



A postmodernist rendition of the clash between materialism and spiritualism in Haruki Murakami's 'The Elephant Vanishes'

Sharifuzzaman

M.A. (Ongoing) B.A.(Honors) in English, Jashore University of Science and Technology, Jashore-7408, Bangladesh

Received: 31 Mar 2021; Received in revised form: 07 May 2021; Accepted: 22 May 2021; Available online: 06 Jun 2021
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Abstract— Haruki Murakami's novels have been widely studied and praised for their depiction of human feelings and nature but the role of his short stories in discussing complex social phenomena has largely been overlooked. "The Elephant Vanishes" is a brilliant story set in 1980s Japan which focuses on the clash between materialism and spiritualism but a postmodernist analysis tells us this 'clash' and 'binary opposition' of ideologies is not as straightforward as one would imagine. Also, it also reveals that trying to find any grand and objective solution to the problem of the clash might be of no use. The plot is multilayered, complex and somewhat confusing, thanks to the narrator's ambivalence which is suggestive and telling at times. This paper seeks to unearth what's beneath the plot and aims to show how the clash between spiritualism and materialism could be interpreted from a postmodernist viewpoint.

Keywords— Postmodernism, binary, contradiction, materialism, spiritualism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The clash between materialism and spiritualism has been one of the defining factors which have been changing the course of societies for decades. Haruki Murakami, the Japanese author, in his short story 'The Elephant vanishes' draws a vivid and complex picture of a society divided between two conflicting ideologies. It is necessary and relevant to see how a post modernist view into that divide can bring out new findings on the issue.

Haruki Murakami has been described as an 'un-Japanese' author by many for his apparent connection with the west, yet ironically he is one of those authors who represented and brought Japan closer so many parts of the world as he

has been a highly successful author in the west as well as many other parts of the world. Though studies have been done on how his novels deal with complex social issues, isolationism, sadness, loneliness as well as other human feelings, his short stories and their depiction of various important aspects of modern society has largely been overlooked.

'The Elephant Vanishes' is one of those stories which dive deep into a modern crisis that's very much prevalent in 1980s Japan and the issue remains relevant to this day. A careful postmodernist look into the story has the potential of revealing how spiritualism and materialism both, often thought to be contradictory and binary opposition to each other, coexist in postwar Japan. It would also dispel with

the notion that a grand and objective solution to the problem of 'the clash between two conflicting ideologies' is possible.

Postmodernist theory generally refers to that particular literary theory that sees literature with an attitude of skepticism, irony and rejects notions such as 'binary opposition', 'hierarchy' and 'stable identity'. It discusses 'intertextuality' and even unreliability of narration in a text. All these are extremely important when it comes to Murakami's short stories and as we shall see, 'The Elephant Vanishes' is a text that reveals a lot regarding complex social issues when the abovementioned techniques are employed to examine it.

This paper would seek to study various aspects of the story while trying to come to conclusion on how the 'clash' between two contradictory ideologies in a rapidly changing society like 1980s Japan is dealt with in literary form by Haruki Murakami as well as how that can be interpreted from a postmodernist viewpoint.

II. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This paper takes Murakami's 'The Elephant Vanishes' (from the short story anthology of the same name that was published in 1993) as the principle text. It also takes into account other works on Murakami as well as writings on modern Japanese society.

The paper seeks to do a qualitative research into Haruki Murakami's short story and looks at the piece through a postmodernist lens while discussing the clash between spiritualism and materialism as well as how other issues relevant to that discussion (i.e. the implications of that clash in modern Japan) are dealt with by Murakami. The paper uses APA method while citing other works relevant to the topic.

III. MATERIALISM AND SPIRITUALISM IN MURAKAMI'S WORLD

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines 'materialism' as a doctrine that says that the 'economic and social change is materially caused'. It's an ideology that's often interpreted as a social system that causes people to always strive for more and more 'consumer goods' and 'financial

development' in an endless cycle of 'demand and supply'. People like Constantin Gutberlet tend to define it from a spiritual viewpoint. In Mr Gutberlet's words, Materialism is "a philosophical system which regards matter as the only reality in the world... denies the existence of God and the soul." (Gutberlet, 1911)

Definitions such as these make it quite simple to understand why 'Materialism' would clash with 'Spiritualism' which describes 'spirit' to be the prime or fundamental element of reality and is associated with religious philosophies as well as the nature of god (or gods), morality, ethics and minimalism.

