

Civilized Morality and Discontents in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*

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ABSTRACT:

Individual contentment is confined in the gyre of civilization. It is a universal phenomenon that we always punish ourselves in expressing our psychological and physical necessity openly in fear of personal bonding, other's reaction, and social expectation. East Asian writer Haruki Murakami reveals this unbounded self-dissatisfaction under the mask of civility and reality through the way of life of modern Japanese young generation in his bestselling novel, *Norwegian Wood*. This self-discontentment makes the weak-kneed commit suicide and the compromising live passively. In this novel, despite having a right emotional attachment, Naoko and Toru fail to give each other psychophysical support that results in Naoko's silent death and mentally sporadic Toru's discontented conducts with bar-girls as well as sensible ones like Reiko and Midori. Moreover, Midori, Reiko, Hatsumi and Nagasawa are seen headmost in their way of life, who are provocative in their tone and action but offensive in their soul. This paper aims to show how civilized morality controls people's unequivocal feelings in a discontented manner in Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*.

KEY WORDS: Civilization; Sexuality; Nothingness; Discontent; Toru.

Date of Submission: 20-11-2020

Date of Acceptance: 06-12-2020

I. INTRODUCTION

Japanese contemporary author, Haruki Murakami's nostalgic and sensuous novel, *Norwegian Wood* is an implicit expression of the psychological complexity of modern civilization. It is a story of yearning for love, loss, pain, and painful memory. We, human beings, are not only social but also biological. To live soundly, we long to fulfill our physical or emotional desires from our ordinary social beings. However, the more we become cultured, socialized and civilized, the less we can hear ourselves. Standing on every marginal line of civilization, people want to know the direction of life from the social constitution and find no direct answer. In pursuit of happiness and peace, they run after person to person and place to place and being tired; they start devaluing their boundless feelings. According to Freud, "a complete list of methods that human beings employ in trying to gain happiness and keep suffering at bay, and I am aware that the materials can be arranged differently" (1930; 19).

Norwegian Wood (1987) is thirty-seven-year-old Toru Watanabe's throwback of 1960's days in Tokyo. After arriving in West German and hearing the song 'Norwegian Wood', he becomes upset with the throbbing reminiscence of his dead beloved, Naoko and throat-choking experience of that time. Toru has a good friendship with his classmate Kizuki and his girlfriend Naoko in Kobe. After Kizuki's death, Toru seems to be the only man for traumatized Naoko to trust, and to find relief and support. Naoko says, "When I am close to you like this, I'm not the least bit scared. Nothing dark or evil could ever tempt me" (Murakami, 1987; 6) but also feels that gradually Toru will be sick of her neurotic instability.

Despite her psychological turmoil, out of genuine love and care, Toru tries to read Naoko's eyes and fill her demands up in Kobe and then in Tokyo. During their first sexual intercourse, Toru realizes that she does not feel him as much as he does for her. To Naoko, Toru is her dead lover's shadow to whom she wants physical and psychological desire. After that one-night sexual union, she runs away from Toru and the society to a sanatorium as she feels that this civilized society and civilized being Toru cannot take her mental deformity for a long time. This alienated feeling is not untrue as Toru himself confesses that he is not smart enough to understand her. So despite loving her, Toru engages in sleeping with random and bar-girls at nights to please his 'sex drive' but always gets up in the morning with bleak displeasure because of his constant feeling of Naoko's transcendent fragrance. He also befriends his drama classmate, Midori Kobayashi who is, unlike Naoko, self-confident, outspoken and high-spirited. Their spiritual relationship is in such a level that they also strongly feel sex for each other but never do sexual intercourse except hand-jobs as their restrained morality does not allow this passion till Naoko is existing. He also meets Naoko's sanatorium mate, Reiko Ishida who could not save her marriage as her civilized family fails to understand her inner shouting. Despite being

desolated, we see her giving the pragmatic solution of mental dilemma confidently when Toru Watanabe faces in choosing between dying Naoko and lively Midori.

