

The Game of the Unconscious in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*

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Abstract

The peculiar unpredictability of human psyche had always been a matter of conjecture and curious speculations since the previous century. However, the significant influence of the unconscious in catapulting behavioural changes in human tendencies could never be questioned. In this regard, Murakami's novels and short stories become a wonderful site for psychoanalytic explorations. Therefore, my paper would trace the contours of literary representations of the characters in Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*, the narrative and its undoing while reading meticulously the influence exercised by the unconscious in the creation of these texts. This paper would also graze the limits and functions of unconscious in manipulating the actions of the characters while gauging the impact of these on the construction of the plot on one hand and the reshaping of the self on the other. The dialectics of desire would also assume a significant portion of my research while I would attempt to weave the evidences into a causally connected structure and try to fit it in the discourse of the unconscious.

Key Words: unconscious; self; language; desire.

Human psyche has always been curiously unpredictable. Be the situation unflattering or not, one can never assume its course of action, while seldom does it conform to the pre-determined scheme of things. It is in this context that the mechanics of human mind becomes a fascinating site for investigating behavioural changes and tendencies in human activities. Psychoanalysis, in this regard, becomes an indispensable tool at the disposal of the authors, helping them to introduce interesting elements in the composition of the characters. On similar rails, it is equally useful and perhaps goes on to become a prerequisite for the readers of literature, to resort to psychoanalysis if they contemplate to understand the characters and their stream of thoughts which are apparently inexplicable. An individual's actions and thoughts are seen being influenced by the unconscious in more ways than one. The unconscious, therefore, becomes instrumental in directing human actions, at times without the awareness and conscious efforts.

To make it convenient, let us think of the unconscious to be something that represents those behavioural features of human beings that are otherwise not available for introspections. The unconscious is known to operate in the realm of the *Id* which acts as a repository for repressed desires, implicit knowledge and at times long forgotten memories which are apparently absent for physical contestation, but are seen bringing about massive behavioural difference in an individual. The unconscious has a peculiar tendency to find its articulation through dreams, talking in sleep, walking in sleep or as common

occurrences as slip of tongues. They do not make sense until they are brought into the courtyard of conscious thought through active interference of an analyst. The unconscious is believed to originate in infancy with the formation of the *Ego* which helps a child to differentiate himself from the outer world, necessarily the other. Of this division between the conscious and the unconscious, Anthony Easthope uses the German term 'Spaltung' (split) in his book *The Unconscious* when he writes, "In the process of growing up it (the division) comes about as a split (Spaltung) between the two, the effect of which is to guarantee that what is present in the unconscious is actively excluded from consciousness" (26).

In "Position of the Unconscious", Lacan writes, "The unconscious is a concept founded on the trail [trace] left by that which operates to constitute the subject. The unconscious is not a species defining the circle of that part of psychical reality which does not have the attribute (or the virtue) of consciousness." (703)

Dream has cropped up as another primary tool at the disposal of the analyst that paves way to peep at the unconscious of the patients. It is believed that the repressed desires and thoughts find their perfect manifestations in dreams which are apparently meaningless. Phil Mollon suggests, "The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to the knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind" (36). He goes on to chart a few characteristics of Freud's interpretation of the unconscious when he says that within unconscious, mutually incompatible and opposing ideas and feelings can coexist without feeling awkward. Within the bounds of the unconscious, meaning may easily be displaced from one object to another while a number of meanings can be signified by the same image. While not having direct exposure to external reality, the unconscious works within the self, concerning itself with the nuances of internal reality, subsequently making dream and hallucination treated as real by a psychoanalyst (Mollon 36).

However, before making the prophetic proclamation "Everything that is repressed must remain unconscious", Freud shows how Repression or 'Verdrangung' (German) takes the center stage in the theory of the unconscious. In his 1915 essay "The Unconscious", Freud writes, "the essence of the process of repression lies, not in abrogating of annihilating the ideational presentation of an instinct, but in withholding from being conscious." To speak plainly, the very fact that the repressed desires, memories, emotions and feelings are not being apprehended by the conscious mind, make their candidature suitable for being in the state of unconsciousness. (572) But for Alasdair MacIntyre, "like resistance, repression is necessarily unconscious" (53). Repression, moreover, is a product of resistance, initiated by the free play of the *Super-ego* which balance the drives in human beings.

