

Reading Haruki Murakami's "The Second Bakery Attack"

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Abstract: This paper is based on a lecture "To know Japan," a part of the immersion program carried out on the 11th of September, 2012. This lecture was given to twenty students in Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Singapore, with the title "Think about modern Japan through reading 'The Second Bakery Attack' by Haruki Murakami." I revised the points which could not be discussed within the time frame to a degree and deleted a part of the materials. The interpretation of this work is a result of discussions between Takano and Unagami, and both of them are responsible for the wording of this paper. Unagami is in charge of translating the contents into English.

Keywords: the end of the age of politics, high consumption society, advanced capitalism, non-existence of existence, hollowing out of subject

At the beginning

Today we would like to read an unfamiliar and a slightly eccentric work called "The Second Bakery Attack" by Haruki Murakami. The aim of this lecture is "to know about Japan." I will not attempt to examine the work in detail. But I'll focus on what aspects of modern Japan are revealed by reading Murakami's short story.

Now it is often said that a great literary work is full of prophecies. About 100 years ago, a representative writer in modern Japan, Soseki Natsume (1867-1916) wrote a novel called *Kokoro* (1913). This novel is a story about a man who forestalled his friend, K, and married the daughter of a landlady of a boarding house. K committed suicide with this as the cause, and the man suffered from a sense of guilt sending his friend to his death because of his egoism. After that, he lives in a place isolated from society as if he were dead. After a while, a young man becomes a regular visitor of the man, and the young man calls the man "sensei," communicating with him. One day, the father of the young man falls into a critical condition and goes home, but there he receives a letter from "sensei" implying his intention of committing suicide. The young man leaves his sick father and goes back to "sensei." Together with the end of the era called Meiji, "sensei" commits suicide, entrusting the meaning of his life to the young man.

This is a simple summary of *Kokoro*, and a part of this work is carried in most high schools' textbooks. Many high school students in Japan read this novel. In *Kokoro*, "sensei" says to the young man as follows:

You see, loneliness is the price we have to pay for being born in this modern age, so full of freedom, independence, and our own egotistical selves. (Part One "Sensei and I" No.14)

What is called "loneliness" here is not "loneliness" which comes from "isolation." I need to delete the explanation, but it is an uncertainty of oneself. This means "an uncertainty" humans necessarily have to live as individuals after the concept of "home" in the feudalistic system collapses. Then what is "home"? In Japan, before the Asia-Pacific War (1937-1945), "home" came before an individual and it determined everything. "Home" was undoubtedly universality itself, and basically each individual had no right of choice. The individualistic idea of European culture imported at the beginning of the modern period (the last half of the nineteenth century) was called "individualism" by Soseki, and it contradicts with the Japanese conventional sense of value. The Japanese sense of value could not collapse so easily, and Japanese people's mental conflicts with the system called "home" turned out to be a mental conflict with "nation" and had been a fundamental theme of Japanese literature in the prewar times. After the war, the theme of "home" transformed into "household,"

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and in modern times, into “family.” “Ningen,” human in Japanese, originally means “Jinkan” (between people), in short, “world” (“Seken” or “Yononaka” in Japanese). So a human is “an existence between people” in short, his or her relationship with people is itself the essence of a human. Therefore, the collapse of the system “home” means “the loss of one’s relationship with others.”

Modern times as well as the present day is the age when one has to build his or her relationship with the world, in brief, his or her sense of value and view of the world by himself or herself. Besides, there is no guarantee for the foundation of the sense of value and the view of the world, the rightfulness and universalities. This situation is said to be peculiar to post-modern. The above-mentioned words of Soseki surely hit the right answer to the situation where the way of our modern lives, absoluteness, and universality are lost, or “the end of grand narratives” in the words of a French philosopher, J.F. Lyotard (“La condition postmoderne” 1979).

I say this once again; a great literary work is full of predictions. If so, what kind of predictions can we read from the fiction of Haruki Murakami, who is now a world-famous writer, whether he can be called great or not? In today’s lecture, I would like to think about this with you and try to achieve today’s goal of “knowing about Japan.”

