



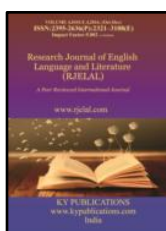
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WOMEN IN HARUKI MURAKAMI'S *MEN WITHOUT WOMEN*

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ABSTRACT

Japanese writer Haruki Murakami's *Men Without Women* (2017) is a collection of seven tales about men who, in their own ways, find themselves alone. Although the stories are about lonely men, it is perhaps more so about women, since women are more often than not, the reason for the alienation and existential crisis that the men in these tales face. Through this article the author intends to explore Murakami's portrayal of women in these tales and symbolic significance they hold.

Key Words: meaning, truth.

The title, *Men Without Women*, is borrowed from Ernest Hemingway's collection of short stories published in 1927. As the title suggests, both Hemingway's and Murakami's *Men Without Women* are an anthology of tales exploring the lives of men without women. Murakami's version, however, bears no resemblance to the celebrated American author and Nobel laureate's version, which celebrates manhood through diverse themes ranging from prize fighting and bull fighting to infidelity, divorce and death. Perhaps the biggest difference between Murakami's *Men Without Women* from that of Hemingway's, is that although the focus is primarily on men, women play a major role in all these tales. We constantly feel the presence of women throughout the core of the stories even though the protagonists and narrators are all male. In fact all but one tale finds the plot revolving around a woman. The discussions between the various characters and their contemplations of the characters are always about women.

The title of the collection and several of its characters and narrators in the tales may on the exterior seem coyly sexist and misogynistic. But on closer reading one realizes that it is not. Murakami paints a picture of man's futile attempt to

understand women. It is and an exploration of whether life is possible without women and if so whether such a life is worth living.

Women in the stories remain elusive, no matter how intimate with the protagonists. There is always a mystery surrounding them. "I didn't truly understand her – or at least some crucial part of her. And it may well end that way now that she's dead and gone. Like a small, locked safe lying at the bottom of the ocean. It hurts a lot" says Kafuku, the protagonist in *Drive My Car*.

The men struggle to define them, understand them or keep hold of them. Women disappear just like the cats in Murakami's stories. "It's quite easy to become Men Without Women. You love a woman deeply, and then she goes off somewhere. That's all it takes" laments the narrator of the titular story.

Men without women are left facing an existential crisis. In *Drive My Car*, the protagonist leads a meaningless life after the death of his wife. The loss of his wife has left him questioning his life and his understanding of her due to her extra marital affairs. In *Yesterday*, we find Kitaru facing an existential crisis as his girlfriend was seeing someone else. In *Independent Organ* Dr. Tokai begins to

question his existence at the prospect of losing the woman he fell in love with. Eventually this leads to his death. In *Kino* the protagonist after losing his wife to his best friend lives a reclusive life and avoids confronting the truth only to realize that it has taken its toll on him.

Women add multiple layers of meaning to the lives of these men. "What his time spent with women offered was the opportunity to be embraced by reality on the one hand, while negating it entirely on the other" says the narrator of *Scheherazade*. They bring love, pleasure, joy, longing, and all sorts of emotions, and when they leave the men are left with only pain. Having seen what life could be with so much meaning, they struggle to cope with the loss.

In a monologue of sorts, the narrator of the titular story goes on to say that "Suddenly one day you become Men Without Women. That day comes to you completely out of the blue, without the faintest warnings or hints beforehand. No premonitions or foreboding, no knocks or clearing of the throats. Turn a corner and you know you're already *there*. But by then there's no going back. Once you are round that bend, that is the only world you can possibly inhabit. In that world you are called "Men Without Women." Always a relentlessly frigid plural." It may sound absurd considering the fact that the narrator has a wife and hence is not a man without a woman. Perhaps this means that Murakami is trying to say something more than the obvious.

In *Men Without Women*, women symbolize meaning. Men are like a jigsaw puzzle that is incomplete without women and hence the existential crisis.

Samsa in Love is perhaps a tale that stands apart from the rest of the stories in the collection. The story seems out of place since we don't find a man who has lost a woman, like in the other tales. Murakami's quirky re-telling of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* finds a reverse transformation of Gregor Samsa from an insect to a man.

The transformed Samsa curses the fact that he was transformed into this preposterous creature called man instead of a fish or a sunflower. In comes a woman, and everything changes. "Just thinking about her made him warm inside" and he wanted to "unravel the riddles of the world with her." The entry of a woman adds meaning to Samsa's existence. At the end of the story we find no longer wanting to be a sunflower or a fish.

Men Without Women is not merely about men who have lost women. It is a contemplation of what life would be without women and by extension what it means to be men with women. Most often than not women are the ones that give a meaning to the lives of these men and that is why their departure leads these men to an existential crisis. Throughout the seven tales Murakami uses women as a metaphor for meaning. These men who have lost women choose to live solitary lives laying testament to the fact that a life without women is a life without meaning.

"I don't think we can ever understand all that a woman is thinking," says one of the characters in *Drive My Car* the protagonist Kafuku. "That's what I wanted to say. No matter who that woman may be. So I doubt the blind spot you speak of is yours alone. If that's what you wish to call it, then we men are all living with the same sort of blind spot. So I don't think you should blame yourself."

An existentialist reading of the collection would reveal that futile effort of the mento understand women in these tales, parallels man's elusive pursuit of truth.

'Isn't it possible that your wife didn't fall for him at all? ... And that's why she slept with him?' says Misaki to Kafuku, a man struggling to understand why his deceased wife cheated on him with a man of little consequence. 'Women can be like that,' she adds.

Murakami's *Men Without Women* echoes Oscar Wilde's opinion that 'Women are meant to be loved, not to be understood' and existentialist Gabriel Marcel's assertion that 'Life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be experienced'.

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