Lacan, in *Seminar XI*, adds, "Freud's unconscious is not at all the romantic unconscious of imaginative creation." (24) It must, therefore, have evidential manifestations through the activities of the self that are carried out in the realm of the conscious. Freud, in *The Unconscious*, is of the opinion that the knowledge of the unconscious is possibly to acquire "only after it has been transformed or translated into something conscious" (49).

Language, therefore, becomes the signifier that helps the unconscious to manifest itself in the world that is real. To emphasize on the importance of language in its dealing with the unconscious and the subject, Lacan says in *Seminar II*, “The foundation of the analytic experience is that not every manner of introducing oneself into language is equally efficacious, isn't equally this body of being, this corpse of being, which makes the existence of psychoanalysis possible, which makes it such that not every random bit of language has the same value for the subject.”(278) The very act of expression of the thoughts or the lack of it involves the use of language. The analyst is also seen heavily relying on the instrument of language to progress in his attempt to understand the unconscious. His happens in the domain of ‘Selbstbewusstsein’ (Self-consciousness). Lacan, in “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious” writes, “Starting with Freud, the unconscious becomes a chain of signifiers that repeats and insists somewhere (on another stage or in a different scene, as he wrote), interfering in the cuts offered it by actual discourse and the cogitation it informs.” (286) He goes on to add, in his essay “Position of the Unconscious”:

The effect of language is to introduce the cause into the subject. Through this effect, he is not the cause of himself; he bears within himself the worm of the cause that splits him. For his cause is the signifier, without which there would be no subject in the real. But this subject is what the signifier represents, and the latter cannot represent anything except to another signifier: to which the subject who listens is thus reduced. (Lacan 708)

If we consider the play of language in creating images in the unconscious, we have two categories of images representing the expression. Firstly the unconscious is seen solely dealing with the visual images where the image is formed when visual signifiers are clubbed together. This is what Freud calls ‘thing presentation’. However, the realm of consciousness deals with the presence of both verbal as well as visual signifiers at the same time, where verbal signifier decides ‘word presentation’. Lacan develops on this to say that the split between the unconscious and the conscious is like the divide between the signifiers and the signified.

The influence of the unconscious leaves its mark quite surreptitiously in our daily life. Such is its impact that it figures quite significantly in almost all the works of literature in varying degrees, working its multi-dimensional manifestations in the constitution of the characters, at times without conscious effort on the part of the author. The unconscious might influence both the creation of a work as well as the understanding of the activities of the characters in a particular premise, taking cue from the empirical evidences scattered by the author during the creation of the text. Therefore, being a student of the unconscious, it would be quite obvious on the part of a scholar to dissect a piece of literature and study the points of convergence in a text to reveal the latent conditioning of the unconscious in controlling the signification of the actions in the text.

As a twentieth century scholar and a sucker for fiction, it would indeed be quite commonplace to stumble upon the shockingly brilliant oeuvre of works by the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami. Ruling over the heart of millions of readers across the globe by his apparently simple story-telling and almost linear narrative, Murakami’s expertise lie in

his ability to read the mind of the characters he create, bringing to the fore those sides of their psyche which are otherwise ignored in common parlance. His characters seem to be disturbingly real, with real psychological issues to be grappled with in a world that is gradually spinning out of control with each passing day. In *Norwegian Wood* the readers discover a troubled narrator, falling back upon his memory and unveiling a complex plot involving a character, Naoko, who is on the verge of having a psychological breakdown, thrown into the realms of insanity, unnaturally communicating with the dead. In Naoko we find a woman who finds it difficult to choose the right word to express her feelings and opinions, losing her confidence and consciousness through the metaphor of not being able to write a letter. In each of the cases, the unconscious can be accused of being inadvertently responsible in framing an individual's subjectivity, and influencing their actions in multifarious ways. This makes Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*, quite obviously, a wonderful site for psychoanalytic explorations.

The novel begins with the narrator, Toru Watanabe making a conscious effort to recreate a narrative by collecting pieces of memories from the past, a past he shared with Naoko, precisely to keep a promise he had made to her years ago when she was alive, a promise to remember her forever, as if she wanted to live through his memories. What started as a conscious exercise to delve deeper into the vault of vague isolated memories, memories that were receding in the counts of clarity with each passing moment, ended up as an experience that would unveil his own repressed desire and longings that had long been lying locked in the texture of his unconscious.