A clash between these two concepts indeed is deeply embedded in Murakami's 'The Elephant Vanishes' and a descriptive analysis on that might shed some light on how we can interpret it from a postmodernist viewpoint.

3.1 Post-war Japan and the capitalist 'utopia'

The mystical and spiritual nature of the 'Orient' has always fascinated the west. If we look beyond any prejudice associated with that idea, this stereotypical depiction of nations such as India, China, Japan as well other eastern countries would reveal that it's not entirely an imaginary construct. In case of Japan, it has always been a deeply spiritual country with distinct social norms, passionate philosophies and a devout population.

The rise of nationalism and fascism in early 20th century started to change the Japanese society with rapid industrialization and an imperial impulse which brought the country to the brink of societal collapse in August 1945 when the United States occupied the nation after Japanese surrender in the WWII. Subsequent reconstruction with US assistance, introduction of a free market economy and a miraculous social as well as economic transformation turned Japan into the second largest economy in 1980s pushing its GDP over a trillion dollar mark and allowed the vast majority of the population to live in an affluent society. Massive industries, western food-chains, modern transport systems apparently made the society more materialist and capitalist in nature with increasing demand for more 'materials' which in turn created a cycle of mass production and mass consumption.

1980s Japan was soon becoming an industrial superpower signaling to overtake even the US but economists and

literary thinkers both did notice a certain problematic undercurrent below this prosperous capitalist 'utopia'. The former could detect a financial bubble which if burst, would halt and roll back years of Japanese economic gains (something that did happen in the 1990s) while the latter could see a widening gap between Japan's contemporary and past societies. A void could be detected by authors such as Haruki Murakami in form of a materialistic social order inside what is and always has been a deeply spiritual, philosophical and religious society.

Murakami wrote the short stories featured in the anthology *The Elephant Vanishes* at the height of Japanese economic bubble and did portray a vivid picture of a society which was engulfed with isolation, melancholy and a sense of loss.

The beginning of the final story of that anthology, *The Elephant Vanishes* (upon which the anthology was named) depicts a powerful picture. It begins with a simple description of how the unnamed protagonist starts his day, yet it's a telling narration. The protagonist starts his day having breakfast with coffee and toasts while reading a newspaper that features news such as trade dispute, real-estate ads and so on. The following pages feature high rise condos and the protagonist's job as a PR person at an electrical appliance manufacturing corporation. If the setting wasn't mentioned to be Tokyo suburb, one may mistakenly assume its New York or London. The beginning of the story itself stands in a stark contrast to Japan's former self. The unmistakable westernization of his society is vividly displayed by Murakami here.

But beneath this 'sad social change', the author tells the readers something much more complex. He alludes to the fact that this transformation of Japanese society from a spiritual-minimalistic one to a materialistic and capitalist one isn't as linear as it'd seem.

3.2 The elephant in the cage and the elephant in the room!

The plot of the story is perhaps the most amusing aspect of the story which describes how one sudden morning an old elephant (which was the city's symbol and was looked after using city funds) simply disappears along with its keeper from its cage leaving no clue as to what happened to them. Subsequent investigation and the protagonist's

own queries inform the readers that it was simply impossible for the elephant to physically go anywhere, at least in the normal sense. The 'vanishing' of the elephant is an important allegory that can be interpreted as the blatant disregard by a society for a significant part of its identity (therefore, alluding to the phrase 'the elephant in the room').

Murakami's writings have always featured isolationism, sense of loss and melancholy. Similar characteristics can be detected in 'The Elephant Vanishes' as well. Traditionally it is interpreted as a critique and a denunciation which basically says, Japan had become an affluent society in the post-war but in the process the country had lost a part of itself. And what's even more striking is that, the part it lost was one of the most significant aspects of its identity. The allegorical elephant in the room was always the spiritual characteristics of Japanese society, which had been shunned aside by the mad rush for processed goods and bank accounts. The critique further says that, entrepreneurial zeal and industrious nature had provided Japan with the components to imitate or even surpass western capitalist countries, and the sad thing for many is Japan had tried to do exactly that.

