

Original Article

Metafiction, Black Humour, and Alienation: Postmodern Identity in John Barth and Haruki Murakami

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ABSTRACT: *The paper analyzes metafiction, black humor, and alienation as prisms through which the identity of postmodern identity in works by John Barth and Haruki Murakami reveals a fragmented, performative self. Barthian metafiction takes its toll: Lost in the Funhouse is full of narrative mazes, asides, and diagrams, undermining authorhood; Sabbatical is full of intrusions of the we-lovers into the Author; and computer-generated disclaimers, satirizing Cold War absurdities. Black humor intensifies alienation; the grotesque suicides in The Floating Opera are a parody of exhaustion. Murakami is a mix of existential realism and mild surrealism: Toru in Norwegian Wood is drifting through suicides (Kizuki, Naoko), trying to find himself through the frailty of Naoko and the energy of Midori. Such short stories as Confessions of a Shinagawa Monkey (name-stealing primate), The Second Bakery Attack (trauma-driven heist), and Sleep (insomniac liberation) use deadpan irony in the context of loss, and there is an implicit reflexivity in dream blurs. Barth's bombastic dismantling of self is the opposite of Murakami's pessimistic survival, both dissenting from fixed selfhood to flux, performing text against relational emptiness through humor to maneuver the absurdity.*

KEYWORDS: *Existentialism, Postmodern identity, Self-reflexivity, Narrative disruption, Fragmented selfhood, Surrealism, Existential realism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Self-reflexivity, narrative experimentation, and questioning stable meaning characterize postmodern literature. This makes identity a key issue in this context, disjointed, mediatized, and fashioned by language and cultural discourse. John Barth is another prominent American postmodernist author who exposes the depletion and regeneration of narrative genres by use of metafiction and irony. In spite of the differences in style, Haruki Murakami describes the alienated people who have difficulties in the reconciliation of memory, desire, and loss in contemporary society.

In this paper, the convergence between the narrative strategies of Barth and the existential realism of Murakami is analyzed in the context of the treatment of postmodern identity. Both writers deconstruct classic ideas of coherent selfhood through metafictional devices, through black humour and alienation. In an essay, "The Literature of Replenishment", [7], John Barth suggests that postmodern fiction renews expired literary forms through the adoption of self-consciousness and parody. Barth rather rewrites tradition using irony and intertextuality. This is a theoretical standpoint that is the basis of his fiction, especially *Sabbatical: A Romance and Coming Soon!!!. A Narrative.*

The use of metafiction in the works of Barth reveals storytelling as a man-made artifact. Narrators recognize their fictitious nature, break the linear flow, and contest the meaning-making process of the reader involved. This sort of strategy disestablishes an established narrative authority and reflects the destabilization of identity itself. The self is made textualized that is textualized by discourse and not based on fundamental truth. Accordingly, though, postmodern identity within the framework of Barth is performative and mediated. The characters are conscious of their fictional lives, and this is a more general postmodern solicitude over the authenticity and representation. John Barth in his essay *The Literature of Replenishment*, suggests that postmodern fiction renews dead literary genres through the adoption of self-consciousness and parody. Barth rather rewrites tradition using irony and intertextuality. This is a theoretical standpoint that is the basis of his fiction, especially *Sabbatical: A Romance and Coming Soon!!!. A Narrative.*

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2. DUBIOUS NARRATION AND SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN *SABBATICAL: A ROMANCE*

John Barth, in *Sabbatical: A Romance* (1982), finds the means of self-reflexivity and the double narrative involving the elements of postmodern playfulness and romantic interest. The form of the novel reflects the cyclical love and authorship discussed in this novel, with innovative narration questioning the reality and fiction. The plot is presented as a two-person narrative of Fenwick Scott Key (professor of literature) and his wife, Susan Seckler (professor of political science), who are telling the story as we do during a sabbatical on the Chesapeake Bay. This core romance is combined with parallel subplots, including the rapes of the sister twin of Susan and the spy life of a CIA-linked twin brother of Fenwick, forming overlapping timelines that are intertwined like waves, separated into zones such as The Cove and Sailing Up the Chesapeake Bay. The phenomenon of self-reflexivity is triggered when an intrusive Author (the alter ego of Barth) intrudes and confuses the character and the creator, as tides do beginning and ending.

The presence of two voices in the story shows the emphasis on identity as a process and not a permanent situation. The connection between the Turners turns into a lived and literary experience. Through foregrounding narrative mediation, Barth implies that there is no way that personal identity and storytelling can be separated. Postmodern ambiguity is also reflected in the way it is told in a double narrative. The opposing views make it impossible to have a single truth. The identity is made dialogic through interaction and interpretation.

