

## BOOK REVIEW

### KAFKA ON THE SHORE

AUTHOR:HARUKI MURAKAMI

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Review by Geetika Kaw Kher\*

Discovering Murakami has been one of the most enigmatic literary experiences I have had recently. Early in the year while browsing through my brother's books, I spotted a collection of short stories titled 'After the Quake' by the author. The appealing title and equally engaging description at the back of the book saw me reading it in no time. Two stories down, I realized that the narratives were not actually about the physical devastating earthquake but much more about the psychological tremors and emotional turbulences triggered by a natural calamity, stories giving an insight into the minds of people rather than in their lives.

Murakami weaves magic in his words, a magic which will not let you put down the book once you are seriously enmeshed into it and that is exactly what happened when I started reading his 'Kafka on the Shore'(2005)( Published in Japanese under the title Umibe no Kafuka in 2002). In narrating the mysterious stories of Kafka Tamura, a fifteen year old boy running away from an Oedipal curse and Nakata, an old man in his sixties who is mentioned to have lost his basic abilities to learn at a young age, the author has woven a surreal tapestry full of absurd and fantastic imageries with a tremendous appeal for our adventure hungry souls. At the core of this disturbing psychological novel lies the feeling that there is a thin line between our dreams and reality and when this line gets blurred our behavior and desires in the dream might get translated into reality. The book aptly described by Updike as an 'Insistently metaphysical mind bender' transports the reader into a world of dreams where every taboo, every prohibited action is subverted and questioned. The interesting play on the word "Kafka" reveals Murakami's literary genius. Besides being the name of one of the greatest authors ,Franz Kafka, it means 'Crow' in Czech language and right from the beginning of the book we have a character called Crow which seems to be the guiding and motivating force behind Kafka Tamura's decisions. The boy called Crow could be either Kafka's super-ego, alter ego or possibly his id, depending on how you would like to look at it.

The plot revolves around a fifteen year old runaway boy Kafka who finds refuge in a remote privately owned library on Shikoku island. Everyone whom he meets on the way seems to be leading him to his oedipal destiny which has given him sleepless nights and has been his reason to flee. Equally mysterious are the people at the library especially Miss Saeki with whom Kafka feels an inexplicable connection. Soon it is evident to Kafka that he cannot fight his destiny but has to fulfill it or might have fulfilled it without his knowing. And

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that is when Nakata the second protagonist, call him Kafka's half shadow, enters the scene. Having lost his sense of learning at a young age due to some supernatural event that he seems to have witnessed or been a part of, he comes across as a simpleton subsisting on government subsidy. But this old guy has an amazing gift. He can talk to cats and thus he helps people find their pet cats to earn some extra buck. It is during one of his cat finding expeditions and weird situations that follow that he decides furtively to leave Tokyo and ends up at Shikoku along with a young driver Hoshino whom he meets on the way. Interestingly, this Hoshino who follows Nakata to the end and help fulfill his bizarre secret calling could be any one of us who despite knowing and realizing the absurdity and incongruity of the novel are hopelessly in its grip. Being thrown in a weird incomprehensible situation leads one to a journey of self realization and in case of Hoshino who has hardly had time and inclination to delve deeper in life, it proves to be a catalyst which introduces him to finer nuances of life like the charm of western classical music and drama. The apt references to beautiful pieces by Haydn, Schubert and Mozart make one want to listen to them while reading those passages.

The characters keep moving in and out of their dreams and there are times when reader becomes confused between dream and reality. The idea of the 'living spirit' that the book is replete with, seems to have been taken from the 'The Tale of Genji', an 11<sup>th</sup> century Japanese classic by Lady Murasaki who was influenced by Shinto thought. The idea of 'Kami' which is difficult to translate literally, but whose nearest equivalent would be 'a supernatural aspect' is the key element in Shinto thought and is considered as manifestation of Musubi, the interconnecting energy of the universe towards which all human beings should strive. These Kamis interact at a level which is beyond our human understanding and it is at this level of Kami that we see Kafka and Nakata interacting and influencing each other, though they don't get to meet in reality. It is at this level too, that Kafka starts his affair with fifteen year old Miss Saeki who actually is in her fifties and maybe is his mother, though we never get to know for sure.

When Nakata reveals that he has come that far to find the 'entrance stone', incidentally the words featuring in Miss Saeki's only music record which she had written at the age of fifteen, the convoluted stories seem to intersect and appear as a whole. The bizarre incidents following the search for entrance stone and later its opening and closing which also opens homologously, a way to another world lead to final repose for Nakata and Miss Saeki and release for Kafka.

While on one hand, the novel deals with the abstract and metaphysical concepts of Shinto belief system; on the other it is a sarcastic and strong statement against capitalism and futility of war. Capitalist icon like Colonel Saunders of KFC fame is seen as a pimp who has the power to grant one's every worldly wish provided his work is done. The other important icon who has a crucial role as the face of the main villain of the piece is Jhonnie Walker, the walking figure we generally see on the bottle of Scottish whisky. These capitalist icons symbolize the never ending greed and desires which have commodified virtually everything under the sun including knowledge.

Like a true artist Murakami does not bind his creation with a singular meaning, leaving it open-ended and polysemic to the imagination of the reader. Various incidents remain completely unexplained till the end and especially the para-normal incident which turned young Nakata into a clean slate is left completely unexplored. To sum it up, the experience of reading this stunning innovative book is like taking a roller-coaster ride, going full speed and wanting nothing to stop the flow of words however incoherent or improbable they may seem to our rational minds.