

REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMININE MATTERS IN HARUKI MURAKAMI'S KILLING COMMENDATORE

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Abstract: Haruki Murakami has delved into the theme of losing females in his writings for many years. His representations of females have been almost overlooked, since they seem to be, at first glance, one-dimensional or stereotypical. In the broadest sense, that kind of analysis should be correct. However, in Killing Commendatore, the reader notices the development of the author's representations of losing females. This essay is designed to illustrate the theme of losing as an essence of Murakami's literature by analyzing the way in which the depictions of feminine matters develop into a more universal existence.

Introduction

Innumerable females have been lost in Haruki Murakami's writings. Throughout his literary career, losing females has been a consistent theme. For example, in *Norwegian Wood*, the protagonist Watanabe loses his sweetheart, Naoko, and tries to hold on to the memories of her. The title of the anthology, *Men Without Women*, which was inspired by the identical title by Earnest Hemmingway, luminously suggests the importance of this theme. In addition, this recurrent theme has been especially developed in *1Q84*, where the theme of seeking women transforms to be reciprocal in the relationship between Aomame and Tengo.

In *Killing Commendatore*, Murakami elaborates on this significant theme, as it is also a story on losing and regaining females. To begin this essay, I will summarize the plot. The narrator is an artist who draws commercial portraits. One day, he is informed of the intent to divorce by his wife. He then leaves their flat and goes on an odyssey around the Tohoku area in his car. After his trip, he is offered a vacant house to live in by his friend, Masahiko Amada. Masahiko's father, Tomohiko, the great Japanese painter, used to live in the house. He is about to die at that time. Living in the house, the narrator finds a mysterious hole while searching for the sound of a ringing bell in the forest. Simultaneously, he feels the spirit of Tomohiko and finds his hidden painting called *Killing Commendatore*.

In the hole, an existence called the Idea has been confined. The narrator is acquainted with

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the Idea, which is an embodied of the image of the character of Commendatore from the painting. During these events, he draws the portrait of his neighbor, Menshiki, receiving extraordinarily high pay. Afterwards, Menshiki asks the narrator to draw a portrait of a beautiful girl called Mariye, who is suspected to be Menshiki's daughter. Before completing the portrait, Mariye goes missing. In order to search for Mariye, the narrator enters the metaphorical world by killing Commendatore in front of the dying Tomohiko. As the story continues, the series of events begin to entangle each other. Through these experiences, the narrator resurrects his life as a person and as an artist by regaining his wife and establishing his identity.

As Murakami indicates in his ['Rabbit' leads Murakami through novel / Latest work features protagonist reaching a new stage in life] interview,¹ this work is intended to be an homage to Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which has the above theme in common. As Murakami himself says, *The Great Gatsby* has greatly affected his writing. The intended analogy between the two authors illustrates the significance of *Killing Commendatore* as the essential kernel in Murakami's literature.

Moreover, this work develops the feminine representation that is found in previous works of Murakami and seems to open new facets to the reader.² In *Killing Commendatore*, as the subtitles show, the "Idea" and the "Metaphor" are crucial concepts. In this section, I will develop the concept of the Metaphor as suggested by Fumiko Asari.³ The work not only delineates the losing of women but also of the holistic power of femininity as the Metaphor. This essay will investigate the representations of females and feminine matters in *Killing*

¹ See the morning edition of Tokyo's The Yomiuri Shimbun, 2nd of April 2017.

² As Tadahiko Haga infers in his book, female representations in Murakami's writing have been almost overlooked until the present (80).

³ Asari discusses the meaning of the Idea and the Metaphor in her essay. In this thesis, I will focus on the fifth definition of the Metaphor in her discussion, as follows: "The fifth, then, is that the Metaphor means experiencing the story which will lead "I" to self-restoration and maturity. In chapter 55 of part two, "I," upon visiting the underground world, hears the words of Donna Anna. She says, "It is filled with hidden possibilities that only finest metaphors can bring to the surface . . . It should be obvious, but the best metaphors make the best poems." She realizes that Tomohiko Amada's *Killing Commendatore* "was a perfect metaphor, one that launched a new reality into the world," which leads "I" to the story that he "meets himself." A "new reality" is the sum of internal experiences that "I" restarts by drawing the portraits requested of Menshiki, discovering the hidden hole in the forest and finding the Idea that appears from it, by traveling the underground world, trying again to communicate with his wife and finally, finding the possibility to live as an artist. The whole experience of the story is the self-restoration and gaining of maturity for "I" (45 Translation mine)." In this essay, I will expand this discussion that the Metaphor would be both the story of self-restoration, and the trigger of that story through the four females: Komi, Yuzu, Mariye and Mariye's mother.