1. An unbearable hunger which attacks a young couple

Then, let’s read the text of the work. The event described in this fiction begins with the scene where a young couple who got married just two weeks ago is attacked by “an unbearable hunger” (36).

This young couple is attacked by an unbearable hunger, but in the refrigerator there is not enough food to satisfy their hunger. “I,” the narrator gives the reason why there is not enough food in it, saying “we had yet to establish a precise conjugal understanding with regard to the rules of dietary behavior” (37). And he mentions their busy lives and says “Groceries were the last things on our minds” (37). Possibly his words suggest not only the fact that the refrigerator is empty but also the immaturity and imperfectness of this young couple.

“I,” the narrator, proposes to his wife, “Let’s get in the car and look for an all-night restaurant” (37). But she refuses his proposal, saying “We can’t. You’re not supposed to go out to eat after midnight” (37).

“I,” the narrator interprets this idea of his wife as “the authority of a revelation” (37) and says like this; “I began to think that this was a special hunger, not one that could be satisfied through the mere expedient of taking it to an all-night restaurant on the highway” (38). The hunger is described as “unbearable” (36) at the beginning of this work. Later, he narrator “I” calls it “a special kind of hunger” (37) once again. And “I” the narrator expresses it using the following “[a] cinematic image” (38).

One, I am in a little boat, floating on a quiet sea. *Two*, I look down, and in the water I see the peak of a volcano thrusting up from the ocean floor. *Three*, the peak seems pretty close to the water’s surface, but just how close I cannot tell. *Four*, this is because the hypertransparency of the water interferes with the perception of distance. (38)

This cinematic image appears in the middle and at the end of this fiction. Haruki Murakami is known as a writer who often uses metaphorical expressions. Here, the interior of the narrator, “I” is metaphorically expressed. This is the key to reading this work and is worth paying close attention to. Especially, to clarify what the metaphor, “a volcano” is compared to, is important. And once it is clarified, we can understand the theme of this work more easily.

The narrator gives this cinematic image as follows; “Not being Sigmund Freud, I was, of course, unable to analyze with any precision what this image signified” (38). And on page 39, “I” the narrator says:

...as if a hollow had opened somewhere behind my solar plexus — a hermetically sealed cavern that had neither entrance nor exit. Something about this weird sense of absence —

this sense of the existential reality of nonexistence—resembled the paralyzing fear you might feel when you climb to the top of a high steeple. (39)

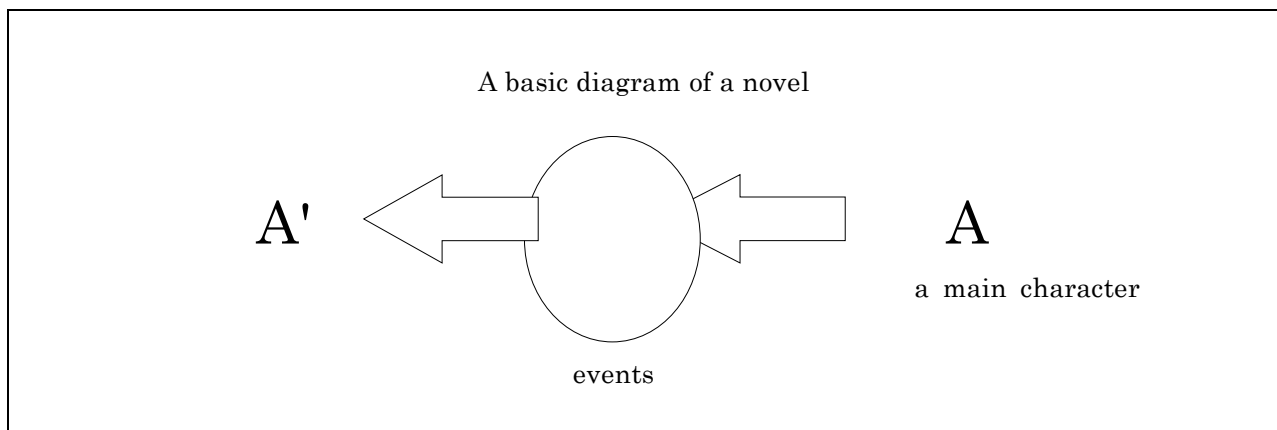
Here, “a special kind of hunger” is climactically paraphrased as “a hollow, a hermetically sealed cavern,” “this weird sense of absence” and “this sense of the existential reality of nonexistence,” and we can grasp the outline to a certain degree. Moreover, this is accompanied by “the paralyzing fear.” Then, as if a camera came to focus on an object, “I,” the narrator, remembers a sense of hunger he used to experience but forgets completely at the present time; he says “I had forgotten all about it” (36). Then in spite of himself, the narrator, “I,” says, “The time of the bakery attack.”

