

Reiko's Uncertain World in *Norwegian Wood*: Looking through a Postmodern Lens.

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Abstract

Postmodernism, as a theory, began after the second world war, as a consequence of the terrible dehumanization that it brought about in the world. Like its predecessor modernism, postmodern works are fragmented and decentered. These works are deliberately ambiguous and do not easily convey a single meaning. This is because the outcomes of the world wars made the writers question the beliefs in grand narratives and universal truths. Their writings started to highlight the hopelessness of life. Modernism mourned this hopelessness but postmodernism accepted it as the only way of existence. The postmodern works focused on surviving in a disordered world. This paper studies this disorder in the novel *Norwegian Wood* through the life of the character named Reiko. This character, like most of the other characters in the novel, encounters unpleasant experiences, through which she must go through. Through a postmodern lens, the author makes the readers question the belief in progress. The paper explores the complexity of survival in a postmodern chaos.

Keywords: postmodernism, modernism, disorder, uncertainty, complexity

Postmodernism, as a theory, has been widely researched throughout the recent years. It began as a radical movement in the 1970s and has found its place in various genres of art. While its predecessor, modernity, was based on clarity and simplicity, postmodernism had complexity as its key principle. Modernism believed in progress and echoed the hope for an ideal society, while postmodernism rejected grand narratives and worked on accepting a dystopic reality.

The principles of postmodernism reflected on the literature of its era. The postmodern writers rejected the idea of truth as universal and considered it a matter of perspective. They rejected objectivity and favoured subjectivity and individuality more in their writings. They wrote about a disordered world where they did not mourn the disorder. They accepted it and often celebrated it. Postmodernists focus on the continuity of the process, accepting that the disorder and chaos present in the world will never be demolished completely. Defining postmodernism, Shaun Best says:

...the postmodern world the problem of identity is one of avoiding a fixed identity and keeping our options open, avoiding long-term commitments, consistency and devotion. In place of a life project established as early as possible, that we loyally keep to, postmodern people choose to have a series of short projects that are not fixed. The world has the feel of being in a continuous present. (238)

This concept of postmodernism is found in the novels of Haruki Murakami. His characters go through crises with no idea about its end. They grapple with uncertainty regarding their individual places in the world. They go through a journey of the discovery of self, that brings about some profound changes in their lives. However, this journey does not fully solidify

their identity. In a typical postmodern aspect, this signifies that this search is lifelong. In this aspect, this paper has portrayed Reiko, from the novel *Norwegian Wood*, as a postmodern character.

Norwegian Wood is a story of love, loss, and complex relationships. Toru, the protagonist of the novel has two people he calls friends, Kizuki and Naoko. After the death of Kizuki, he tries developing a romantic relationship with Naoko, when both are nineteen years old, but fails repeatedly, as Naoko is very depressed and descending down into despair. In order to heal herself, Naoko joins a sanatorium located in the hills of Kyoto. When she feels better, she replies to Toru's many letters, asking him to visit her in the sanatorium. When Toru reaches the sanatorium, which is named Ami Hostel, Toru and the readers are introduced to Reiko Ishida, who is another patient and Naoko's roommate in the sanatorium.

Before arriving at the sanatorium, Reiko was an excellent pianist looking forward to a successful career as a concert pianist. In her final year at the conservatoire, while practicing constantly for an important competition, the little finger in her hand stopped moving completely. The doctors were not able to find anything wrong with the finger and suggested that the problem could be psychological. But her psychiatrist could not give her a proper solution either. He advised her to get off the piano for a while.