Commendatore in order to analyze the universal relativity between the narrator and others. Furthermore, it will discuss the establishment of the protagonist's identity as an artist by believing that the Metaphor relates to femininity.

I. Females Transcending Time and Space

After the metaphorical prologue depicts the narrator's confrontation against the faceless man, the story begins with his recollections on parting from his wife, Yuzu. In that scene, Yuzu tells the narrator that she is going to leave him since she saw a realistic dream, as follows:

A few days ago, just before dawn, I had a dream," she said instead. "A very realistic dream, the kind where you can't distinguish between what is real and what's in your mind. And when I woke up that's what I thought. I was certain of it, I mean. That I can't live with you anymore (18).

This quotation shows that Yuzu refuses the narrator since she saw the dream, which blends the boundary between the dream and reality. Yuzu's words seem to suggest the characteristics of a worldview of this story, by a reality that resembles a dream. In the world of this story, the narrator experiences varieties of incredible events. He speculates on the series of supernatural events:

I felt like it had taken place in a dream. I must have been having a long, very vivid dream. Or maybe this world now was an extension of the dream, one I was shut up inside. But I knew this was no dream. This might not be real, but it wasn't a dream either (238).

In this quotation, the narrator reflects on the surreal events which he has been through. Furthermore, the narrator's entry in the metaphorical world exemplifies the aberration of reality in this story. He enters the metaphorical world that resembles the hole in the deep forest where he lost his younger sister Komi. When he enters the world of the Metaphor in order to save Mariye, who looks like Komi, he reaches the hole near his house and his body is moved supernaturally.

As we have seen, the narrator transcends space in an aberrational way. However, the transcendence of space and time can simultaneously be seen as a representation of lost females in this story. This timeless connection to the lost females can be seen in the representations of Komi, Yuzu, Mariye, and Mariye's mother, and this connection among four females delineates

them as one “soul,” or a metaphor. In this section, I will analyze the affinity of these four females and how their existences are merged into one “soul” in the narrator’s mind.

Among these four women, Komi and Mariye’s mother are already dead. These two dead women are virtually positioned in the center of the story. Furthermore, since Komi would have been the most significant figure in this story, I will illustrate her as a prototype of the metaphor of femininity. At first glance, the story depicts the losing and regaining of the narrator’s wife, Yuzu. However, behind the surface of the story of Yuzu lies the shadow of the narrator’s dead sister Komi. After the scene of parting, the narrator recollects the first time he met Yuzu and why he was attracted to her. The following quotation illustrates Yuzu’s charm:

It was my wife’s eyes, too, that drew me to her. *Something* I could see deep in them. When I first saw those eyes, they jolted me. Not that I was thinking that by making her mine I could restore my dead sister or anything. Even if I’d wanted to, I could imagine the only thing that would lead to was despair. What I wanted, or needed, was the spark of that positive will. That definite source of warmth needed to live. It was something I knew very well, but that was, most likely, missing in me (28).

Here, the narrator depicts *something* in common between Yuzu and Komi. He finds “the spark of will” in both females. Although he denies that he wants to restore his dead sister, he has kept seeking *something* of Komi that he has already lost. This intense feeling of loss for Komi could be the driving force of the story. Since the narrator has had this profound feeling, he unconsciously sees Yuzu as having an existence similar to Komi, and this could make their relationship destructive.

The narrator reflects on the relationship between him and Yuzu and realizes he has thought of it based on the relationship between him and his dead younger sister (32). Such a conscious can be seen in his attitude during a sexual intercourse with Yuzu. The narrator calls Yuzu “Sudachi, a similar type of fruit, as a joke” (30). Although calling her the other name is a joke, it may symbolize the narrator’s unconsciousness of seeking the soul of his dead younger sister (287). Simultaneously, Yuzu also feels that she is not Sudachi, but Yuzu herself. It is possible that Yuzu might feel uneasy since she is not told the “sole secret” (30) of the main reason he had been attracted to her, which is that her eyes reminded him so much of his dead sister.

