

A Post Modern Perspective of Murakami's *Killing Commendatore*  
Amidst the Hyper Real Chaos

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism, an extension of modernism emerged in the academic field only in 1980s after witnessing its spread in various fields like art, architecture, film, fashion, communication and most importantly in technology. In a globalised scenario, humans were in a race to carve a place for them by running away from an institutionalized practice in search of novelty. Writers through the medium of literature try to explain the very complicated term called Postmodernism. Haruki Murakami who is well known for his high flying novels reached the zenith of popularity by adopting diverse postmodern techniques in his novels. The present study tries to dig out the hidden postmodernist techniques used by Murakami in his most mysterious and heavily packed novel *Killing Commendatore*. An exploration into the inner recess of man, the narrator helplessly bound himself within some whimsical yet mundane

world. Murakami to a certain degree succeeds in caricaturing characters who are able to shun the manacles in front of them.

Key words: postmodernism, fantasy, novelty, technique.

Living in a Post-Truth era which is a leftover of postmodernist innovations, man moulds himself to depend largely on metaphors. Truth or reality in postmodern notion is viewed in a different tone; it is a partial, patchy and perpetually deficient. Contrary to Realism, Postmodernism stresses on hybridity of reality. A travel through ideas and metaphors, the novel *Killing Commendatore* is an account of the struggles encountered by a thirty six year old man who ends up realizing that life is nothing but an attempt to believe the unbelievable. Haruki Murakami, an asset to Japanese literature has to his credit fourteen novels and five collections of short stories translated in a variety of languages.

Postmodernism is known for its use of an assortment of techniques used by writers to furbish their writings. Beginning with the theatre of the absurd, postmodernism celebrates everything that is formless and wishes to embrace a higher truth. Like all other theories, there is no definite date for the rise and fall of postmodernism. Some critics argue that postmodernism had marked its beginning with the death of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. According to Peter Barry, “A major ‘moment’ in the history of postmodernism is the influential paper ‘Modernity – an Unfinished Project’ delivered by the contemporary German theorist Jurgen Habermas in 1980”(87). Murakami’s novel *Killing Commendatore* is a novel filled with suspense that exhibits postmodern ideas and techniques. According to The Hindu:

A writer narrates reality. If reality expands in the imagination, you can't keep griping about 'suspension of disbelief'. Literature is so much more than our present diet of the believable. And if a master novelist like Murakami takes advantage of his position to again prove this point, all the better.

The dreamlike indeterminacy of *Killing Commendatore* is the force of literature, not its weakness. It's what allows you to be in a reverie with Murakami and fill in your own blanks. Yes, disappearing fish knives will reappear in hospital cupboards just when you need them. The sacrifice made with that weapon is as metaphorical as its reappearance. (n.p)

The life of a six and thirty year old man with all its complicacies is carefully handled. The novel can also be considered as a Dasein story wherein the main characters with his companions accomplish many existential struggles between the shifting worlds. At times he is in a world which is familiar to his existence but suddenly he is lured by a world which is full of enigmatic people where ideas and metaphors jumped into real life. The narrator is a portrait painter who is forced to face situations which would aid him in losing his consciousness.

Fragmentation is the major technique employed by Murakami in the novel with the help of interchanging plots. Murakami is a master of fragmentation that he always uses fragmented and discontinued thoughts. The chapters are put in a disheveled style which is capable of confusing the readers. There are no sequences of events in novel since the narrator is a man who never sticks to a single place. The narrator being abandoned by his wife discontinues his life at home and starts his journey to a place

which is unknown to him. Again the novel starts with him finding an old friend who is ready to help him in his need. Even though the plot is discontinued, and there is a strange connection which bonds the whole story. Fragmentation is exposed to the zenith as the narrator unexpectedly unearthed the truth behind the life of Wataru Menshiki and Mariye Akikawa. To a great extent the life of the characters are scrappy, still are capable of finding new ways to stick together their disjointed life. This is evident when Menshiki mentions his fragmented mental memory “So, days later you take the memory you’ve burned into your brain, rearrange all that as an image, and reproduce it as a work of art. You must have a gift to do that—to have such extraordinary visual recall” (101). For Foucault, man possesses a counter memory which was imprinted on the body to represent a mnemonics of pain which was also encountered by the narrator of *Killing Commendatore*.

