

## **Psychological Refugees: The Quest for Identity in Postmodern Japan**

### **Reflection Statement**

My fascination with Japanese culture was shaped by my half-Korean background and filtered through my maternal grandparents' childhood memories. They grew up under Japanese imperial rule, and their war stories depicted snapshots of Japan as a vilified military power. Over time, my developing interest in Japanese literature and culture led me to question how this limited perspective continues to obscure the complexity of Japanese identity. I realised that the critical essay would be the most potent form to explore how Japan's power as a post-imperial nation has been undermined by the insidious cultural and economic forces of neocolonialism. Kwame Nkrumah's warning that neocolonialism is "imperialism in its final ... most dangerous stage," added further provocation to my investigation of America's infiltration of Japanese culture with doctrines of consumerism and progress. My inquiry into the West's cultural invasion led me to discover that, since the aftermath of WWII, Japanese cultural identity has been perpetually compromised, induced to conform to parasitic western myths of capitalistic 'enlightenment'. The realisation that the threat of cultural dilution in contemporary Japan has magnified existential anxieties and suicide rates in the first two decades of the twenty-first Century imbued my work with exigency. I therefore aimed to reveal how a postmodern model of identity some call the emergent self may resist Western tendencies to staticize Japanese identity. This approach is premised on the posthumanist assumption that, underlying the coherent identity we project to society, is a chaos of emergent selves.

Given my growing awareness of this emergent model of identity, Haruki Murakami's oeuvre quickly took on a new significance. His ongoing existential account of contemporary Japan, I realised, represents a microcosm of the nation's quest to recover its cultural agency. Yu Lu's postulation that Murakami's oeuvre paints a "multidimensional", fluctuating portrait of Japanese "war history, traumatic memories ... [and] spirit searching",<sup>46</sup> led me to interpret his novels as extended allegories of the dangers of western neocolonialism that have rendered the Japanese people 'psychological refugees': adrift from a war-torn psycho-cultural homeland,

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<sup>46</sup> Lu Yu, "The Other World in Murakami Literature and the Reception of Murakami Haruki in China," Master's Thesis, University of Oslo, 2013. <https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/36866>.

many Japanese individuals have embraced the ‘spiritual void’ of consumer capitalism.<sup>47</sup> Originally, I intended to focus only on Murakami’s latest novel, *Killing Commendatore*. However, Jonathan Dil’s interpretation of Murakami’s oeuvre as an “evolving therapeutic discourse”<sup>48</sup> impelled me to chart the development of Murakami’s central protagonist who recurs in various guises. This initially nihilistic figure symbolises Murakami’s evolving response to Japan’s identity crisis. Over time, his progressive engagement with the emergent self provides a vision of how Japanese individuals might elude the stifling stability of Western Cartesian subjectivity.

As I investigated neocolonialism’s cancerous growth in the guise of western consumerism, I came to understand that its effects extended to the loss of Japanese culture worldwide, as Japan’s distinctiveness becomes subsumed by globalisation’s homogenising tendencies. I extended Said’s Orientalism to incorporate Richard Miller’s assertion that self-Orientalism — a method Japan exploits to “establish the [western] Other” — has progressively reinforced the romanticised and hyper-consumerist version of Japan imagined by the West. These hyperbolised and conflicting images of Japan neglect complex facets of its cultural identity, particularly the collective unconscious which Jolande Jacobi sees as “fundamental psychic conditions accumulated over millions of years”.<sup>49</sup> To explore the full complexity of Japan’s cultural identity, I combined Carl Jung’s theory of the ‘collective unconscious’, an ongoing narrative of the human psyche moulded by generations of cultural experience in Japan, with Matthew Strecher’s theory of ‘*monogatari*’ or an individual’s evolving story shaped by memories and dreams. This enabled me to propose that an individual’s *monogatari*, intrinsically grounded by cultural memory and myths, is a place where the Japanese may paradoxically re-discover their collective unconscious. It became apparent to me then, that the unending Bildungsroman of Murakami’s protagonist is mimetic of Japan’s quest for agency over self-representation amid the indeterminacy of an ever emerging self.

My major work posits that magical realism has been prolifically employed as a vehicle for social protest against neocolonialism, expressing, as Tamara Kamer writes, “a political

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<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Watts, “Identity Crisis Has Japan in Turmoil,” *The Guardian Online* (London), 2001. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/mar/14/japan.jonathanwatts>.

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Dil, “Murakami Haruki and the Search for Self-Therapy,” PhD diss., University of Canterbury, 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Anja van Kralingen, “Review of Jolande Jacobi, *Complex, Archetype, Symbol in the Psychology of Karl Jung*,” Centre of Applied Jungian Studies, February 2, 2017. <https://appliedjung.com/complex-archetype-symbol/>.