2. The change of “I” after the first bakery attack

Like this, the narrator, “I,” starts to recollect “The first bakery attack.” What kind of event is the first bakery attack that the narrator, “I,” talks about?

That is an event of “[t]en years ago” (39). At that time, the narrator was a university student, and he himself says, “We were so broke” (39), and “Never had enough food” (39). And as he says, “[w]e didn't want to work” (40), and so he and his friend attacked “[o]ne of those ordinary little neighborhood bakeries” (39). But he tells his wife, “But as a holdup, it didn't work” (30). The baker made them a deal, saying “If [they] would listen to the record all the way through, [they] could take as much bread as we liked” (40). They, in the text “we,” in the original text “wareware” in Japanese thought, “It wouldn't be work in the purest sense of the word” (40), and “listened to the overtures to *Tannhäuser* and *The Flying Dutchman*” (40). The narrator talks about this event rather self-defensively, “It was more of an exchange” (41) and “Legally speaking, it was more like a commercial transaction” (41).

Using charts like one used in a Power Point presentation, I simplify a fiction as a story describing how the main character changes through some events and teach students about the fiction.



Then, let’s grasp the meaning of the main character’s change and the events according to this chart. Before the bakery attack, “A,” in short, the narrator, “I,” ~

was ○ My best friend back then (39).

○ We [his friend and I] did some pretty awful things to get our hands on food (39).

○ We [his friend and I] didn't want to work (40).

The narrator used to be a person like this.

Then what kind of person did “A’,” the narrator “I” become after the bakery attack? Likewise, I’ll quote the relevant parts from the text.

○ I went back to the university, and I graduated, and I started working for the firm and studying for the bar exam, and I met you and got married. I never did anything like that

again. No more bakery attacks. (41)

○Something happened, some nothing kind of thing, and we stopped hanging around together. (41)

To sum up, “I,” the narrator, did not go to university, refused to work, and often engaged in antisocial activities. After the event, the bakery attack, the narrator, “I,” went back to university, graduated from it, and started working for a firm to study for the bar exam.

“Law” consists of the basic principles to support a social system, so we can find a change in the narrator. He had rejected a stereotyped society, but he came to be tangled up in it. Probably, it is related to the fact he and his best friend broke up.

Then why did the bakery attack transform the narrator, “I,” radically? “I,” the narrator, says to his wife I still can't figure out why he did what he did (42). And about having accepted the baker's deal, he says, “we had this feeling that we had made a terrible mistake” (43) and “this mistake has just stayed there unresolved, casting a dark shadow on our lives” (42). Then what on the earth is “this mistake”?

3. Who are we, “wareware,” in Japanese?

In order to think about the issue of the “mistake” in the bakery attack, especially when we read this story in English translation, we need to understand Japan's circumstances at the time.