3. ALIENATION AND IDENTITY QUEST IN *NORWEGIAN WOOD*

Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (1987) is an emotional novel of alienation and identity search, as its protagonist, Toru Watanabe, experiences loss, love, and existential loneliness in 1960s Japan. The novel is a reflection on a quest for self in an environment of deep disconnection, marked by fractured relationships and a weak mind. *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami is less dramatic, but equally postmodern in the way that it explores identity. In contrast to the open metafictional writing of Barth, Murakami uses an apparently naturalistic narrative voice. Nevertheless, the alienation in the novel is very deep in the emotional context.

The existential sense of disconnection, loss, and memory is the focus of the introspective narrative of Toru Watanabe. The disjointed relations in the novel are an indication of the failure of the characters to form coherent identities. Grief and longing cause a break in coherence as the self is in a state of suspension between the past and the present.

The minimalism of Murakami is not comparable to the narrative flamboyance of Barth, but the representation of identity is not fixed in both authors. In *Norwegian Wood*, the experience of alienation is not related to the play but to the isolation, both emotional and social. It is trauma and dislocation that make the self fractured.

When his friend Kizuki commits suicide, Toru feels that death has taken him along as well, and he is no longer connected to the normal social life, aided by this, and creates emotional numbness. Naoko represents a mass alienation, and she is tormented by the death of Kizuki and the suicide of her sister; her withdrawal to a sanatorium is symbolic of alienation from the norms of society, and she ends her life as she feels Kizuki reaching out to her in the darkness. Midori creates a contrast in relation: bright yet mourning her parents, and moves Toru toward a connection, when all characters are in need of solitude in the world of loss. Murakami associates alienation with postmodern individualism, in which loss brings about identity crises, such as suicide as a means of escape, sexuality as a temporary remedy, but the fact that Toru survived implies temporary healing in the form of memory and human attachments, filled with *amae* (dependence) and magic realism. This reverberates on larger themes of what has been discussed before, such as Barth and his metafictional fluidity, but sets them on the ground of crude, nostalgic reality.

The narrative techniques of John Barth revel in metafictional disenfranchisement and structural games, unlike the existential realism of Haruki Murakami, but both challenge postmodern identity as being fragmented and evasive. This comparison is based on their methods, built on the previous discussions concerning Barth *Sabbatical* and *Norwegian Wood* by Murakami.

4. NARRATIVE STRATEGIES OF BARTH

Barth uses the doubled narratives, self-reflexive interruptions, and cyclical formations to reveal identity as a fiction. In *Sabbatical*, the we line of narration combines the voices of lovers with that of an Author that interpolates on blank areas, with tidal motifs and twin plots to erase linear selfhood in limitless revisions. This metafictional excess focuses on alienation, linguistic exhaustion, and identity is illustrated as performative and unstable.

5. THE EXISTENTIAL REALISM OF MURAKAMI

Murakami bases postmodern identity on the naked, introspective realism blended with a hint of surrealism, which is that of alienation through loss and solitude. This escapist element of existentialism in *Norwegian Wood*, through the haunting of suicides, resonates in Toru's numb drifting in a world of consumerism in Japan, where characters swing between solitude and wavering relationships with little narrative artifice.

The playful fatigue of Barth is echoed in the silent despair of Murakami, who denies any fixed self in favour of the flux of postmodernity, playing upon the fireworks of narration and the lived absurdity, respectively, only to end up in the journeys that deal with the emptiness of alienation in a comically cynical and realistically realistic fashion. The manifestation of the metafiction of frame-breaking in *Lost in the Funhouse* or Author intrusions in *Sabbatical* reveals identity as a narrative artifice, replacing epistemological concerns with ontological concerns with the reality of the self. Murakami employs more subtle strata, such as dream-reality confusion in *Kafka on the Shore*, where characters are unsettled in their being by means of multiple layers of narrative, which are akin to Barth's reflexivity but through the magic realism.

Barth uses grotesque irony, as in the absurd suicide scheme of *The Floating Opera*, to satirize nihilistic despair and emphasize the absurdity of identity. Murakami answers deadpan, the ironic distance of Toru in *Norwegian Wood* as suicides-religious ceremonies occur, making the alienation a dark comic survival, both writers relying on humor to find their way through the postmodern flux. Alienation is also expressed through Barth in the form of linguistic/cultural weariness, characters being lost in funhouses of myth and history. In Murakami, there is a close lack of connection with loss and social conventions, which motivates the search for a sense of basic selfhood. These, combined, create fluxed identities: intermittently rewritten by Barth, provisionally won by Murakami.

6. COMPARISON

The example of *Lost in the Funhouse* by John Barth is an overt postmodern metafiction using ceaseless self-reflexivity, as compared to the more subtle, existential approach of a self-reflexive story by Haruki Murakami, with its undertones of surrealism. Whereas Barth dismantles the illusion of narrative explicitly, Murakami incorporates a reflexivity in the character introspection and dream logic, both of which also explore the unstable postmodern identity as addressed earlier.