After Naoko's unwanted departure, both Reiko and Midori individually give an ineffective try to make Toru progress in their way. For a long time being sexually discontented, Reiko wants to find sexual contentment from Toru, but it also results in another discontentment. At the end of the novel, both Midori and Toru choose to stay together with each other; that is nothing but another fruitless civilized decision. Freud remarks within his asking, "what good a long life to us if it is hard, joyless and so full of suffering that we can only welcome death as a deliverer?" (1930; 26-27). This paper aims at focusing on refined and modern morality as the root cause of self-dissatisfaction because this morality teaches us to enslave our self-freedom directly and indirectly in our self-creating civilized ideology.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researchers collect data from printed books as primary sources and reading online articles as secondary sources. For achieving the target of this research paper, they follow the 'qualitative research method' by analyzing the main text narratively.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While analyzing the novel, this research paper responds to the questions below:

- i. What is the discontentment of the mind and soul?
- ii. How does civilization make our mental health discontented?
- iii. How does discontentment affect our interpersonal relationship?
- iv. Is psychological discontentment a modern nervous sickness?

IV. EXPECTATIONS IN CIVIL CULTURE

Expectation acts as a consistent part of our mental health as well as cultured society. "The expectation is a biological adaptation with specialized psychological structures and a long evolutionary pedigree. At the same time, culture provides the preeminent environment in which many expectations are acquired and applied" (Huron, 2006; 3). To live in a civil culture, human beings have to carry on code and conduct of civility that "represented the deepening of self-control, strict control over bodily desires and the segmentation of personal space to protect a zone of privacy" (Buonfino&Mulgan, 2009; 019). In *Norwegian Wood*, Japanese societal ideology, norms and lifestyle go against the biological expectation of Naoko, Toru, Midori, Reiko, Nagasawa and Hatsumi. For them, civilized culture becomes a new deep well which might be the end of them if they fall into it. It makes them think much seriously about civility overlooking the expectation of their mental health. As well, it is beautiful to fall in love with more than one person as every person has something unique to be relished. Since love is the food of soul and mind, one should not toss it on the back of a labyrinth and should give himself to love sincerely. Having much concern for civil relationship, Toru Watanabe could not make any relationship either with Naoko or with Reiko and Midori full of life. Naoko's touch sometimes reminds him that she is Kizuki's girl and he feels, "my arm was not the one she needed, but the arm of someone else. My warmth was not what she needed, but the warmth of someone else" (Murakami, 1987; 35). Because of Naoko's mental deformity, he goes to intimate with Midori and Reiko to meet his psychophysical desire, but they also remind him, Naoko.

Naoko wants to convey something to Toru but always losses the track of what she is trying to say because she gets wrong words that are opposite from what she means. She cries, "the other me has the right words, but this me can't catch her" (Murakami, 1987; 25). Here 'this me' is civilized Naoko who fails to recognize the 'other me' that is soul's contentment in fear of societal creeds. Even after that, she expects him to remember her existence and stand for her even in his busy time. She knows that their innocent life of meadow is over and her expectation sounds ridiculous in this challenging city like Tokyo as Toru cannot look after her all-time even though they are a married couple. During the day, he has to work hard, and at night he has to keep his physical and mental health in rest. Despite being mentally unstable, Naoko's institution works well. In her loneliness, she sees the civilized hungers like Toru starving for life but find no idea until they stand on the edge of their end. When they look back, they only see the untouched banquet. She sighs to Toru, "We grew up fast and had to enter society, which is why you were so important to us. You were the link connecting us with the outside. We were struggling through you to fit with the outside world as best we could. In the end, it didn't work, of course" (Murakami, 1987; 170).

Toru promises her that he will listen to her, and with the time being, he will also help her solve her problems as they are not keeping their life with the degree from an account book. Once he told her, "It takes me a while to understand things. But if I do have the time, I will come to understand you--- better than anyone else

in the world” (Murakami, 1987; 9). Disappointedly, it is the harsh reality of modern civilization that every individual has to be psychophysically fit to survive here. It requires so much from an individual that despite having emotion, one cannot express it in the right way of the right time. So, Toru fails to stand for Naoko as he could not manage time to understand her deeper, darker and colder agony in her current time. Also, the dark morality of civilization makes Nagasawa's heart stony for Hatsumi. Quiet, caring and intelligent Hatsumi knows well that he sleeps around with other girls, but she does not ever complain to him. Despite loving him seriously, she never makes any demand to him. Being fed up of his indifference to her, she marries another man but commits suicide later as her dejected mind cannot go forth with the cultural actualization.