Nevertheless, near the end of the story the relationship between the narrator and Yuzu is restored. The important factor that induces this restoration could be Mariye. She seems to dissolve the narrator’s conflict of seeing Komi’s figure in other females. The narrator drew the portrait of Komi after her death, before drawing abstract paintings at art university and

commercial portraits as his job. His drawings were a sincere effort of his soul trying to awaken his sister's (115). Drawing Mariye's portrait could be seen as an act that is almost identical to him drawing his dead sister, since he confuses Komi's figure while he is drawing Mariye's, as in the following quotation:

I looked at those three dessan over and over again, intently focusing, trying to construct a concrete picture of the girl in my mind. As I did this, I got the distinct sense of Mariye Akikawa's figure and that of my sister getting mixed into one. Was this appropriate? I couldn't say. But the spirits of these two young girls nearly the same age were already, somewhere—probably in some deep internal recesses I shouldn't access—blended and combined. I could no longer unravel those two intertwined spirits (331).

As this quotation shows, when looking at the three dessan of Mariye, the narrator sees Komi inside them. For him, the spirits of the two young girls are “blended and combined” and “intertwined.” This sense of blending and combining spirits develops further to include Yuzu (464) and, in the end, Mariye's dead mother (619). Moreover, their images are combined with Donna Anna's, as follows:

Cheered on by Donna Anna and Komi, I had managed to overcome my deep claustrophobia. No, Donna Anna and Komi could have been a *single entity*, Donna Anna at one moment, Komi at the next. Together, perhaps, they had shielded me from the dark powers, and protected Mariye Akikawa at the same time (598).

This is the scene after the narrator exits the metaphorical world. In the metaphorical world, he is helped by Komi and Donna Anna to exit it. The narrator, at the time, considers Donna Anna and Komi as “a single entity” that protects both him and Mariye.

As we have seen, the souls of four females are united to Donna Anna for the narrator. It is interesting that four females are combined to a “single entity,” though two of the four females (Komi and Mariye's mother) are already dead, while Yuzu and Mariye are still alive. By combining their existences, the narrator's mind seems to transcend time to meet Komi's soul again, experiencing catharsis.

II. The Hole as Femininity

In section two, I have delineated that the four females are symbolically combined as a single entity and, therefore, the narrator's mind succeeds in transcending time to meet Komi on a

metaphorical level. The overlapping images of them suggests that femininity absolutely reigns in the world of the story, since the narrator seems to keep finding images of lost females throughout. In this section, I will analyze the meaning of femininity in the depictions of the hole. The hole should be the starting point of the story and should be the symbolical origin of femininity; the femininity the narrator is attracted to is symbolized in the imagery of the hole.

To begin with, the hole is the very place the *Idea* was confined in. Inside the hole, the *Idea* was ringing the bell and the narrator, upon hearing the sound, emancipated it. The emancipation of the *Idea* virtually means the main story begins when this event occurs in chapter 15, as suggested by the title “This is Only the Beginning.” Although the emancipation is “only” the beginning, it certainly is the beginning. Furthermore, the hole is virtually the trigger of the story.

Although the main plot begins with the narrator’s parting with Yuzu, the essential beginning of this story could be the narrator’s losing of Komi when she entered the hole. When the narrator was thirteen years old and Komi ten, they went alone to Yamanashi Prefecture to visit their mother’s brother. They visited the cave where the narrow hole exists. Upon discovery, Komi was interested since it looked like “Alice’s rabbit hole” (250).⁴ Despite the narrator’s worries, Komi had entered the hole and exited from there after a while. Nevertheless, the narrator thinks that Komi had already gone to the world of death at that time (252-53).

The narrator is convinced that Komi’s life was snatched from her when she was in the hole. For the narrator it is not an assumption, but a conviction. After the narrator saw that her dead body had been confined in a small coffin, he began to fear narrow places. It is certain that her death was an unequivocally traumatic experience for him. This traumatic experience recurs when the narrator enters the metaphorical world. Therefore, the hole could be the beginning or the origin of the story since one of the themes could be the narrator’s triumphing of his trauma.

In the metaphorical world, he visits a cave which resembles the one in Yamanashi Prefecture, and enters the hole where Komi lost her life. After exiting the metaphorical world, the narrator reaches the hole near his house in Odawara. The two holes are connected. They are identical existences on a metaphorical level.