6.1. SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN LOST IN THE FUNHOUSE BY BARTH

The eponymous storyline features adult teenager Ambrose, who is lost in a boardwalk funhouse, reflecting his sexual awakening and narrative entrapment. Barth interferes with italicized asides, authorial footnotes, and charts (e.g., how can a story end?), to lay bare authorship as an empty game, to a connection with the literature of exhaustion of his essays.

6.2. THE SUBTLER REFLEXIVITY OF MURAKAMI

The narratives by Murakami, as in *Kafka on the Shore* or *Norwegian Wood* are indirect, as the protagonists are narrating in the face of transforming realities (talking cats, parallel worlds), causing a questioning self by the means of fragmented memories devoid of the overt intrusions of Barth. The retrospective voice in *Norwegian Wood* is self-consciously struggling with the subject of loss, and it is a blurred lived experience and retelling, similar to existential searches amid alienation. The bombastic reflexivity of Barth dismantles the identity in language as a trap of linguistics, and the quiet alienation of Murakami in the shadowed wells instead of his stable self, both refuse stable selves in favor of the postmodern flux, the funhouse mirrors of Barth and the shadowed wells of Murakami.

In his short stories, Haruki Murakami frequently employs black humor through surrealism, in an absurd manner, in a deadpan, detached way in the face of existential panic, and in an ironic depiction of loss or alienation. This ironic tone--the pedestrian against the horror is reminiscent of the subjects of his novels, such as *Norwegian Wood*, but in miniatures, dream-like in short.

Confessions of a Shinagawa Monkey (First Person Singular): A talking monkey admits his habit of stealing the names of women to fight the feeling of loneliness, with pathos mixed with the absurd notions as the narrator thinks over the name of his ex-lover that he almost forgot.

The Second Bakery Attack (After the Quake): A bakery is robbed at the hour of midnight by two people who want bread, not money, and this is because the husband has a certain existential hunger connected to a past trauma; the deadpan heist turns into a slapstick comedy with McDonald's coupons as the reward.

Sleep (The Elephant Vanishes): A woman is spending 17 days reading the *Odyssey*, enjoying the privilege of insomnia that lets her be free of dreams, only to ironically challenge the husband who is a dentist, the dark mocking of domestic norms against the mental breakdown.

Murakami's black humor works where Barth fails; in the commonplace heroes of his ordinary characters, facing the bizarre invasion (animals, metamorphoses), the black humor uses understatement to subvert horror; e.g., a monkey laughing at identity theft, or at sheep counting in red tape in excerpts of *A Wild Sheep Chase*. These instances enhance the flux of postmodern identity in which humor is an antidote to the lack of connection, as it is echoed in the play by Barth, but with the minimalism of a Japanese background.

Giles Goat-Boy (1966) by John Barth is a masterpiece of using metafiction to satirize grand narratives in the form of campus-as-universe allegory that serves as a conscious piece of art that blurs the line between authorship and reality. This is in line with

the more general postmodern playbook of *Lost in the Funhouse* and *Sabbatical*, wherein the work of reflexivity is to demystify the identity quests.

Barth is a parody of the heroic voyage of Joseph Campbell protagonist Giles (goat-raised George) plays messianic, Grand, Tutor) and Cold War mythology: with labels rearranged (Jesus as Enos Enoch) to disrupt religious epics, Giles journeys through East/West Campus divides. Unreliable narration through the output of the WESCAC, which is automatic, lays emphasis on storytelling as a mechanical farce. This metafiction makes identity a play of performance in the face of exhaustion, and mirrors Murakami subtly on his endlessly reflexive scale, but with the blasting-and-laughing deconstruction of Barth.

7. CONCLUSION

The metafiction, black humor, and alienation wielded by John Barth and Haruki Murakami are the tools of meticulous precision to dismantle the postmodern identity, revealing it to be a hairsplank construct hovering up in the cultural and existential emptiness. Barth's bombastic reflexivity, which manifests through the labyrinthic asides of *Lost in the Funhouse*, the dual narration and Author intrusion of *Sabbatical*, and the parodic disavowals of *Giles Goat-Boy*, breaks the illusion of narratives, representing the self as endlessly rewritten performance during linguistic exhaustion. Murakami uses less obvious currents of the surreal, deadpan irony, as with the suicidal drifts in *Norwegian Wood*, or his short stories, such as *Confessions of a Shinagawa Monkey*, where surreal intrusion (name-stealing monkeys) is used to highlight a fragmented search for connection in alienated realism.

In their end results, however, their contrasting approaches are united in a strong dose of absurdity: the grotesque satires of Barth ridicule the pomp of myth to restate flux, and the personal loss accepted in the melancholic wit of Murakami is converted into a provisional recuperation. They together oppose stable selfhood in favor of relational and illusory identities, proving the ironic ability of literature to replicate and survive postmodern fragmentation.

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