Moreover, Like Naoko, Reiko in her conjugal life understands that her society will not let her husband take up her neurotic sufferings for a long time and for the civic order he might wish to sacrifice his love for his wife. Reiko says, “I didn't want to drag anyone down with me. I didn't want to force anyone to live in constant fear that I might lose my mind at any moment” (Murakami, 1987; 212). She left her husband and lives with a smiling face but with discontents. To Freud, “by ‘drowning our sorrows’ we can escape any time from the pressure of reality and find refuge in a world of our own that affords us better conditions for our sensibility” (1930; 16). However, despite falling in love with Toru, Midori cannot confess it artlessly as she is entangled between his present love with a boy and blooming love with Toru. Like Naoko, she also wishes to spend her whole life with Toru, but in reality, it is not possible from both sides. She expresses her untold confession only in her diary:

*“I'd love to cook a stew for you
But I have no pot.
I'd love to knit a scarf for you,
But I have no wool.
I'd love to write a poem for you,
But I have no pen”* (Murakami, 1987; 98).

V. PSYCHONEUROTIC DERIVATION

The worst psychological conflict for a living being is between what he knows and what he feels. In modern society, the expression of personal declination or alienation is the reaction of ‘civilized sexual morality’. “The lonely Westernized story is well documented on Murakami's oriental book with the addition of tiny bits of Japanese Zen. It seems to propose a more aggressive outburst of humanity at the threshold of the destruction from the atomic bomb or of all the sicknesses or craziness that a person faces on a self-denial journey” (Hang & Bac, 2019; 241). In this novel, all the characters are lightly or deeply go through some neurosis problem.

The attraction for the opposite gender and its contentment is good for mental and physical health. ‘Sexual excitement’ comes from the touch or feeling the ‘sex object’. For men, women are sex objects, and men are for women's object. Besides the opposite, often same sexual drive acts as ‘sex object’ for a human being that is the issue for Reiko, which Freud defines as ‘inversion’. Typically for achieving the sexual goal, a certain level of touching is necessary for human beings. To Freud, “the touch of the sexual object's skin constitutes, on the one hand, a great source of pleasure and on the other a great influx of arousal” (1970; 133).

In contrast, socially progressive human beings find a restriction in enjoying such arousing sexual pleasure because the power of civilized community always takes decisive steps claiming it right against the emotional power of an individual. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud denotes, “on the one hand, love comes into conflict with the interests of civilization; on the other, civilization threatens love with substantial restrictions” (1930; 39). At 20 ages, being busy for self-exploration in the socialized culture, Toru provokes the notion of his emotional expectation, saying that he is not sure whether he has ever fallen in love to anyone even with Naoko. Moreover, mentally inconstant Naoko's way of approaching love is a little different from modern fashion. Meeting, walking and doing sex with him, she substantially expects his heartfelt attention to cure her nervous illness so that she can live her life with full content. At 37 ages, almost after twenty years, he realizes that he fails to understand her approach and his redundant attention to her is also responsible for her physical and spiritual decease. Carter argues, “Naoko is meant to be more than a friend but less than a lover for Watanabe because she has the power to make him reach self-actualization and feel whole in his identity” (2017). That is why, throughout the novel, he sticks his mind to Naoko's memory because in that time and even at present, he needs her most than she needs him. Also, Carter criticizes, “Toru Watanabe is a lost man, left without his lover. With a never-ending void in his sense of self to fill, Watanabe travels. Without Naoko to fill the void in his reality, he will always be lost. Almost 40 years old, Watanabe is travelling alone, his plane taking flight. He will always be alone without her to hold him together” (2017).

