



Literary Onomastics and Identity in Haruki Murakami's and Easterine Kire's Selected Novels

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Received: 16 Mar 2023; Received in revised form: 15 Apr 2023; Accepted: 22 Apr 2023; Available online: 29 Apr 2023

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Abstract— This paper attempts to study the significance of naming in the literary context of two selected works of Haruki Murakami and Easterine Kire respectively. Along with this, the study of the process of self-introspection that is revealed through the protagonists will also be undertaken. The blurring of the surreal and the real by Murakami, much like the magical realist novels, play a pivotal role in the formation of the protagonists' selves. In Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud*, the lack that the main protagonist feels is initiated by stories narrated to him during his childhood. This lack is subsequently intensified in the later years, when the protagonist's family is wiped out when a drought affects their village. Like the Murakamian world, the world that Kire creates in her novel is a concoction of the surreal and the real. In the works of these authors, the fragmentation inherent in the characters is dealt with, often through the exodus of the main protagonists. This 'reaching out', more often than not, entails a re-telling of the past both literally and metaphorically. Reconciliation with the past is crucial for the future. In the course of this ordeal, the main protagonists' search for meaning behind their names and the name of their acquaintances becomes a prerequisite for the formation of identity. This initially entails a process of disintegration of the 'self', or broadly, the 'subject'. The paper will also lay emphasis on the study of how the protagonists try to attain integration from disintegration.

Keywords— literary onomastics, self, subject, integration, disintegration/fragmentation, reconciliation.

The relevance of onomastics as the study of personal names and places has been established in the study of varied disciplines, and at the same time, its redundancy has also been argued upon. Particularly in relation to naming places, onomastics comes in as an inevitable means to direct one's knowledge about a certain place. This derivation of meaning from onomastics also entails historical, geographical, social, cultural, political, ethnic and even psychological understanding of a physiological landscape. Pertaining to personal names, it is a tacit fact acknowledged by many that personal attributes and aptitude are linked to the source of any given name. Along these bases, literary onomastics leans towards the study of the names of literary characters and settings, fictional and non-fictional. It can be an attempt to explore meanings behind literary appellation, few instances would be: 1) Do the name of places have any bearing upon the characters' temperament, other than the characteristic milieu attributed

due to its name? 2) Are the characters driven to self-identification by exploring the significance of their given name? 3) Does naming affect the way an individual identifies with others? Though these instances, among many others, may not always spell out to be inherently imperative in the study of every available literary text, they do play a crucial role in determining the meaning that can be derived from many literary texts. Usually, "literary name-giving" is "reserved for when the core of the study is the literary text and its proper names." (Nicolaisen 1986:6) However, it may be cautiously insisted upon that interpretation and analysis of a literary text rest heavily upon the reader. Thus, certain autonomy can be vested upon the readers and critics who may see or work beyond the task that a particular literary text offers.

Since literary onomastics deals with the personal, it is intrinsically betrothed with identity. Even in general

observation, naming is one of the foremost indicator of an individual's identity. A child's initial identification of her/himself takes place with the recognition of her/his name, this also shapes the cognitive development of a child through the establishment of her/his difference from others. When the child encounters someone with the same name then aspects of bonding simultaneously emerge. These innuendos are no less significant than the purpose or reason behind name-giving. When the child comes of age, then interrogation or derivation of meaning behind her/his name takes shape. In literature, Wamitila argues, "Characters' names...can be used artistically to achieve a number of goals like encoding a central trait in particular characters' signification, embracing crucial thematic motifs, ideological toning as well as even showing the particular writer's point of view." (1994:35) It becomes implicit that literary onomastics mirrors an individual's (or character) sense of self and also the relationship that the individual forges for her/his "namesake".

The two contemporary writers selected for the study, Haruki Murakami and Easterine Kire, though culturally and topographically set apart share a common ground in terms of surreal and sometimes fantastic settings in their works. Murakami is an international best selling Japanese writer, whose works are manifestations of the human psyche. Insights into the characters' psyche along with the disclosure of the characters' peculiar traits make Murakami's works strangely popular. Kire, on the other hand, has been acknowledged as the first Naga writer to publish writings in the English language. She currently lives in Norway where she continues to write mainly about the cultural, political, and ethnic heritage and scenarios of Nagaland. Murakami has often been accused of being "westernized" because of the individualistic postmodern strain in his novels, and mostly because his writings are strewn with western innuendoes. However, it may be argued upon that certain innuendoes have become universal, and the portrayal of the plight of an individual has become universal too. One may fervently add that an individual writer does not become less historically or culturally inclined because s/he chooses to write about universal concerns, or is physically located outside the said premises.