But that's not exactly the case. As we will find out at the final part of this paper that this simplistic notion of an 'objective mathematical equation' which can predict how each society would react in a certain situation regardless of their uniqueness and native characteristics is not as useful as we would imagine. That's not to say Japan's transformation into a westernized capitalist economy hasn't changed it fundamentally, it has and it's vividly clear in *The Elephant Vanishes*' narrative as well.

The Tokyo suburb where the protagonist lives is made up of "affluent citizenry", People there got amused by the elephant but apparently they never really cared for the animal or its keeper, as evidenced by the fact that they forgot their disappearance rather quickly on account of their busy lives. It is seen as a stark contrast to Japan's old nature, which used to be characterized by many as a society deeply connected with people and nature. The sad reality of a nation with a rich history of philosophy, meditation and collective identity turning into a pale imitation of western societies is the meaning beneath the

'elephant'.

Just like everyone (except the protagonist) simply ignored or were not consciously aware of the elephant, the spirituality in Japanese society hung around until it truly began to be 'vanished' from sociality which was picked up initially by a small number of keen watchers like Murakami. The elephant was made the mascot of the city-suburb by the mayor for political and financial gains; a similar comparison can be drawn with Japanese cultural aspects as well. Many exploit the cultural elements of Japan for the financial advantages they entail, it's like using Japanese cuisine, history, clothing, symbols to turn a profit - selling the 'mystical orient' in the west, and ironically in the east (to those who have bought into the versions of reality constructed by corporations for profit) as well.

With the disappearance of the elephant, the locality loses its mascot and surprisingly, hardly anyone notices that in their busy lives! A similar picture could be seen in 1980s Japan where a technological advanced "soon to be largest economy" and a materialistic nation seemingly let part of its identity fade away. The story then ends with a grim prediction,

"The elephant and keeper have vanished completely. They will never be coming back." (Murakami, 2003, p. 327)

The author here as it seems, dismisses the idea of the city ever regaining its former self which could point towards the improbability of a Japanese renaissance which could restore the society to this exact shape.

But then again, the interpretation born out of the postmodernist analysis of the text predicts something drastically different. The strange and suggestive narrative style of Haruki Murakami allows us to differentiate the surface meanings from other deeper interpretations. Ambivalent and unreliable descriptions (acknowledged by the narrator himself) of the elephant's 'vanishing' as well as the strange relations between the animal and its keeper makes us aware of something mysterious about the apparently 'insignificant elephant affair', not to mention the very act of trying to make a sense of that affair, even years later, is in itself an indication that the narrator deeply cares about the mysterious event. Therefore, the permanent disappearance of the elephant and its keeper might not be

permanent at all as long as 'Murakamis' of our world who have been keen observers of their respective societies through their works ensure the preservation (in full or in parts) of their culture and their 'way of life' in literary forms.

3.3 Pragmatism vs. Mysticism

Pragmatism and mysticism both may serve as each other's synonyms and antonyms depending on context. A mystical world can be full of hope and optimism (therefore having a close proximity to the word 'Pragmatism') as we can see from ancient Japanese Shamanism and Shintoism which describe spirit worlds and the 'Kami' (gods) who provide people with refuge from diseases and natural disasters. Granted there are elements and spirits which are less than benevolent in ancient Japanese religions, but they do give people hope (like most religions do). The rituals and traditions have been ingrained so deeply in Japanese society that mysticism has become part of Japanese spiritual identity.