To take over the internal anxiety, most of the characters of the novel find the use of different defense mechanism that is an automatic or unconscious behavior of our mental health. In the case of Naoko, Reiko states that her bundles of neurotic problems are so badly mixed-up with one another that it is difficult to sort out a single one. She always drags the memory of her beloved, dead Kizuki to trouble the peace of her mind and that of others. Even in sleep, she gets scared of hearing the dead one's voice. When she is in open eyes, she also hears the dead kizuki calling her from darkness to come to him. In psychoanalysis, such behavior is termed as 'Repression' that means storing unpleasant memories, thoughts and feelings in the unconscious level of mind. Because of her repressed reaction, despite demanding sexual intercourse from Toru, she could not co-operate him during intercourse. This might be either her 'displacement' mechanism where she unconsciously wants Kizuki's attachment from Toru but consciously fails or sex phobia as every girl bears vaginal pain in her first-time sexual intercourse. Otherwise, it is her social phobia as "the fact that the curbs placed by civilization on erotic life lead to the universal debasement of the sexual object may divert us from the objects to the drives themselves" (Freud, 1970; 258). In this novel, other discontented leading figures: Toru, Reiko and Midori unconsciously and consciously play 'Reaction Formation' by behaving in a way which is opposite to the feelings, thinks and behaviors that are considered unpleasant. In this way, Toru continues random sex with anonymous girls. Instead of full sexual intercourse with Toru, Midori does hand-job unwillingly as Naoko's spirit is in between them.

Moreover, "The sex that was had between Reiko and Watanabe was not romantically fueled. The moment between the pair was an opportunity to reflect on their lives and change for the better" (Carter, 2017). However, to Murakami's existing and solitary characters, the psychological disorder becomes a compulsory part of their life. So, in one sense they all are alone inside themselves, and with the appetite of their mind, they live in this civilized world to fulfill all the worldly needs.

VI. NOTHINGNESS IN EXISTENCE AND ABSENCE

Nothingness means feeling meaninglessness in one's own existence. It crawls in the heart of human beings like a slither. "There is an element of despair in human existence, which comes, Sartre says, from the realization that we are limited to what is within the scope of our wills. We cannot expect more from our existence than the infinite probabilities it possesses" (Stumpf&Fieser, 2008; 435-436). The ultimate goal of a being is exercising his freewill. When he exists in the world, viewing it as 'being-in-itself', he has to be situational that means to act about other people's choice. Then out of discontents, finitude like despair, guiltiness and loneliness start developing in his mind, and he feels nothingness in anything or with anyone present or absent. "In *Norwegian Wood*, the characters encounter a defect and a hollow self. They are aware of the imperfection and try not to refine, but to adapt to that imperfection. Tragically, the more they try to adapt, the more they discover that there are things that cannot be adopted" (Hang & Bac, 2019; 242). At the end of the novel, Midori ask Toru,

“Where are you now?”

‘Where was I now?’

Gripping the receiver, I raised my head and turned to see what lay beyond the phone box. Where was I now? I had no idea. No idea at all. Where was this place? ... Again and again, I called out for Midori from the dead Centre of this place that was no place” (Murakami, 1987; 386).

It is Toru's abrupt existential crisis after Naoko's sudden death. After her eternal departure, he never sleeps with any random girl but once with Reiko and finds no comfort in his ached soul. Since he believes, "I am a born optimistic" (Murakami, 1987; 314), after Reiko's leaving for Asahikawa, he seeks Midori's indulgence to fill the void of his existence, but he loses the key of his soul to let Midori enter. When she wants to know actually how he is, he gets his paralyzed brain not responded and finds himself fastened in a cold-blooded place alone.