The texts that have been specifically selected for study are: *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*¹ by Murakami, and *Son of the Thundercloud* by Kire. *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki* is a narrative about the protagonist and his search for self-integration. It can be discerned that right from the outset there is something lacking in Tsukuru, the narrative goes, "something about him that wasn't exactly normal, something that set him

apart." (11) For one thing, the first evidence that sets him apart is initiated by the names of his four friends: "their last names all contained a color", (6) while his name, Tsukuru simply means "to make or build". (44) His friends are nicknamed, taking the root of their last names thus, Aka (red), Ao (blue), Shiro (white), and Kuro (black). Tsukuru often mused, "How great would it be...if I had a color in my name too. Then everything will be perfect." (6) Even though this may be the case, the bond that he shares with his friends is something extraordinarily special, so much so that they are more "like an extension" of his "own body." (30) Then, the discernible disintegration happens when during his sophomore year in college, his four best friends estrange him for no apparent reason. The "otherness" that Tsukuru has felt all the while because of his "colorless" name materializes through this inexplicable incident. When constant efforts of reconciliation with his friends fail, Tsukuru begins to "sleepwalk" through life, "as if he had already died but not yet noticed it." (2) He cannot think straight "as if the folds of his brain were a broken screw." (27) The intensity of meaning(s) attached to naming is felt, so far, in the novel's course of action. Nicolaisen is of the opinion that, "If one accepts [certain] premises, then onomastics, the study of names of any kind is, on its most profound level, to be understood as a discipline which engages in the exploration of the landscape of the human psyche..." (1986:140)

Tsukuru's sense of peculiarity and "otherness" is given a brief hiatus when he came across an article that says that "half the people in the world dislike their own name". (48) There seems to be a momentary relief to think that he is not alone in the battle with one's own name. It is also no exception that the reason behind Tsukuru's battle with his name has a lot to do with the relationship that he forges with his friends. It has been laid down that "Names, as products of the linguistic gesture of identifying reference, only make sense, only have meaning, if you will, in relation with other names." (Nicolaisen 1986:140) The "colored" friends surrounding him become faces reminding him of his own "colorless" name. This façade is internalized as a sense of fragmentation which is again intensified by his friends' action against him. During the next five months after his estrangement, Tsukuru drowns himself in a bottomless pit of self-aggravation. "Colors he'd once seen appeared completely different, as if they'd been covered by a special filter", everything around him appears colorless, "with no light to speak of. No sun, no moon or stars." (33)

Left alone and perplexed, the only alternative for Tsukuru is to fend for himself. He begins to muse upon the viable significance of his name. His father's name is Toshio

¹ Referred to as *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki* henceforth

Tazaki- "Toshio spelled out in characters that meant 'man who profits,' Tazaki literally meaning 'many peninsulas.'" (50), a fitting name for a man who is in the real estate business. It was his father who gave Tsukuru his name before his birth, struggling to decide how to write the character – the complex character meaning to "create" or the more simple one meaning "to make" or "build", and decided after a long haul to go with the simpler character. Tsukuru's mother tells him,

"Your father felt that giving you the character for "create" would be a burden to you,... The simpler character was also read as Tsukuru, and he thought it was more easygoing, comfortable sort of name. You should know, at least, that your father thought long and hard about it. You were his first son, after all." (49)

The significance of naming itself is immediately brooded upon by Tsukuru, if he had not been given a name he would have been "nothing- dark, nameless chaos and nothing more." (49) With due appreciation for his father's initiation to name him, Tsukuru still labors about the "burden" that he has to carry for his name, given the circumstances that he is in. During the five months of internalizing the burden of being alone, Tsukuru feels the dying of his old self. The euphoric moment comes when he is visited by a woman in his dream, a woman who is willing to give away either her heart or her body. He burns with the desire of the "whole" of this woman and at the same time, angered at the thought of her giving away either "half" of her to someone else. When Tsukuru wakes up he realizes the gravity of his dream, he cannot give away 'half' of what he is to the mind wrecking rift that has separated him from his friends, either that, or his old self has to be buried to give birth to a new self. He chooses the latter, and from what remains of his new emerging self, Tsukuru begins to learn that it is "a sort of quiet resignation. A colorless, neutral, empty feeling." (40) Getting accustomed to this feeling, he also learns that "he grew used to this new self... It was like acquiring a new language, memorizing the grammar." (42)

