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The Trajectory of Evil and Violence: Studying Murakami's *Barn Burning* Through the Praxis of Arendt's 'Banality of Evil'

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Abstract

The paper investigates Haruki Murakami's story "Barn Burning" through the praxis of Hannah Arendt concept "Banality of Evil." The article relocates the text within the framework of Arendt's concept to explore the precipice of evil and violence within the mundane and ordinary psychosis of human being. Evil here expostulates itself through an ordinary act of suppressed violence but underneath it tries to locate the inherent criminality through that ordinary expression. Murakami uses a quiet, intense narrative that wholly acts as a metaphor for the horror of its passivity through its aimless destruction.

Keywords: banality, evil, psychosis, burning, Holocaust.

INTRODUCTION

What is evil? How it can be assumed or deduced? The concept itself flounders through multiple layers of human mind that captures not only its complexities but also a different way of approaching another being. Psychoanalysis views evil not as a supernatural being but as a product of psychic conflict. At this point, comes the concept of 'banality of evil' coined by the renowned political theorist, historian and philosopher Hannah Arendt who fled Germany during Hitler's Fascist regime to United States. In psychoanalysis "banality of evil" intersects with concepts like dissociation, superego and defensive compartmentalization. Arendt coined and phrased the term in her controversial book

"Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil" regarding the trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the key organizers of the Holocaust. According to May and Kohn -

The story of her struggle with the meaning of evil is far more complex and nuanced than it initially seems. Following its twists and turns is like following a detective story where there are all sorts of misleading clues (May, Kohn 128).

Haruki Murakami's story "Barn Burning" showcases evil through the workings of a complex mind where the most banal things can usher up something more horrific and violent in an ordinary human being. The story uses a serene, intense narrative that wholly acts

as a metaphor for the horror of its passivity through aimless destruction. He uniquely blends the ordinary with the surreal in a simple and clear style that captures deep feelings of loneliness. His novels and short stories always enhance the narrative through a new genre that somehow borders itself on the brink of Postmodernism. "Barn Burning" was first published in a translation in The New Yorker in 1992 and later published in his short story collection "The Elephant Vanishes." The story traces the life of its unnamed narrator who befriends a young girl expert in mime and concurrently starts an affair with the narrator. Slowly he identifies that she usually moves between her several boyfriends in need of money or other faculties. The unnamed narrator becomes one of them but rather to say profusely falls in a kind of infatuation with this young, free-spirited girl. The story takes a viable turn when she returns from North Africa with an enigmatic Gatsby-esque young man possessing unexplained wealth. He ends up meeting with this young fellow quite few times until that day when they both spend a whole day in his house. During a long intensive talk the narrator comes across a different and unblemished side of this young man. He professes that his greatest hobby in life is to burn burns every two to three months. Now at this juncture the concept of "banality of evil" comes in close contact with the young man of the story. While Arendt during her reporting on the trials of Eichmann stated that neither he was a sociopath or a psychopath who committed these atrocities during the Holocaust. In Eichmann's Kantian words he was abiding by categorical imperative that as Arendt discusses had wholly misunderstood Kant's moral principles. Eichmann was an average and mundane person who relied on cliché defenses rather than thinking for himself. Banality in this sense doesn't mean that Eichmann's actions were ordinary but motivated by a sort of complacency wholly unexceptional. It's a concept that describes how ordinary people commit atrocities through thoughtless

conformity and bureaucratic routine. As Arendt says-

Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III "to prove a villain." Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. (Arendt, 234)

BANALITY OF EVIL IN MURAKAMI'S TEXT

Murakami's story also follows on a similar kind of pattern that Eichmann followed. The only difference was that Eichmann was an officer in the S.S troop while the young man is a mundane person with unexpected wealth. He felt a deep, unimagined need to burn a barn that produced a kind of ecstatic being in his own mind. On the contrary Eichmann was simply a cog in the bureaucracy that resolved his thinking like an operated system based on the premises of a duty to be fulfilled. Murakami never mentions any backdrop to this young man's evil deeds. His inner thoughts about the barn burnings becomes a central metaphor for shredded evil underneath the human mask:

"I burn other people's barns without their permission. Of course, I always choose one that won't turn into a four-alarm blaze. I don't want to start a fire—just burn down barns." "I won't get caught," he said casually. "I pour on the gasoline, strike a match, and take off. Then I have a good time watching it all from a distance with binoculars. I won't get caught. The police aren't going to comb the streets over a lousy little barn burning down." (Murakami)

This clearly indicates the young man's suppressed violence which he charts down through this activity. Somehow the banality always feels less important for the object that it directs as it frames as an ordinary being. Arendt's concept locates in this context that whatever the circumstances through which the

trajectory of evil directs itself is not at all ordinary in any aspect. Though Eichmann's crime during Holocaust and the young man's barn burning are completely different in context but what it resurfaces primarily is the underlying violence that it proliferates.