Every living being has to taste death one day. In the cosmic level, our life is not a handful of dust as every creature is created for a significant purpose. In the ebb and flow of our life, everybody cannot fulfill his/her life-motto within a limited period. For this failure, except fate, we the individuals are also responsible for creating blockades to make our life meaningless. In the novel, this meaninglessness is connected with the presence or absence of their interpersonal relationship with others they meet. Out of depression, frustration and guiltiness, death seems an easy option for all characters to free the souls from nothingness. So they bluntly question why committing suicide is not preferable. Despite having a family, childhood friend, Watanabe and lovely girlfriend, Naoko, Kizuki commits suicide, and nobody finds out what his soul's discontents are. Might be Kizuki does not feel his loved ones fit to meet his expectations. His death makes Naoko's trauma 'strictly psychological' and Toru's life a living dead. Mentally both of them are attached to Kizuki in such extend that Naoko has to die with dead Kizuki's memory and to Toru, "death exists, not as the opposite of life but as a part of life" (Murakami, 1987; 30). When Naoko's dying soul needs Toru most, like her family he cannot also give

her good mental ailment because to satisfy his physical cravings, he runs after random and non-platonic sex and dooms to nothingness more. According to James, "Since sex is presented as a safety-valve and escape mechanism for alienated and stressed-out youth, this is not altogether" (2011; 137-138). Nagasawa rightly comments, "there's always some part of him somewhere that's wide awake and detached. He just has that hunger that won't go away" (Murakami, 1987; 277).

Since sexuality is an essential part of our life, Toru's frustration out of unoccupied feelings is also a result of sexual unhappiness that his platonic lover, Naoko fails to give him. So, we cannot all alone blame Toru, an everyday youth, for his improper sincerity for her because his civilized morality makes him helpless in managing his biological content and social content that creates discontent in his another world with Naoko. "The duality in Toru is a duality that exists in every modern man. But, this duality raises a moral dilemma and a question on the face of modern love" (Islam, 2018). Being hopeless and more loneliness from her trusted ones of the total civilized system, Naoko also commits suicide in a distant sanatorium. Her death makes Toru reach another level of existential crisis where he feels guilty for her tragedy. He agonizes, "but I can't forget her. I told Naoko I would go on waiting for her, but I couldn't do it. I turned my back on her in the end... Naoko was choosing death all along" (Murakami, 1987; 379). Like Naoko, alienated "Hatsumi reached a certain stage of life and decided--- almost on the spur of the moment to end it" (Murakami, 1987; 278). At the end of the novel, like Toru, passionately deprived Reiko and Midori also fight to survive by challenging more uncertainty.

VII. CONCLUSION

Civilization provides all kinds of arrangement to build up a socially dignified life. When the external world restricts the freedom of our self-expectations, parts of our "mental life- perceptions, thoughts feelings --- seem alien" (Freud, 1930; 5) to our consciousness. Then despite enjoying the facilities of civilization, we mourn for our lost contents of soul and mind at the end of the day and fall in total frustration, depression and anxiety. In *Norwegian Wood*, every youth goes through psychological conflict in choosing either individual happiness or civilization, but all of them lose their soul to civilization. For a better life, Naoko and Toru leave the rural Kobe to more civilized and challenging city, Tokyo. In the same city, Reiko wants to be a heartthrob pianist, Midori dreams of exploring herself in the drama world, and Nagasawa and Hatsumi going ahead to the pursuit of happiness. Despite struggling altogether for better livelihood, at the end of the busy road, they find themselves desolate and companionless because the way of social progress is becoming accessible for them where platonic love is growing obsolete. Toru and Nagasawa's reckless sexuality, Kizuki, Naoko and Hatsumi's committing suicide, in fear of homosexual assault Reiko's leaving her marriage to be a straggling traveller, and finally Toru and Midori's walking to no destination- all are the discontents of modern civilization. Though every individual's discontents are linked with each other's indifference and reluctant psychophysical assistance, we cannot solely blame any particular man because nobody's mind is right that is understood by nobody. Like Murakami, Robert Lowell also interprets human's discontents from civilized morality in his poem, 'Skunk Hour':

*"A car radio bleats,
"Love, O careless Love. . . ." I hear
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
as if my hand were at its throat. . . .
I myself am hell;
nobody's here—"* (1958).

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Tanzin Sultana, et. al. "Civilized Morality and Discontents in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 25(11), 2020, pp. 59-64.