One of the reasons the English translation fails to convey the delicate nuance of the original Japanese version, is the complicated personal pronouns in Japanese grammar. What is most important here is “we,” “wareware,” in Japanese. The parts of “we” in the English translation are expressed as “wareware” in the original Japanese version. This Japanese word “we,” “wareware,” is not used by most Japanese in their daily conversation and in their writings. Why did Haruki Murakami make the narrator, “I,” use the unusual expression “wareware”? That is because this expression, “wareware,” has some implications.

Expressions of personal pronouns in Japanese are used, depending on the situation, and they change in various ways, according to the person to whom one talks to and the situation. This is material to compare expressions of first personal pronouns in English with those in Japanese. In today's lecture, I call myself “I,” “watashi,” in Japanese, but in a more formal situation I would use “watakushi,” and usually I use “boku” to express “I” in English. And among my close friends, I use “ore” as “I.”

The first person (English)		The first person (Japanese <man>)		
the singular	the plural	the singular	the plural	
I	— We	watakushi	— watakushitachi	formal
		watashi	— watashitachi	↑
		boku	— bokutachi	↓
		ore	— oretachi	informal
		ware	— wareware	

To conclude, the reason Haruki Murakami made the narrator, “I,” use the first personal pronoun “wareware” is presumed that Haruki Murakami tried to give the narrator, “I,” the attribute of a man who was absorbed in the student movement which intensified in the 60s and 70s in Japan.

The following conversation is from the scene (39) where the narrator, “I,” talks about “the bakery attack” to his wife; “.....All we wanted was bread, not money. We were attackers, not robbers.” “We ? Who's we ?” (39). We can think of two things as the reason his wife has her doubts about the talk of the narrator “I.”

First, she must be concerned about what kind of person the narrator's former “best friend” was. Is the

friend a man or a woman? So she must be nervous about the fact that her husband had a best friend who was so close to him in the past. She might be even jealous of the friend. In the English translation, the person the narrator calls “my best friend” is expressed by the pronoun “he.” So everyone must have read the person as a man. But “my best friend,” “aibou” in the Japanese original version can be used to express both a man and a woman. And at least, in the original Japanese version, the distinction of sex of “my best friend” is not specified until the end. Japanese readers will judge from the narrator “I”’s words, “it wasn't true that nothing had happened as a result of the bakery attack.....but I didn't want to talk about them with her” (41) and presume that “my best friend” was a woman.

Second, this is more important, a matter concerning the expression “wareware” itself. The reason his wife asks “We? Who's we?” repeatedly might be related to the implications I mentioned. In short, from the narrator’s word, his wife senses the narrator’s attribute of a man who was absorbed in the student movement which intensified in the 60s and 70s in Japan. A matter concerning this attribute is also expressed in the narrator’s wording like calling his wife’s idea “thesis” or “declaration” as well as the word “wareware.” Later we can see from video images that “wareware” and “declaration,” “seimei” in Japanese, are expressions peculiar to students who were absorbed in the student movement around the 70s.

4. The age of “the bakery attack” - 1970 as a turning point

Then, what kind of age was it “around the 70s,” the time of the bakery attack? I interpret the bakery attack as an event in the 70s and the second bakery attack as an event in the 80s. I made material, data arranging a brief summary of Haruki Murakami’s career and social events at this time. This material clearly shows that Japan underwent earthshaking changes from “the time of politics” to “the age of economic growth” especially with the 70s as a turning point. Osaka Expo was held in 1970, and the first McDonald’s shop in Japan was opened in 1971. These were social events symbolizing Japan’s plunging into the age of economic growth.

Haruki MURAKAMI Chronology (Social cases and events)	
1946	Born in Kyoto, and moved to Hyogo. He spent his youth in Nishinomiya, Ashiya and Kobe
1968	Enters Waseda univ in Tokyo. (Sinjuku Riot)
1969	The intensification of student movements “Zenkyoto”
1970	(Osaka Expo'70 Japan World Exposition)
1971	Marries Yoko.(student marriage) (A McDonald's first shop opened in Ginza in Tokyo) (The case of an attack on a gun shop in Moka)
1972	(Asama-Sanso incident)
1974	Opens a coffee house and jazz bar,the Peter Cat.(~1981)
1975	Graduated from Waseda univ.
1979	Writes “Hear the wind sing ”and wins first prize.
1980	Publishes <i>Pinboll,1973</i> .
1982	Publishes <i>A Wild Sheep Chase</i> .
1983	Publishes <i>A Slow Boat to China</i> .(short stories)
1985	Publishes <i>Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World</i> Writes “The second bakery attack”

Now, let's check the situation at the time by watching two brief video images. (The showing of video images is omitted in this paper.)