Interestingly, feminine imagery is luminously depicted in both holes. Specifically, the hole

⁴ The motif of *Alice in Wonderland* is recurrent in Murakami’s literature. For example, see *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and The End of The World*, and *IQ84*. Even in the above interview, Murakami describes writing his books as follows: “Once I start to write a book, every day is like trying not to lose sight of a rabbit that is leading the way” (Yomiuri).

in Yamanashi Prefecture seems to be depicted as the womb and the one in Odawara is depicted as the vagina. Both feminine images of the holes imply the ambiguous border between the self and others. First, I focus on the hole in Yamanashi Prefecture. After exiting the hole, Komi describes it, as follows:

I managed to squeeze through the narrow part, and then deeper in it suddenly got lower, and down from there it was like a small room. A round room, like a ball. The ceiling's round, the walls are round, and the floor too. And it was so, so silent there, like you could search the whole world and never find any place that silent. Like I was at the bottom of an ocean, in a hollow going even deeper. I turned off the flashlight and it was pitch dark, but I didn't feel scared or lonely. That room was a special place that only I'm allowed into. A room *just for me*. No one else can get there. You can't go in either (251).

This description of the hole inevitably associates images of the womb. The room of the hole is "round" and it is "so silent," as though she is "at the bottom of an ocean." The roundness and the silence of the hole imply the conditions in the womb. The image of the ocean also suggests femininity or maternity. Furthermore, its darkness and the lack of fear or loneliness illustrate that the hole symbolizes the womb since it is the place where unborn babies are connected to their mother. This image is empathized in Komi's further description that in that room, "it's like your body is gradually coming apart and disappearing . . . You don't know if you still have a body or not. But even if, say, my body completely disappeared, I'd still remain there. I wanted to stay there forever" (252). Komi's words suggest the ambiguity of the border between child and mother in the womb. This assumption is reinforced by the narrator, who has "gotten too big to get in" (251) the room.

Nevertheless, the narrator enters the hole in the metaphorical world to save Mariye in the end. Before entering the hole, the narrator is in his house and starts to sketch it, as follows: "As I sketched, the eerie sensation that I was merging with the pit returned. It wanted me to draw it . . . It was a pure act of creation, and it brought with it a kind of joy . . . Only then did it hit me how much it looked like a woman's genitals" (381).

In this scene, it could be said that the narrator has found a way to enter the hole by feeling that he is "merging with the pit." He feels "the eerie sensation" while he is drawing the hole and with "a kind of joy," the narrator enjoys the "pure act of creation." These depictions show the narrator's resurrection of his passion toward creation. Simultaneously, the narrator's entering the hole should result in his rebirth after confronting the bitter trauma of losing Komi. By saving Mariye the narrator accomplishes saving Komi in a reciprocal meaning, which he

could not do in his past.

III. The Establishment of the Narrator's Identity

As we have seen, the four females are combined as a single entity in the narrator's mind, and his spirit is seemingly reborn by entering the hole that is represented as the womb or vagina. In this section, I will discuss the universal relativity between the narrator and others which is led by the feminine power.

The worldview of this story delineates that every existence or phenomena is connected to each other, and this connectivity unequivocally encourages the narrator to find and establish his identity. The narrator undoubtedly lives in the world of relativity. Just before killing Commendatore, the narrator realizes the connectivity of everything, as follows: "I felt the rush of owl wings, and heard a bell ring in the dark . . . Everything was connected somewhere" (540). The narrator's words illustrate that everything in this story seems to be "connected somewhere."

In such a world of relativity, the narrator finds his identity from the interlocution with Menshiki, Tomohiko, and the man with the Subaru Forester. To begin with, the relationship between the narrator and Menshiki grows deeper through the making of Menshiki's portrait. Their close relationship is not formed entirely naturally; Menshiki's intentions are involved in the construction of their relationship.

Menshiki describes the act of drawing or being drawn as "a kind of exchange" (102). His view toward constructing the artwork illustrates it as the mingling of two persons. Menshiki is seemingly forming a firm relationship with the narrator, and through the act of drawing or being drawn in the portrait they exchange their parts metaphorically. Working on his intentions, the narrator also begins to feel that he is connected to Menshiki. He feels this similarity to Menshiki, as follows:

And strangely enough (at least to me it felt strange), I'd begun to feel a closeness to Menshiki, a closeness I'd never felt to anyone before. An affinity—no, a sense of solidarity, really. In a sense, we were very similar—that's what I thought. The two of us were motivated not by what we had got hold of, or were trying to get, but by what we'd lost, what we *did not now have* (289).