Journeying a couple of decades back, the narrator is seen as a boy in his late teenage, living a plain life until he suddenly met Naoko, the girlfriend of his dead friend. There ensued a very unnatural relationship that boasted a silent understanding and stood on the principle of sharing a mutually lived past. The death of Kizuki, Naoko's boyfriend and Toru's only friend, looms large throughout the entire matrix of the narrative. Kizuki's conscious decision of ending his life in his eighteenth year was perhaps also a manifestation of ego failing to play its hand and the repressed unconscious manipulating the teenager's actions, driving him to suicide. Though shrouded with mystery, this death affected to two major characters in *Norwegian Wood*, and finally at the end of the novel, readers would realize, how the entire creation of the narrative by rejoining bits and pieces of memories was, in a way, an attempt to negotiate the pervading call of the unconscious not only on the narrator's part, but also the unconscious motivating Kizuku and Naoko to decide the abrupt finale of their life. Murakami, displaying his expertise in blending the intensely psychological aspects of a character in the fabric of their real existence, is seen quite comfortable in creating the character of the narrator Toru as someone who apparently understands his desires and the limits of his actions, while being perfectly aware of the consequences of these actions. To any usual confronters, he would appear to be perfectly in control of himself, his psyche and his life, but a close and meticulous observation would reveal a freckled discourse, a disturbed existence that oscillates between the realms of stability and instability. Throughout the novel, Toru, more than anyone else, is seen engaged in a tight-rope walking, balancing chaos and uneventful

existence. Unconscious, indeed, play a major part in scrambling the threads of his homogeneous existence.

The choice of handling traumatic memories, which were unsettling in themselves, was a voluntary act on the part of the narrator who was absolutely convinced about the difficulties involved in the endeavour. This attempt to churn out old events, as a medium of conscious speculation had stirred the distinctive desire that remained buried within the narrator's psyche since Naoko's death. The flood-gates being open, the unconscious, steered by the drives, could decide the course of the actions. Therefore, it is beyond the reader's agency to weigh the authenticity of the narrated incidents involving Naoko and Toru, which the readers might suspect, and legitimately too, of being tinged with elements from the unconscious, without complete awareness on the narrator's part.

While Toru had always been convinced about the very problematic and nuanced relationship that he shares with Naoko, yet he is drawn to her. Her life and death had bothered her in ways no other person could. She inspired in him emotions and feelings that would sustain him through the monotony and linear journey of his days and the wait for Naoko's letters would drown him in a routine-like loneliness that was hard to explain. Yet his attempts to quench his physical need by participating in Nagasawa's wild escapades meant nothing to him. He felt tormented about it the next morning, which might also be a manifestation of the way ego worked in his psyche, relocating the activities influenced by the unconscious Id.

Toru's conscious self knew the consequences of sleeping with his dead friend's girlfriend, yet he impulsively took Naoko in his arms in a bid to console her and went on to make love to her, which evidently threw Naoko into a state of depression later and did significant damage to her mental health. This sudden act on Toru's part and the escalation of the sexual tension between the two could be read legitimately as a physical manifestation of the repressed desire that lurked behind the veil of the unconscious. This was something that Toru didn't get straight, as he writes in his explanation to Naoko:

There was a lot I still didn't understand, I said, and though I was trying hard to understand, it would take time....I probably should not have done what I did, and yet I believe that it was all I could do. The warmth and closeness I felt for you at that moment was something I have never experienced before. (Murakami 52)

While time froze for Toru while he waited for Naoko, his unconscious was at its dominating best controlling Toru's mind. He felt, as he walked in a park, aimlessly, "Time itself slogged along in rhythm with my faltering steps. The people around me had gone on ahead long before, while my time and I hung back, struggling through the mud" (Murakami 310).