Reiko recuperated and after two months, her finger started to move again. But the period of recuperation had impacted her heavily. She had begun to question her self-worth and whether she would mean something if her piano was taken away from her. "People paid attention to me for that one thing: my talent at the piano. Take the piano away from a girl who's grown up like that, and what's left? So then, *snap!* My mind became a complete jumble. Total darkness" (Murakami 154). Through these lines, Reiko alluded to the anxiety that every artist carries- the death of the artist in them. This death is the fear that something,

or some event, will kill the artist inside them, and that they will not feel the same passion for their art like they did anymore. The lyrics from BTS's song "Black Swan" portray this exact fear:

The heart does not beat
anymore, when listening to music
Tryna pull up
It feels like time has stopped
Oh that would be my first death
I been always afraid of (BTS 0:27)

After her little finger started moving, she realised that she did not have the old passion for the piano in her anymore. Her previous learning and experiences ensured that she was a decent pianist, but she was not mentally ready for any competitions. The psychiatrist advised her to leave behind the idea of becoming a professional pianist as her mental self was fragile, and it could affect her immensely. Nevertheless, giving up a cherished dream hurt her a lot. An artist lives for applause, and it was agony for a person like Reiko who, was once filled with applause, and now had to completely leave it behind. "It was as if my life had ended. Here I was in my early twenties and the best part of my life was over...No more applause, no one would make a big fuss over me, no one would tell me how wonderful I was...I felt so miserable, I cried all the time" (Murakami 155).

She continued living a miserable life. Her mental condition worsened and she was constantly in and out of depression. She was even sent to an insane asylum and desperately attempted to get better so that she could leave the place. Seven months later, she was discharged and then she met a man who was ready to marry her, despite being aware of her

mental struggles. She married him and settled down in a new place, to leave behind her past. Though she was able to spend happy time with her husband and child for some time, things get worse for her again. One of the neighbour's kids, to whom she taught music, accused her of harassing her sexually. The kid had done the act very well by leading Reiko to the room, seducing her and then framing her, and it seemed very believable. Reiko could not live in the neighbourhood anymore, and to make things worse, her past resurfaced there. People started avoiding her and cast strange looks at her. Her mental condition, that had stayed better for a few years after marriage, worsened once again. Unwilling to let her condition affect her husband or her child in any way, she divorced him and rushed for recuperation in the Ami Hostel.

The conditions in the Ami Hostel help Reiko's mental health a lot. It is a different sanatorium from the ones she had previously stayed. It presents a utopic view in a dystopic world for the patients. The sanatorium does not separate the doctors from the patients. It works on the principle that every single person needs healing within themselves. The sanatorium helps the patients forget their deformity. It creates a safe place which makes it difficult for the patients there to leave it. Like Naoko describes in her letter to Toru, "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" (114). Once a patient leaves a sanatorium, they cannot return. When the readers meet Reiko, she had already been in the sanatorium for seven years. It either means that she had not healed completely or that she was just not ready to leave the mental comfort of the sanatorium.

The sanatorium is an example of a utopia that the postmodern dystopic world outside does not offer. This is what makes the patients think twice before leaving the sanatorium. Once they leave, they cannot return. They know well that the disordered, chaotic world

outside will present them with only one option, which is to embrace the chaos. The sanatorium had the provisions to meet the basic needs of the people and nothing extraordinary that would tempt or disturb the mental peace. Like Reiko says, “Just living here is convalescence...A regular routine, exercise, isolation from the outside world, clean air, quiet. Our farmland makes us practically self-sufficient; there’s no TV or radio. We’re like one of those commune places you hear so much about” (140). In his research work titled “Haruki Murakami and His Realistic Style: The Japanese Aesthetic Taste in *Norwegian Wood*,” Huang says:

Although it is called a sanatorium, there are no fences or barbed wire walls of white stone, and the place is very spacious, where people live happily, work at sunrise and rest at sunset, and do not take compulsory treatment because it is a nursing home. People who live here often do not want to leave. In this way, life in the sanatorium is serene and beautiful. (775)

Life in the sanatorium guarantees peace and quiet. People talk quietly as they do not find anything that needs yelling. Also, the serene atmosphere fosters healing to the patients. But this serenity does not come free of cost. In the words of Reiko, “it costs a bundle to get in here” (Murakami 126).