The first video images are a scene of Tokyo University's Yasuda Auditorium where students clashed with riot policemen, a symbol of intensified All-Campus Joint Struggle League in Japan at the end of the 1960s and an image of the Haneda case, which happened the year before. After these incidents, the student movements declined all at once. The failure of the movement gave students a strong sense of emptiness. And having such a sense, they could not help starting to work like a beaver to support economic growth in Japan.

The next video images are images of the Asama-Sanso incident. After the decline of All-Campus Joint Struggle League's movements, a minority group of leftist activists carried out attacks in various places. One of them was "Assault of Mooka Gun Shop" in 1971 and a gun was taken by force. And the gun was "a Remington automatic shotgun," and by a curious coincidence it was the same gun as the one the narrator's wife prepares. Probably Haruki Murakami got the idea from a newspaper article about this incident.

An evening edition of the Yomiuri Shinbun newspaper reported this incident. The article said, eleven guns such as a Remington automatic shotgun, five barreled sporting guns (Diameter: 12.0 mm), and five live bullets were taken by a group of three people wearing ski masks. Two of them were arrested, but the guns and bullets were missing. After that, a part of the leftist activists formed a group called the Coalition Red Army, took a private citizen hostage and clashed with riot policemen. These images were broadcast on TV throughout Japan. But as a result, the images "political movement - radical party - violence - evil" became fixed, and Japanese people were completely disillusioned with politics.

5. Can the narrator, "I," change by attacking the bakery? - Is the attack a success?

Then let's return to the text. I think you can understand the 70s was a turning point in Japan through my interpretation of the video images. The narrator, "I," and his best friend could not understand the change from the time of politics to a high consumption society. The mistake they made is that they could not understand this, the change. A sort of cultural act, to listen to Wagner, cannot be called a work or a labor, but it directly leads to production as an act of consumption and is incorporated into a part of the circulation system of economics, like "labor - production - consumption." The narrator, "I," says, "If the baker had insisted that we wash his dishes or clean his windows or something, we would have turned him down" (41). But they stuck to this old-fashioned view of work, or labor, so they did not notice that they were incorporated into the established social system they believed they had rejected.

By the way, I mentioned that his wife is concerned about the narrator "I"'s best friend. She mentions the connection between the narrator's breaking up with his best friend and the attack, saying, "that's why you two broke up, isn't it? The bakery attack was the direct cause" (42). She must be thinking like this; the "curse" makes her husband break up with his best friend and if the curse, the spell is not broken, then it will make him part from her. Then she decides and declares to her husband, "Attack another bakery. Right away. Now. It's the only way" (43). Thus, they drive around Tokyo late at night, attack McDonald's as the second attack, and take thirty Big Macs by force. At the end of this fiction, the narrator "I"'s change is expressed by cinematic images. Referring to the basic pattern of fiction I showed you minutes ago, the situation becomes like this material.

"A" ("I" before the second bakery attack)

One, I am in a little boat, floating on a quiet sea. Two, I look down, and in the water I see the peak of a volcano thrusting up from the ocean floor. Three, the peak seems pretty close to the water's surface, but just how close I cannot tell. Four, this is because the hypertransparency of the water interferes with the perception of distance. (38)

"A'" ("I" after the second bakery attack)

Alone now, I leaned over the edge of my boat and looked down to the bottom of the sea. The volcano was gone. the water's calm surface reflected the blue of the sky. Little waves—like

silk pajamas fluttering in a breeze—lapped against the side of the boat. There was nothing else. (49)

Then, I would like to ask you a question. Before the attack, the image of the volcano formed by the narrator, “I,” disappeared and the curse seems to disappear, too. Can this attack be called a success? Can anyone answer this question?