But on the other side, mysticism also means ambivalence, mystery and illusion which is the exact opposite of what 'pragmatism' stands for in 'The Elephant Vanishes'. The term 'pragmatic' here literally means 'realistic, precise or calculative' and the protagonist while discussing his profession as a "Kitchen seller" describes the necessity of pragmatism like this,

"...in this pragmatic world of ours, things you can't sell don't count for much" (Murakami, 2003, p. 320)

He goes on to describe the society as "essentially pragmatic" or "pragmatic in essence". All of these point towards a materialistic society which has little patience for mystery or ambivalence. At one point, it may even seem the protagonist weighs every one of his decisions against their potential outcome (whether it would be a loss or not) when he talks about the unviability of trying to find the elephant. In traditional interpretations, Murakami's suburb wants everything to be calculated and analyzed. Kami, spirits and native traditions don't seem to count for much there as long as you can't sell them.

But then again, among all these 'pragmatism' that the narrator talks about, there is something 'un-pragmatic' like the narration itself. The narrator informs the audience at the beginning of the story that he is best equipped to tell

the elephant's tale as he did research on the matter and knows it better than everyone else, yet while talking to the girl at the hotel lounge, he says something drastically different,

"...I'm probably not the most reliable witness." (Murakami, 2003, p. 324)

This ambivalence is something that makes the narrator 'out of place' according to his own parameters. After all, he mentions the disappearance of the elephant to be something that didn't matter and yet, he researches and obsesses with it. On top of that, his narration turns out to be, as he describes it, unreliable. The narrator therefore is an un-pragmatic element here. His obsession with the elephant and its keeper, along with his stubborn belief that the connection between the elephant and its keeper had been something mysterious which because of its incapability with the materialistic society allowed them to simply vanish rather than escape using any worldly means, points out the fact that the narrator is more mystic than he leads others to believe.

The clash between pragmatism and mysticism is something we see in many of Haruki Murakami's writings. Through magical realism and complex psychological episodes, he describes the cultural and ideological clashes in his novels and stories. But what's unique about 'The Elephant Vanishes' is that the narrative proves itself to be not just 'a critique of the materialistic society' but something much more complex. He describes, at least in individual level, the inseparableness of pragmatism and mysticism even when one tries to discard one of them.

3.4 The Balance and the Unity

Balance has always been a central aspect in Japanese culture - the balance between man and nature, the balance between good and evil, the balance between the natural and the supernatural. Ironically it's also a central figure in a materialistic society, albeit in a completely different form.

The protagonist talks about the way the elephant vanished in a fateful night when he seemingly saw something amazing, a reduction of physical size of the elephant and (or) the gradual increase in the keeper's physical form shrinking the difference between them. Their imbalance disappeared as did they themselves later on. This event is

extremely allegorical as the old elephant and the old keeper both could represent Japanese norms which together vanished from the materialistic world where they were not welcome.

The elephant and the keeper are both said to be extremely fond of each other and not really cared for by anybody else, their departure from the physical may signify another clash between materialism and spiritualism creating an imbalance which interestingly isn't noticed by anyone else around them.

Unity is too a distinctive feature that brings the clash to the forefront as the elephant and its keeper represent one form of unity while the protagonist's kitchen sale pitch describes another. The protagonist mentions in the end,

"...People are looking for a kind of unity in this kit-chin we know as the world. Unity of design. Unity of color. Unity of function." (Murakami, 2003, p. 327)

It's almost poetic that the unity of human and nature is also the main tenet of Japanese spiritual identity like it is of the materialistic society. But what the materialistic society wants everyone to subscribe to is not only unity - its unity through uniformity, a monotonous and collective machinery made by the population stands in stark opposition to everything spiritualism stands for.

This denunciation of materialism in the story, as we will see in the following section, can be interpreted quite differently when we analyze it through a postmodern lens.

4. Postmodernist analysis of 'The Elephant Vanishes'

Analysis through a Postmodernist lens does allow us to gain important insights from *The Elephant Vanishes*, chief among them is the narration style. The plot itself is arranged (therefore the story has been told by the narrator in a manner) in a way that we can sense the newly transformed and materialistic society of Japan has, in lieu of replacing the spiritual nature of the society, has merged into the old way of life to create something entirely new which makes it tough to even determine the nature of current Japanese society.

This is an aspect which we can make clearer by studying the story through the lenses of postmodernism and the observation of Japanese society. Though the trend shown in the story, which is an accurate depiction of 1980s Japan,

predicts an ominous future, Japan of today is not a cesspool of human machines devoid of emotion and spirituality.