A flicker of hope enters Tsukuru's life when he meets Haida, a freshman at his college. Haida means "gray field", "Another person with a color, Tsukuru mused. Mister Gray. Though gray, of course, was a fairly subdued color." (45) True to the color in his name, Haida turns out to be fairly mystifying, a gray shade whose nature one cannot totally grasp. The intervention of this shade in Tsukuru's life is nevertheless significant; Haida's re- telling of his father's story (which, of course, has to be interpreted between its "gray" ambiguous lines) becomes instrumental. In Haida's narrative, his father once met a man named Midorikawa, meaning, "green river", who told the latter that

every individual exudes "an unique color, which shines faintly around the contours of their body. Like a halo. Or a backlight." (71) This peculiar man carried a bag with him all the time and he later told Haida's father that the bag contains a "death token" which was secured in his hands by another man, giving him only a month left before his imminent death. If he wished, he could pass on this token to Haida's father, who exuded an engaging and illuminating color, but he chose to keep it with himself so that the latter would have the chance to lead a fruitful life (given from what is disclosed at the conversation: making the best out of one's life, to find a "meaning" in life). For Tsukuru, the "green" in Midorikawa can represent regeneration, a life giving element. Even though Haida's act of leaving Tsukuru after six months of acquaintance has the latter baffled, a piece of puzzle has been placed in the right space in the fragmentary subject that is Tsukuru. With the minute details of Tsukuru's new self being patched up, he has yet another nerve wrecking proposition to undergo- confronting the past through the interrogation of his friends. He has still a long way to go to "make" or "build" his new identity.

Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud* is a surreal narrative about a man named Pelevotso, whom everyone calls Pele. The giver of his name, his grandmother insisted on calling him Pelevotso which means "faithful to the end". When she decided to name him so, the other family members were uncertain with it, but she sternly added, "we cannot continue to give our children safe and insignificant names. It is a way of stopping them from living powerful lives, and making sure they don't wander too far from the village." (12) Pelevotso, right from when he was christened with a name was steered towards a life of being a wanderer. His grandmother's wish for him comes true when his wife and children die due to a famine that coldly and unexpectedly struck their village. "He never once look[s] back" as he undertakes an uncompromising journey. (15) Perhaps, in order to make his name meaningful, he has to undertake this journey, which means leaving behind everything there is about his 'past' and being more or less 'reborn'. Even Tsukuru, in this instance, has delimited the boundary of his past- his old self, to help build himself a new self.

What seems to be a sudden exodus on the part of Pelevotso is initiated by one particular story that his grandmother related to him in his childhood. It is the story of a widow whose husband and sons were killed by a tiger; it so happened that on a sunny day while she was out drying paddy, a thunderstorm suddenly struck and one raindrop fell on her. Miraculously, she became pregnant, just from a single raindrop and gave birth to a son. Much like the Midorikawa story that is found in *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*, this core re- telling of the story of the tiger widow generates life. Pele's grandmother had concluded the story by adding

that this entire story will be played out again, she fervently hoped that it would be in Pelevotso's lifetime- because he would remain "faithful to the end". Though the cause and means of Pelevotso's faithfulness is yet to be put on ground, what is laid bare is the fact that he is on the run from death to a more fruitful life- he is headed towards the Village of Weavers, where there is, as he is told, plentiful food and water.

There is a mountain that Pele has to climb through before reaching the Village of Weavers which is inhabited by two sisters named Kethonuo meaning "truth" and Siedze meaning "future full of hope." (34) Pele spends the night at the desolate and dilapidated inhabitation shared by these women. They tell him about their fervent wait for rain which, as they relate would come after seven hundred years of drought, a harbinger of the coming of the son of the thundercloud. The duo has lived, solely dependent on their names for all these centuries, their flesh and bones barely hanging for the moment when the story they tell will materialize. Their "wait" seems to be just a story, but for them it is the "truth" and their only "hope". The same night, there comes a heavy downpour of rain, and the next morning, the three amazed characters wake up to find the earth replenished from centuries of drought. The two sisters accompany Pele to the Village of Weavers, where Pele meets their very own sister, the tiger widow, Mesanuo, meaning "the pure one". Mesanuo excitedly tells them the news of her pregnancy from a single drop of rain, to which Pele exclaims, "'You are the woman they speak of in my village! The one whose husband and seven sons were killed by a tiger!'" (37) Mesanuo gives birth to a son, the son of the thundercloud in fact, and names him Rhalietuo, "the redeemer." (51) After this miraculous birthing, the earth is replenished and the villagers constantly talk about the miracle that has been bestowed on them through the tiger widow and her son. The Village of Weavers symbolically and indiscernibly becomes a place where narratives are weaved for each individual's benefit.