And if this is 'banal' and even funny, if with the best will in the world one cannot extract any diabolical or demonic profundity from Eichmann, that is still far from calling it commonplace. For the concept of genocide, introduced explicitly to cover a crime unknown before, although applicable up to a point is not fully adequate, for the simple reason that massacres are of whole peoples are not unprecedented. (Arendt, 234)

His destructive act exposes an everyday, casual form of evil that society ignores because it lacks a dramatic face. His total detachment places a sense of ordinariness within the trope of the violent act itself.

"The world's full of barns, that are, like, waiting for me to burn them down. A barn all by itself beside the ocean, a barn in the middle of a rice paddy... Anyhow, all kinds of barns. Give me fifteen minutes, and I'll burn them clear to the ground. So, it looks like there was never any barn there to begin with. No one gets choked up over it. It just ... disappears. Whoosh!" (Murakami)

Just like Eichmann this young man moves between those similar lines where the total banal act of evil or violence proliferates itself in a very calm and serene manner. His usage of this quiet evil trope with the mundane world shows the co-existence of both worlds simultaneously. Adolf Eichmann as Arendt explains in his book was a boring, polite, normal man who she never thought to have committed such a heinous crime, whereas in Murakami's text the wealthy young chap is an intelligent, well-spoken lad who has an inherent evil hidden under the precipice of violence. The physical act never

directs itself in the story as when the narrator fails to find any barn being burned. So, as a matter of fact the physical act becomes vulnerable and cruel. When the narrator tries to investigate through the young fellow about the barns and the girl, he reacts in a very timid way

"By the way, whatever happened to that barn?" I ventured to ask him A trace of a smile played at the corners of his mouth. "Ah- you still remember, I see, he said. He took his handkerchief out of his pocket, wiped his mouth, and put the handkerchief back in his pocket. "I burned it, of course. Burned it right down. Just like I said I would." (Murakami)

The violent act itself reciprocates behind the camouflage of a decent being. For them this act wholly acts as a crossover of a daily activity, but what the text points out is that the barest way a heinous crime is committed it never remains a banal thing. Just like Eichmann who felt that it was his legal duty to kill those persons as a certified way to gain bureaucratic power.

He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. (Arendt, 234)

THROUGH THE LENSES OF VIOLENCE

Violence acts as a premediated object through which the story unleashes itself. The young man's approach towards the burning acts as a receptacle for the murder that he commits. Though the story never explicitly mentions it is told in an implicit way. It is quiet, psychological and unpunished. Violence in the twentieth century equivocally displaced itself from big warfare and landed itself on an ordinary level. As Arendt points out:

The technical development of the implements of violence has now reached the point where no political goal could conceivably correspond to their

destructive potential or justify their actual use in armed conflict.

Hence warfare from time immemorial the final merciless arbiter in international disputes – has lost much of its effectiveness and nearly all its glamour. (Arendt, 5)

But for Edward Bond, the renowned British playwright violence is a different approach for him. He uses violence in his plays to showcase the gruesome nature of a civilized being. As he says-

Violence is not an instinct we must forever repress because it threatens civilized social relationships; we are violent because we have not yet made those relationships civilized. (Bond, On Violence)

Murakami showcases violence in a very surreal and organic way. In this story the underlying statement steeped in aggressiveness melts with the narrative in a pensive way. When the narrator enquires about the young girl the young man's reaction rightfully underlines his plan of action:

I imagine she just took off for somewhere. She's done that a number of times. He stood there, hands stuck in his pockets, and stared at the tabletop.

With no money, for a month and a half? She's not the kind who can make it on her own, you know. (Murakami)

The banality of her disappearance or rather her murder becomes a common fecundity in the face of ordinary existence As Erich Fromm says in *Escape from Freedom* (1941) that people employ to help alleviate feelings of existential uncertainty and ontological insecurity. The burning acts as a chilling proxy for human elimination. A barn becomes strongly implied to represent real-life lethal violence. The young chap's internal conflict never comes in contact with his external outpourings. Though his simplistic nature he never instigates a

criminality within his character. Eichmann's reference in the story highlights this point. Still being an accused he never believed that he committed a heinous act. He often proliferated that he was securing order from his superiors. As Arendt says-

for he left no doubt that he would have killed his own father if he had received an order to that effect. (Arendt, 21)

CONCLUSION

His approach looms larger in his real experiences that toggled the inherent violence. His banal approach created the instinctive evil in him that finds a similarity in Murakami's text. The violence that he reciprocates utilizes his own ideas to extinct another being just like a barn. Within the civilized shell, it portrays what man is capable of pushing the boundaries purely on the basis of violence.

So, as a matter of fact to conclude it can be said that the young girl's disappearance becomes a metaphor for an implicit violence and on the other hand showcases that with the end of Eichmann, the persecution of evil never stopped. It's still there where it started just the times have changed a lot where humanity falls flat generally within the violent crevices.

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