On the contrary, 64 percent Japanese to this day describe themselves as spiritual (The Japan Times Editorials, 2012) and yet a few research found that 57% of the people are not religiously affiliated (Cortez, 2016). There are temples and practicing Zen Buddhists in Tokyo and beyond. How to account for this drastic contradiction then?

First of all, it was never a straightforward change. It's true that Japan never did go back to its roots, it's a secular country and the postwar trend continues to this day making more than half of the country irreligious today, but they are spiritual. Japanese people have embraced both spiritualism and materialism in a form that they can belong to both worlds. While the clashes seen in *The Elephant Vanishes* still persist to this very day, Japan had to find a balance which it did. The 'battle' between spiritualism and materialism therefore doesn't end with the triumph of one ideology and annihilation of another; rather it ends with a compromise.

'*The Elephant Vanishes*' through its complex plotline does prove that the society didn't just turn into a westernized people stripped of all native values, rather discussion between the protagonist and journalist signify the fact that beyond the façade of mindless elements of a materialistic social order, the characters do love mysteries. They crave mysticism and through his many contradictory statements as well as 'un-pragmatic' works such as looking at an old elephant and its keeper until dark when they apparently disintegrate into nothingness, the protagonist proves beyond doubt that 'materialism and pragmatism' aren't the only things that determine his actions.

Another aspect which becomes apparent through this discussion is that Haruki Murakami accepts the inevitability of erosion. He accepts that the modern world can't remain static; indeed he doesn't seem to advocate for such a thing. Rather his protagonist comments something on the inevitability of erosion through an allegory - how the rainy season comes to wash away the memories of the summer,

"...washing away bit by bit the memories of summer

burned to earth. Coursing down the gutters, all those memories flowed into the sewers and rivers, to be carried to the deep, dark ocean." (Murakami, 2003, p. 318)

Like memories and people, culture and identity will too eventually erode and what's more grim is that the protagonist through his thinking knows pretty well that the 'pragmatic' society will have use for him only as long as he has utility, in time he too would be forgotten like the elephant and its keeper. It also signifies how the flow of time influences everything. It simply can't be stopped, time will march forward changing culture and identities.

Therefore, the solution to the 'problem' of the clash between spiritualism and materialism as well as changes to the Japanese society that many has been looking for might not exist, simply because it's not a problem at all. Postmodernist criticality points us towards a contradictory aspect of today's materialistic Japan which might shed some light on that. Zen Buddhism, Shintoism as well as other Japanese religious ideologies all support minimalism and control which too are accepted by many Japanese, something ironic in a materialistic society,

"...Everywhere you look in Japan there are clear and obvious associations with their Shinto and Buddhist spiritual history. In the concrete jungle of Tokyo it is not hard to spot an old shrine or a place of veneration, often nestled between completely modern structures. Japanese cities have a beautiful contrast between the old and the new, much of which is attributed to the presence and abundance of these well-maintained shrines." (Cortez, 2016)

Apart from the societal minimalism, the minimalistic approach of Murakami in this story (and of course many of his other stories and novels) should be unmistakably clear to a postmodernist. This particular aspect itself being an element of postmodernism, we find it easier to make interpretations of the story from a postmodernist viewpoint. One critic mentions this in relation to many of Murakami's short stories,

"One of the postmodern concepts used by Murakami in his works is minimalism; a style of writing in which the writer demonstrates characters that are unremarkable and events that are taken from everyday life." (Ravari & Bahadori, 2016, p. 55)

In 'The Elephant Vanishes', a similar picture can be seen where the protagonist remains unnamed (frankly every character remains unnamed except for the elephant's keeper) and the author tells the story through what seems to be a mundane description of everyday life. Yet within it, the unusual conversations, withheld information and curious breaks in the narration style lead us to doubt the narrator's various assertions and to search for meaning buried beneath the mysteries and 'mundaneness' of the plot.