Stories become reality in *Son of the Thundercloud*, as when in *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*, Tsukuru feels the boundary of Haida's story and reality overlapping. (65) As time passes in *Son of the Thundercloud*, and Rhalietuo comes of a certain age when he can participate in hunting, the story of his miracle birth has left the minds of the villagers. They no longer choose to believe what they had witnessed and experienced. The "dark ones", according to Mesanuo, are a group of people who sent famines and droughts, and they always "came after the storytellers, and they let their minds grow dark and began to oppose the storytellers and the work they did." (64) When the storytellers are no more, then "people slowly forgot what they had been told, or believed they were just myths, and

they allowed their minds to accept the darkness." (64) Even so, after the Village of Weavers chooses to obstruct their storytelling strand by choosing to believe in the "plausible rather than what is miraculous", (116) the legendary life of Rhalietuo has to end. He is killed by his so-called friends during a tiger hunting spree. The living legends, Rhalietuo, along with his mother and aunts all pass when people give up the narrating of stories. Pelevotso, however, remains "faithful to the end" by choosing to believe that he has relived the past, and will continue to be the bearer of stories that have been weaved. He remarks, "'I actually feel...reborn- if I may use such term. Things that I learned as I was growing up no longer fit or belong, and this is the only reality I want to hold on to'" (94-5)

Tsukuru in Murakami's *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki* also takes a plunge into the world outside his familiar zone by confronting each of his friends about their past action. He, in more ways than one, has to re-live the past too. Along this journey, he finds out that Shiro was the reason of his estrangement from his friends. She had accused him of rape and Kuro had initiated their action against Tsukuru. He also finds out that Shiro died an unnatural death and this haunts Tsukuru, who used to have a dream of explicit content involving both Shiro and Kuro, the two girls in their group of friends. The dream ultimately went away when Haida told him the story about his father and Midorikawa, but its exit happened with the same dream, ultimately involving Haida himself. With all these perplexing workings of what Tsukuru calls the "unconscious", the ultimate resolution for him happens when he meets Kuro at Finland; true to his last name- Tazaki "many peninsulas", Tsukuru crosses many peninsulas to find an inner peace, much like Pelevotso. He ultimately chooses to reconcile with the trace of reality that inhabits his "unconscious"; that he actually had a desire for Shiro and he somehow killed her unconsciously. Kuro also confesses about the feeling she used to have for Tsukuru and hypothetically sums up that she must have something to do with Shiro's death, mainly due to jealousy. For Tsukuru, Kuro's assessment of him somehow propels him to a site of positivism:

"Let's say you *are* an empty vessel. So what? What's wrong with that?... You're still a wonderful, attractive vessel. And really, does *anybody* know who they are? So why not be completely beautiful vessel? The kind people feel good about, the kind people want to entrust with precious belongings." (260)

In the texts that have been analyzed, the protagonists, Tsukuru and Pelevotso become guardians of the stories that are weaved through the narrative. They choose to believe in the stories that people narrate, and they also acknowledge

the gravity of reality being weaved in others' stories. In this case, their "identities are orienting, they provide a meaning-making lens." (Leary and Price 2012:69) The meanings that are derived from their identities are drawn from other individuals as well as the workings of their own psyche-which may at times draw materials from the past. Along the same lines, "a feeling of stability can emerge whether [individuals] have a motivation to perceive the self as stable or not." (Leary and Price 2012:74) The fluidity of identity is spelled out through the protagonists. Tsukuru gains momentary stability as he confronts his past, but after his return to Tokyo, he sees his girlfriend Sarah who has been the driving force in his confrontation of the past, being happy and complete as never seen before in the arms of another man. Pelevotsu is about to wander again, closing the chapter of living in the past, nevertheless hopeful that another narrative will come to be lived, or re-lived. The future that is in stake for the protagonists is filled with many possibilities, which may propel the protagonists or hamper their development as identifying subjects.

In the analysis of the significance of proper names, it can be observed from what have been discussed, that personal names are given more significance than names of places as "place- names tend to be resolutely practical and personal names tend to be conventional or aspirational." (Cavill 2016:3) In any case, the protagonists' drive towards a deeper understanding of their names, in relation to others and their own psyche prove to be motivational and even self-reconciliatory.

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