “Landscape with Flatiron”, the characters feel isolated. Junko just thinks of a family - a real family, probably like this, she thought (*After the Quake* 24). Sheran is away from home (*After the Quake* 24) and lives in isolation in another city. To her mother she wrote: “Don’t worry about me, and please don’t look for me, I’m doing fine” (*After the Quake* 24). There was a generation gap between Junko and her father that causes her to run away and live in isolation.

Another isolated character is Miyake in which Junko “could feel the Miyake’s fear and hope and despair as if they were her own”(*After the Quake* 22). The reader does not know about the characters, only that Junko is a runaway and Miyake probably has lost his family members in earthquake. “Making fire is...which both characters look in silence. Fire is the symbol of warmth and feeling among friends and family members. However, the bonfire that Miyake makes is kind of pointless (*After the Quake* 26). For Junko and Miyake life is meaningless. The feeling of loneliness and emptiness made the two characters think of death. As this short story along with other short stories in *After the Quake* were written after the Kobe earthquake and Murakami endeavored to settle the distresses of these events on the Japanese people

(Ross 2009). The story depicts Junko's depression and Miyake's nightmarish devastation through a communal conflict with death and emptiness.

Isolation in Najdi's "Entrusted to the Earth" is shown through Taher and his wife who feel nothing but loneliness since they have no children. In "Darkness in the Boot", Taher's father had worn a black shirt for four years because of the death of his son. He thinks of death and the atmosphere of the story shows this feeling.

2. Lack of Communication

As another postmodern theme lack of communication is obvious in Murakami's short stories. In *Landscape with Flatiron*, "Junko's thinking with herself." (*After the Quake* 22) In "Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman", the narrator was always day dreaming instead of communicating with others around him including his cousin whom he was with the whole day. In "Super Frog Saved Tokyo", Katagiri's parents died and his siblings did not communicate with him although he paid for their education and living costs. He himself does not communicate with people around him. He just follows his dreams and his meetings with the frog are also in his imagination.

3. Absurdity in life

One of the postmodern themes is an absurdity in life which is obvious in repetition in Miyake's life in "Landscape with Flatiron". Every day he "would come to the convenience store at least three times a day. In the morning he'd buy milk, bread, and a newspaper. At noon, he'd buy a box lunch, and in the evening he'd buy a cold can of beer and a snack—the same thing, day after day" (*After the Quake* 25) and usually in the evenings he makes a bonfire on beach. "He made them all year long except during midsummer when the beach was full of people far into the night" (*After the Quake* 26). This repetition in his life is pointless and shows the absurdity in his life.

Repetition in the life and, consequently, absurdity in life is obvious in Najdi's "Entrusted to the Earth"; "Friday was at the back of window, as it had

the same unbelievable similarities with all the Fridays in the winter” (*Leopard* 7).

4. Mysterious Tone

Another postmodern theme is mystery. The tones in “The Elephant Vanishes” and “The Birthday Girl” are mysterious. As Mussari claimed, “Murakami may have been heavily influenced by Chandler’s detective novels but he was determined to write different kind of mystery, one without any definite solution” (22). In “The Elephant Vanishes”, like in a detective fiction, the narrator explains about the mystery of the mysterious missing of elephant from the town’s elephant house and the way the police and city principals’ search but do not find the animal. As the narrator mentions, this is an “unsolvable myster” (*The Elephant Vanishes* 206).

As a detective theme, in a conversation with a colleague about the vanishing of the elephant, the narrator divulges that he had detected something strange the day before the disappearance of the elephant. He saw the elephant and its keeper become smaller. In his view, it was a mysterious scene. In “The Birthday Girl”, the wish of the girl and the owner of the restaurant are mysterious. We do not know about the wish and do not know how the owner understands the girl’s wish.

The elements of the mystery and detective story are obvious in “A Pool Full of Nightmare”. It begins with Morteza’s capture because apparently he has killed a swan but in the middle of the story Morteza’s return to his city after 20 years is described. It is not clear whether Morteza is the killer of swan or not. The lieutenant said: “You were seen... This is brutal. Haven’t you killed the swan? Morteza said: Yeah... It seems yes... Likewise... How can I say? Suddenly I found out its dead body is on my hands” (*Leopard* 15)!

Conclusion

This study has undertaken a postmodernist reading of five short stories of Haruki Murakami and three short stories of Bijan Najdi by discussing

different postmodern techniques and themes in each short story. The facts are highlighted wherever the writers' short stories have traces of postmodernism in them.

The analysis indicates that both Murakami and Najdi had used the technique of minimalism and the use of unremarkable and ordinary characters with everyday events in their short stories. To trace the concepts of magic realism; "Super Frog Saved Tokyo" by Murakami, describes the way a human being (Katagiri) talks to an animal (frog). In Najdi's "Entrusted to the Earth", the old couple adopt a corpse as their dead boy and order a tombstone for him. Fragmentation in "Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman" is shown through a narrative and plot which are fragmented and in "Entrusted to the Earth" is indicated through time order which is broken. A lack of a grand narrative is obvious in all Murakami's and Najdi's characters which are simple and low rather than complex and grand.

Isolation and a lack of communication are shown in Murakami's *Landscape with Flatiron* through the characters of Junko and Miyake and in Najdi's "Entrusted to the Earth" through the characters of Taher and Malihe. Mystery is shown through Murakami's "The Elephant Vanishes" and "The Birthday Girl" and Najdi's "A Pool Full of Nightmare".

This study which analyzed Murakami's and Najdi's short stories from the postmodernist perspective offers a concise account of the postmodern issues in their selected short stories from 1993 to 2006 and is an important contribution to this area of study.

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