Societies do tend to change and Japan has changed a lot in postwar period, but that isn't a linear conversion from one type to another. Rather than a blanket generalization, we should look at the uniqueness of a society which might leads us to identify the nature of change it has gone through. The Elephant Vanishes presents a Japanese society that's lost part of its identity because of rising materialistic aspiration but it hasn't forsaken spirituality.

The people of the city apparently want the elephant's disappearance to be a natural event but the protagonist alludes to the fact that they know it's not. The protagonist, during his job as a PR person talks about unity and balance, both of which are central features of Japanese spiritualism. Materialism and capitalist elements here help him express his true feelings which have a certain connection to spiritualism rather than trying to suppress it.

He can feel the intimate connection between the old elephant and its keeper although they do nothing special to show it. He, while trying to woo the girl at the lounge during their conversation, tells the mysterious affair of a vanishing elephant which he knows might not be a romantic story to tell. He doesn't stop and the girl doesn't want him to. All these help dispel the notion that the short story is a blanket denunciation of a materialistic Japan that has lost its spiritual identity.

Then, there are the contradictions. A post modernist analysis takes us to a direction where we can see something unique beyond the orthodox explanations regarding what the story tries to convey. Since the narrator himself remains ambivalent and suggestively contradictory throughout the story, we can't but think if he means everything he says. Postmodernism leads us to take his word with caution and allows us to think if we can see

through the fog of contradictions.

When he says, "The disappearance of one old elephant and one old elephant keeper would have no impact on the course of society" (Murakami, 2003, p. 318) ...does he really mean that maybe they do have real impact on the society...? Otherwise why would he, a pragmatic and calculative element of society, be so much conscious of it?

And when he describes in the following line how everyday work has been continuing despite the elephant's disappearance to tell us (apparently) that nothing has changed, what are we to make of that? If the elephant and its keeper were really part of the balance of the world, how can their disappearance be of no consequence? And in case they were never really part of the narrator's world, why bother thinking about them?

The final statement regarding the elephant and its keeper never coming back might be of similar nature too which leads us to assume they might just come back. And since people like Murakami as well as the protagonist in the story remain to tell others how the elephant had vanished, that may just make the elephant's existence relevant against.

According to that interpretation, the Japanese spiritualism will and should make a comeback in one form or another which is not a farfetched idea and something that has been perfectly put forward by a Japanese news media article titled "Spirituality on the rise" that says,

"...The highest percentage of Japanese ever – 64 percent – said they are now placing priority on "spiritual fulfillment" rather than "material richness"...." (The Japan Times Editorials, 2012)

IV. FINAL ASSESSMENTS AND CONCLUSION

The short story "The Elephant Vanishes" therefore has some very interesting aspects to look at which upon analyzing from a post modernist viewpoint bring us to a few major conclusions.

Though it is widely believed that clashes between spiritualism and materialism have been intense in postwar Japan where a westernized capitalist and materialistic Japan started creating a society that's fundamentally different from its former self, Murakami's 'The Elephant

Vanishes' alludes to the fact that there has to be a balance between the two ideologies for a spiritual society like Japan to survive. It can't solely live on pragmatism. The story is a brilliant depiction of a changing society but at the same time it proves, when analyzed closely, materialism and spiritualism don't act as binary opposition to each other in modern Japan as a formalist critic would have us believe, rather they have a certain balance between them. Japanese society today has not become completely devoid of spiritualism and the clash between two vastly different ideologies has created a new Japan that has a dual nature.

Then there is the ever marching motion of inevitability which can't be halted. Erosion of certain practices and cultural elements are therefore part of a society's evolving identity. It has been depicted in the story in a melancholic yet enjoyable way.

Finally, there are the implications and the suggestiveness in the story which from our postmodernist view can look like satire and optimism. The protagonist's ironic statement regarding writing and researching on something that "doesn't matter" convinces us that it does matter. In one form or another, spiritual awakening has to be amalgamated with modernism to save humanity which is something that has been taking place in Japan in various forms for years. The short story therefore is not a blanket denunciation of any ideology; rather it's an acknowledgement of inevitability which time brings and uniqueness of societies which adapt to different changes differently. It's not a description of battling ideas, rather its passionate narration of how ideas can coexist even if they are vastly different from each other.

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