After arriving at the sanatorium, Reiko heals considerably. She plays piano and guitar to the patients as well as the doctors. Her music has healing properties and because of this, she comes to be famously addressed as ‘Doctor Ishida’, despite being a patient herself. She stays in the sanatorium for so long and even helps in the office works, that the boundary between her being a patient and a staff there starts to fade away. After enveloping herself comfortably with the alienation the sanatorium offered from the real world for seven years, she had convinced herself that there would be nothing the outside world could offer to her. Talking about leaving the place, she tells Toru, “There’s nobody waiting for me to get out, no

family to take me back. I don't have any work to speak of and almost no friends. And after seven years, I don't know what's going on out there" (128). Later she confesses, "I'm afraid to get involved with the outside world. I'm afraid to meet new people and feel new feelings" (213).

The alienation and the separation from the outside world that the sanatorium offers helps the characters look into their own selves and take time to heal. People who are afraid that the outer world can hurt them, find refuge in the sanatorium, away from the world. For these people, it is a paradise, making them ignore the dystopic reality for a while. Unlike in the outer world, there is nothing around the sanatorium that would constantly make them feel powerless. Explaining postmodernism, Dr. Mary Klages in her blog titled "Postmodernism" says, "Postmodernism then is the critique of grand narratives, the awareness that such narratives serve to mask the contradictions and instabilities that are inherent in any social organization or practice" (Klages). People continue living with these instabilities around them, but when it starts affecting them more than they can bear, they become dangerously fragile. Reiko's instability began when her big aspiration of becoming a concert pianist went into the dust and her entire life became uncertain. She became afraid of being a burden to the people around her and her own parents were very careful around her, so as to not hurt her. After getting better, she got the biggest blow of her life when she was accused of assaulting a thirteen-year-old. After this she goes into the brink of insanity.

Reiko knows that the sanatorium cannot be her permanent home, and that she will have to leave that temporary utopia. She is aware that as long as she stays in the sanatorium, she will only be a patient, or sometimes even a musical doctor, but have no real relations, or a real home. She has always known that a chaotic world outside was waiting for her, a place she has lost touch with, and a place where she cannot take the familiarity and the comfort of the sanatorium along with her. Her temporary utopia had to be broken. "It is that while

aesthetic modernism had presented fragmentation, for example, as something tragic to be lamented (as in Eliots' "The Waste Land"), postmodernism no longer laments it but rather celebrates it. Thus, postmodernism is inclined to stay with meaninglessness, playing with nonsense" (New World Encyclopedia). Postmodernism is characterised by its' embracing the meaningless and its' lack of a single solution. It opens the door for multiple interpretations and validates every single one of them. Reiko could make a decision and spend her life in the sanatorium, away from her family, or choose to enter the dystopic reality outside, and both the decisions would be right from a postmodern perspective. In the end, after the death of Naoko, she leaves the sanatorium. She tells Toru, "Anyway, it's about time for me to get out of this place. I've been here eight years, after all. If they keep me any longer, I'll start to rot" (Murakami 364). She understands that too much of the same place will do her no good either. She goes by herself to meet Toru in Tokyo. The vast changes the world has undergone hits her immediately. She confesses, "I'm scared...So scared, I could go crazy just like that. I don't know what I'm supposed to do, flung out here all by myself" (366). She also believes that the world does not have anything worthwhile for her to offer. Her husband had re-married after their divorce and there was not anyone really waiting for her. Though she still played music well, she was too drained to enter a competitive world by making it her profession, and thriving in it among other artists. She stands for the postmodern view of hopelessness. She tells Toru, "I'm finished as a human being...All you're looking at is the lingering memory of what I used to be. The most important part of me, what used to be inside, died years ago, and I'm just functioning by auto-memory" (378).

After spending time with Toru, she goes into the postmodern world of uncertainty. Seeing her leave, Toru gets a feeling that "all we had to think about was continuing to live" (386). This is because he knows that among those who defeated the postmodern uncertainty and achieved their freedom by killing themselves, continuing to live will be a challenge.

Murakami thus ends Reiko's story in a way that the readers are left to ponder if she survives the world outside the sanatorium. His refusal to provide a happy ending to Reiko's story reflects the postmodern complexity of unending chaos.

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