Writing letter has been a recurring metaphor employed by the author to portray the functioning of the unconscious in the narratives of the novel. Toru had made it a habit on his part to write frequent letters to Naoko when she was living a peaceful life in the sanatorium. However, he too, like Naoko would later in the novel, found it infinitely difficult to phrase his feelings and emotions into words. His urgency to write to Naoko is

seen in conflict with a peculiar void that he discovers in him, a void that he finds inexplicable. In one of his letters to Naoko, he writes:

I try my best to set aside a time in the week for writing to you, but once I actually sit down in the front of the blank sheet of paper, I begin to feel depressed. I'm really having to push myself to write this letter, too. Reiko's been yelling at me to answer you. Don't get me wrong, though. I have tons of things I want to talk to you about, to tell you about. Its just hard for me put them into words. (Murakami 308)

The movement of the plot overlapped with the evolution of the tone found in the letters delivered to Naoko. The more we move into the narrative the more intimate the letters become and we are inevitably treated to the dark recesses of the narrators mind, which clearly was the best a reader could do to peep into the unconscious of the character. The very act of writing these letters seems to be influenced by the unconscious as well, as if it remained the only flickering hope of rekindling the lost fire in Naoko, as she was gradually but steadily moving towards the realm of insanity.

Naoko's character is the most complex and psychological character that could be found in this novel. Her inability to accept the death of Kizuki was the final revelation that inevitably wrote her fate. Her accommodating of the self in an unusual routine, getting involved with Toru sexually and finally getting overpowered by the repressed conscience were all perfectly fine examples of a powerful functioning of the unconscious. The young woman's life had been regulated by her unconscious to the extent where she found it immensely difficult to communicate with people in the living world. Towards the end of the novel she was unable to answer Toru's letter, clearly mentioning her inability to handle the tool of language. Her serious difficulty in finding proper words and arrangement tormented her, and made human communication impossible. These difficulties were the signifiers from the realm of the unconscious that brought about massive changes in her behavioural aspects, i.e. the signified. Her listening to voices could be dismissed as figments of her imagination, had she not accused these voices to cloud her consciousness and jumble up her vocabulary, thus rendering the functions and power of language invalid. Her death, towards the end of the novel was perhaps the final act of the unconscious that had been maintaining a strong hold in the years she lived. Naoko's inability of being aroused during sex was also something intensely psychological and had been severely influenced by the unconscious which referred to the death of Kizuki.

Toru's relationship with Midori, or the very necessity of it is also something that could be seen as a manifestation of the repressed desire being brought into the folds of reality. The decision to wait for Naoko, the uninformed meetings, the longings, the phases without communication gave birth to a peculiar and unusual acceptance in Toru, and brought him close to Midori in a way he could never imagine. The physical proximity with Midori, and the absence of it with Naoko is hard to negotiate as he tries to recline on his memories of Naoko involving sexual intimacy. Toru's relationship with Reiko is also fraught with unusual relics. Being influenced by his repressed desire, his oedipal attraction towards her, Toru is seen sleeping with Reiko, Naoko's roommate, once Naoko's is dead, this might seem quite unusual if we try to measure its water dissociating it from the

functionality of the unconscious. The fact that Reiko was wearing clothes that belonged to Naoko compelled Toru to muse about her as he writes, “I saw that Reiko’s build was almost identical to Naoko’s.”(Murakami 370) Surrogating Naoko in those clothes, Reiko and Toru could feel the sexual tension building, leading up to a very unusual consummation, and strangely, without regrets.

However, towards the culmination of the plot, the unconscious is finally negotiated when we find Toru calling Midori and saying:

I have to talk to you...I have a million things to talk to you about. A million things we have to talk about. All I want in this world is you. I want to see you and talk. I want the two of us to begin everything from the beginning. (Murakami 386)

The conscious choice of finally giving up a life clinging tightly to the memories of the past and the decision to walk towards a new beginning proves to be a clear indication that Toru could now, after reconstructing his self, shed his dependence on the drives regulated by the unconscious.

Concluding the discussion, it would not be absolutely out worldly to be reminded of Ogden writing, “The unconscious is by definition unknowable... psychoanalyst is therefore in the unfortunate position of being a student of that which cannot be known.”(2) There could be, perhaps, no better claim for the justification of the above statement than the narrative of *Norwegian Wood* and Murakami’s vocation in it where, at the end, readers are brought back to the first block in their attempts to understand the novel, having strains of skepticism instilled in their methods.

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