In this scene, it is significant that they have become close since both are motivated by what they "*did not now have*." These sentences particularly delineate the importance of the theme of

losing in the story. As I have already indicated, losing is the obvious theme in *Killing Commendatore*. Although this theme is indeed consistent in Murakami's writing, it seems to be particularly developed in this story.

In *Killing Commendatore*, both females and a male become lost. The theme of losing females develops to become more universal since the narrator's sense of loss also resonates with that of Tomohiko; Tomohiko could not have saved his brother just as the narrator could not have saved Komi. Like the narrator who was always trying to save Komi, Tomohiko had always been trying to save his brother, Tsuguhiko, since their childhood (396). Interestingly, both Tsuguhiko and Komi were three years younger than Tomohiko and the narrator. Moreover, the narrator accomplishes Tomohiko's hidden will in the painting, *Killing Commendatore*.

By literally killing Commendatore in front of Tomohiko, the narrator can enter the metaphorical world to meet Komi again on a spiritual level. This murder has further meaning as in the following quotation, where Commendatore describes the meaning of killing him to the narrator: " 'All right, now bring it down,' the Commendatore said. 'I know my friends can do it. Remember, my friends will not be killing me. My friends will be slaying your evil father. The blood of your evil father shall soak into the earth' " (542). The words of Commendatore suggest that for the narrator, killing him signifies the murder of the evil father.

Who, then, is the evil father for the narrator? He is the man with the Subaru Forester who symbolically reproaches him repeatedly. When traveling around the Tohoku area, the narrator accidentally had sexual intercourse with an unknown woman. From that time, the image of the man with the Subaru Forester has been occasionally following the narrator and tells him the metaphorical message that "*I know exactly where you've been and what you've been up to*" (217). Although the narrator realizes the man's rancor, he cannot understand the reasons for it. This enigma in the narrator's mind reflects the ambiguous or multistoried meaning of killing Commendatore, as it describes this killing as to kill "another *someone's* body" (543).

The ambiguity in killing Commendatore implies that the narrator both kills his evil father for himself and kills "*someone*" instead of Tomohiko. By accomplishing the will of Tomohiko and himself by killing Commendatore, the narrator succeeds in establishing his identity as an artist. Tomohiko should be a role model for the narrator as a father for a son. For the narrator, Tomohiko is a good father in contrast to the man, with the Subaru Forester, who is an evil father.

Conclusion

This essay delineates the way in which the losing of females is transformed to have a universal meaning. By mingling the existences of the self and others, the narrator seems to acquire his own identity as an artist. In this story, the narrator finds his role model in Tomohiko. For the narrator, Tomohiko is the good father who shows him the ideal way of living. By referring to the life of Tomohiko and by accomplishing his hidden will from the painting, the narrator intakes this metaphorical father's former life and improves it with his own. Through the universal relativity developed from the femininity, the narrator kills Commendatore as an evil father and acquires his identity.

Killing Commendatore is indeed a story of losing. However, the narrator regains the lost object in a metaphorical way. This regaining is accomplished by believing in the power of the Idea and the Metaphor. One of the clarified statements in this story should be that believing is significant, as the narrator says that his daughter should believe in the existence of Commendatore (681). This statement should suggest a kind of message or prayer in the present world, especially after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, since that historical event is luminously imposed into the story.⁵ By publishing this story, Murakami imposes his statement about the significance of his commitment to the world by depicting the mingling of the self and other.

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⁵ Murakami indicates the background of *Killing Commendatore* in the interview as follows: "There were expectations that the advent of the internet would make discourse, which had been dominated by the mass media, more democratic. However, the opposite has happened. In Japan, after the bubble economy burst, we had the Great Hanshin Earthquake, the Tokyo subway sarin attack, the economy was in the doldrums, then we had the Great East Japan Earthquake and the nuclear accident [Fukushima]. . . I thought our state and the economic system would have become more sophisticated, but that didn't happen. Even so, I believe good stories can give people a certain kind of power (Yomuri)."

The Yomiuri Shimbun, Morning edition. April 2, 2017. *Hito ga Hito wo Sinjiru Chikara*
[‘Rabbit’ leads Murakami through novel / Latest work features protagonist reaching a new stage
in life]. Tokyo.