critique of contemporary relationships with mainland Japan and the United States”.<sup>50</sup> Inspired by my research into magical realism and postcolonialism in HSC Extension 1 English, my study of Guillermo del Toro’s *Pan’s Labyrinth* revealed the power of magical realism to disrupt the notion of a single historical truth regarding the Spanish Civil War and its resulting national trauma. I was encouraged to explore how this hybrid genre is utilised by Murakami to explore an emergent model of Self in perpetual flux. As Francisco Varela asserts, our “emergent selves” are based on “processes so shifty, so ungrounded, that we have an apparent paradox between the solidity of what appears ... and its groundlessness”.<sup>51</sup> Through this transient model of Self, Murakami resists Western tendencies to reduce Japanese culture to a fixed identity, whether romanticised or hyper-consumerist. My study of Anthony Doerr’s All the Light We Cannot See in HSC Advanced English also prompted me to explore those liminal spaces where marginalised voices persist in the interstices of authoritative discourses. This led me to further research into Murakami’s employment of liminal spaces as conduits between the protagonist’s conscious and unconscious selves. Interestingly, Michael Seats posits that these liminal spaces allow the protagonists to enter a state of “only flesh and no-subject, or where the borders of his subjectivity are at best elusive”.<sup>52</sup> Seat’s assertion refined my thinking, revealing to me the paradox underlying Murakami’s representations of identity as “wind” and “sandstorm[s]”. It also helped me more fully grasp how Murakami’s protagonist, by embodying both the Zen notion of Self as nothingness and Jung’s archetypal Self as completeness, acts to warn Japanese readers of these conflicting models of Self that threaten the disintegration of Japanese cultural identity.

I decided on a critical response because this form allowed me to demonstrate a cohesively structured argument and develop insightful interpretations on Murakami’s employment of magical realism to explore the identity crisis afflicting contemporary Japan. As my major work developed, however, Theodor Adorno’s premise that the essay “instead of accomplishing something scientifically” must “reflect a childlike freedom” to achieve its purpose, was instrumental in my decision to incorporate three short, creative excerpts

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<sup>50</sup> Tamara Kamer, “Fantastic Realities: Magical Realism in Contemporary Okinawan Fiction,” *Vienna Journal of East Asian Studies* 5 (2018): 23-44.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329419925\\_Fantastic\\_Realities\\_Magical\\_Realism\\_in\\_Contemporary\\_Okinawan\\_Fiction](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329419925_Fantastic_Realities_Magical_Realism_in_Contemporary_Okinawan_Fiction).

<sup>51</sup> Francisco Varela, “The Emergent Self,” *The Edge.org*, June 2001.

[https://www.edge.org/3rd\\_culture/varela/varela\\_index.html](https://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/varela/varela_index.html).

<sup>52</sup> Michael Seats, *Murakami Haruki: The Simulacrum in Contemporary Japanese Culture* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009): 291.

borrowing the Master Scene Format of screenplays from the New Hollywood era. Ironically, while I employ a ‘Voice of God’ narrator reminiscent of the WWII Griersonian documentary mode, I present this voice as unreliable through my purposeful screenplay style to mirror the transitory autonomy Japan exercises over its cultural and historical representation.<sup>53</sup> I was fascinated by Ardoni’s contention that “although art and science became separate in the course of history” this opposition “should not be hypostatized”. This understanding galvanised me to present my final vignette as a Tedx Talk by the late Jungian psychoanalyst, Hayao Kawaii, speculating on the possibility that the emergent self could provide an alternative to Western essentialist visions of identity. After observing numerous Tedx Talks and drawing on Ken Hyland’s assertion that constructing proximity is essential to breach the expert-audience barrier, I decided to have Kawai progressively move closer towards the audience throughout the speech before merging with them and disappearing from the camera’s view.<sup>54</sup> My research has empowered my hybrid essay form, engaging my readers’ academic and imaginative response to Murakami’s post-war context.

“Psychological Refugees” is intended for a globally conscious audience, particularly one interested in extending their current understanding of postcolonialism through literature that explores the rise of neocolonialism and how this affects contemporary Japan. The ideal audience for my major work would therefore be readers of an academic publication such as *The Gateway Review: A Journal of Magical Realism*. For such a readership, my formal yet experimental style would resonate, given their interest in magical realist and postcolonial research. In my major work, I offer my audience a unique perspective on how the blending of the magical and the real by non-Western writers may “lead to some truth about the human condition”,<sup>55</sup> particularly on the underlying complexity of the emergent self. I have endeavoured to engage with my target demographic by addressing universal concerns about identity within the context of Japan’s current cultural identity crisis, shaped by the rise of nationalism worldwide in 2020 that has not only enabled, but amplified, hostility towards the cultural ‘Other’.

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<sup>53</sup> Bill Nichols, “The Voice of Documentary,” *Film Quarterly* 36.3 (1983): 17-30.

<https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft5h4nb36j&chunk.id=d0e5582&toc.depth=1&brand=ucpress>.

<sup>54</sup> Ken Hyland, “Constructing Proximity: Relating to Readers in Popular and Professional Science,” *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 9 (2010): 116-127.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248617142\\_Constructing\\_proximity\\_Relating\\_to\\_readers\\_in\\_popular\\_and\\_professional\\_science](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248617142_Constructing_proximity_Relating_to_readers_in_popular_and_professional_science).

<sup>55</sup> *The GateWay Review* <https://gatewayreview.wordpress.com/>.

My major work has evolved into an intellectually rigorous exploration of the complexity of Japanese identity and the uncomfortable truth that whilst colonialism as a system of western imperialism unraveled during the twentieth century, neocolonialism's influence continues unabated. I therefore questioned how contemporary Japanese individuals might engage authentically with a traditional culture parodied by a western-centric lens. One answer lies in the capacity for Murakami's works to offer a therapeutic discourse, carving liminal spaces where Japanese identity can be rediscovered beyond the trappings of the western gaze. Although I initially encountered Japan as a military aggressor through my family's history, my labour of passion has unearthed an unexpected fragility underlying Japanese identity amid the modernisation of a culture that is as rare as it is beautiful.

*"You'd better hurry," the faceless man said. "I can't stay here for long."*

**Haruki Murakami, *Killing Commendatore***

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