Murakami uses the technique of intertextuality which is a common feature of his works. The popularization of the term intertextuality is an outcome of an analysis on Michael Bakhtin’s concept of carnival and dialogism by an eminent critic and writer Julia Kristeva. She argued that no text is independent since it is a product of interconnectedness. Intertextuality otherwise known as Plurality states that a text is open to manifold ramifications and there can never be a colossal reading of a text. In *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Linda Hutcheon’s puts forth a comment on postmodern intertextuality as:

Postmodern intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context. It is not a modernist desire to order the

present through the past or to make the present look spare in contrast to the richness of the past...It uses and abuses those intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony. (86)

The concept of intertextuality in connection with metafiction can allude to two things that no text can be written in remoteness or the text is affianced in a discourse with itself. Thus postmodern writers try to incorporate a work within the framework of a formal or contextual component of a previous text. In *Killing Commendatore*, Murakami refers to various texts and musical compositions to substantiate that every text is dependent in one way or the other. The name of the painting painted by Tomohiko Amanda is itself an adaptation from Don Giovanni, an opera by Mozart. In a chapter named "A Clear Contravention of Basic Principles" the narrator explains the importance of connectivity and interdependence. Donna Anna, a companion of the narrator in his mysterious journey opines, "All that we see is a product of connectivity. Light here is a metaphor of shadow, shadow a metaphor for light. You know this already, I believe" (573). The author cites examples from various writers like Edgar Allen Poe, Samuel Beckett, Dostoevsky, George Orwell and a lot more. The concoction of various secondary texts in a primary text proves Kristeva's idea of the presence of a phenotext and a genotext.

Magical realism employed by the postmodernist writers originated with the Latin American writer, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, gained momentum in the twentieth century with its capacity to see the unforeseeable. By juxtaposing the realistic with the fantastic, the use of dreams, surrealistic description and abrupt surprise marks the

characteristics of magical realism. Murakami is a master writer who blends reality with fantasy and in *Killing Commendatore* he constructs the plot by keeping magical elements as its base. The story of a portrait turning into reality evokes shock as well as surprise in the readers. The painting that gained life in a particular point of time started guiding the narrator. The painting is described as “But this painting titled *Killing Commendatore* was full of blood. Realistic blood flowing all over. Two men were fighting with heavy, ancient swords, in what seemed to be a duel” (66). Soon after some days the narrator witnessed the characters in the painting as alive. The narrator is stunned to see the characters in front of him and he elaborates it as:

My body felt frozen. As if a fist-sized lump of ice were slowly crawling up my spine. The Commendatore from the painting *Killing Commendatore* was sitting on the sofa in my house—or, more, precisely, Tomohiko Amanda’s house—and looking straight at me. The little man was dressed exactly like in the painting, with the same face. As if he’d escaped directly from the painting. (233)

After witnessing an odd scene, the narrator is in a dilemma that he could not have a mutual understanding of the happenings. Reality and unreality flipped in his mind as well as in the readers. Mostly the text is filled with such fantastical images and events that it requires a careful scrutiny to distinguish real and dream. Commendator’s reply to the narrator’s question is yet another whimsical event to be discussed. The Commendatore says “am I a spirit? No, it is nothing like that. I am no spirit. I am just an idea. A spirit is basically supernaturally free, which I am not. I live under all sorts of restrictions”(236). The narrator is now trapped with the world of ideas and metaphors

which play an important part in everyone's life. Various dreams of the narrator and his friends are scrupulous and are difficult to differentiate.

Man live in a world of ideas and metaphors where life drags him to the extreme end of suffering. In such a world man tend to believe what is hyper real and may create their own fantasies. Jean Baudrillard exemplifies the ambush of imitation on the day to day life of humans who is competent of causing an implosion of reality. He says that in such a world only signs tend to absorb human reality. He reinforces the notion of the loss of the real by pointing out that the present day environment is permeated by hyperreality that it is a thorny task to separate real from dream. Murakami's novel is filled with hyper reality that often twists the reader's power of understanding. The narrator when passed through the underground Donna Anna states:

“No problem! The gap flows through that river between being and nothing. And a wonderful metaphor can reveal the possibility that is hidden in everything. As a talented poet reveals a new landscape through a landscape, the best poems emerge from the best metaphors. You must keep an eye on the new landscape”. (716)

The narrator finds the painting as a turning point in his life even if he is unable to relinquish his capabilities.

Postmodernism celebrates the surface by absolutely negotiating profundity. Postmodernism unlike modernism does not grieve over the idea of fragmentation, discontinuity or incoherence. As a prevailing mode of literature, postmodernism can be

viewed as an attempt to rise above the sense of exhaustion that affected cultural as well as artistic consciousness. To quote Terry Eagleton:

Postmodernism is a style of culture which reflects something of this epochal change, in depthless, decentred, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art which blurs the boundaries between 'high' and popular culture, as well as between art and everyday experience.(vii)

Murakami's apt usage of postmodernist techniques generates awareness in his readers as well as the world, the importance of imagination and the necessity to distinguish reality from imagination.

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