There are some points to think about here. And I will summarize them and point out the three points.

(1) McDonald’s as a symbol of advanced capitalism

The first point is about making McDonald’s a target of their attack. McDonald’s is systemized by “McDonald’s hospitality manual” (46) and works as a subtle social system more than the baker of the bakery attack. Certainly two of them could take thirty Big Macs by force, but about the loss, the McDonald’s shop is insured; “We’re insured” (46) and the fact that 30 Big Macs are taken by force is nullified by the insurance system. The situation where a thing which exists turns into a thing that does not exist, reverses the sense of the narrator “I”’s hunger, and is a serious situation where an existential thing becomes non-existent. This can be called a trick of advanced capitalism which supports a high-consumption society.

(2) A student-like young couple - a symbol of Japanese people in the modern age

Second, the meaning of setting, “a young couple—students, probably (46) who “slept the sleep of the dead” (46) at the site of the attack, the McDonald’s shop as their background is important. They, the couple, are like this; “the couple sleeping at their table was still out cold” (47). When they leave after the attack, “[t]he customers at the table were still asleep, like a couple of deep-sea fish” (48).

For this student-like young couple, the attack of the narrator and his wife is almost an event that does not happen. This symbolizes a situation where existential things like individuals and identities dissolve in a society of advanced capitalism and becomes non-existent. They, who would not wake up whatever happens and would not wake up because of an unbearable hunger, and are not aware of a sense of lack in themselves, the “sense of the existential reality of nonexistence,” can be taken as the figure of Japanese people in the modern age who lose interest in their society and politics.

(3) The place where the narrator, “I,” has gone - the narrator, “I,” who does not choose

The third point is the place where the narrator, “I,” has gone. It is his wife who decides their second attack and prepares the necessary weapons. On the other hand, as the narrator, “I,” says “Let’s forget it” (45), and “Do we really have to do this?” (45), he is consistently negative and passive. Likewise, after the second attack, he says, “Still, was it really necessary for us to do this?” (49) and repeats his doubt about the necessity of attacking the bakery to his wife. He cannot find an adequate reason for the second attack until the end.

What is more important is the last sentence, “waiting for the rising tide to carry me where I belonged” (49). Where is the place, “where I belonged” after all? Where did the boat flow to and reach?

Here we need to read the beginning part once again. The times of this fiction consist of a three-layer structure, in short, the time of the bakery attack, the time of the second bakery attack, and the narrator “I”’s present time which overviews the two attacks. The narrator “I”’s present time is reached after the second attack is narrated at the beginning. Here the narrator, “I,” clearly states, “I myself have adopted the position that, in fact, *we never choose anything at all*” (49) and how he thinks would not change anything. If he adopts the position of never choosing anything at all, all the things like working in a law firm and marrying his wife should be groundless acts. This gives us a glimpse of his present time, for example, it is possible that at the present time, the narrator, “I,” might have already divorced his wife.

After all, the narrator, “I,” is obsessed with the idea that the world will not change. Not feeling a special kind of hunger, a pain caused by losing his identity, he has no choice but to live in “a hermetically sealed cavern that had neither entrance nor exit”.

Conclusion

Today, for the purpose of deepening our understanding of Japan, we have read Haruki Murakami's short story, "The Second Bakery Attack" critically in the context of a story portraying Japanese people in the modern age who have no opportunity to be mature socially or politically. We, who live in modern Japan, seem to live in "a hermetically sealed cavern that had neither entrance nor exit," under the spell of the idea that the world would not change at all and without noticing the pain caused by losing our identities. I think, in this hopeless situation, Haruki Murakami talks about longing for the recovery of Japanese people's identity.

Text

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