

Cognitive unreliability in the narrative of Haruki Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase*

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Abstract: The study examines the narrative's multifacetedness and how it represents the cognitive unreliability of the nameless narrator in Haruki Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase*. Haruki Murakami, in his renowned Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech, known as "Wall and Egg," poignantly critiques the powerful political system of the world, linking it to a formidable stone wall, and representing individuals as fragile who inevitably collide with unyielding forces like corporate, governmental, and quasi-governmental organisations. This metaphor underscores the vulnerability of individuals in the face of oppressive societal structures. It is a novel which is fragmented with a first-person narrative, which constantly shifts from the present to the past. And later, it gets entwined with the history of sheep in Japan, and metaphysical elements. Cognitive unreliability is a blend of narrative unreliability and cognitive narratology of the narration. It focuses on cognitive dissonance, genre conflict, and intratextual conflict present in the narrative. It tries to further explore the perception, memory and emotion manifested within the narrative. The inconsistency represented in the narrative shows the psychological distortion created by Murakami to dissonate the reality of the characters.

Keywords: cognitive, dissonance, psychological, distortion, multifacetedness

Granted, everything I tell you now is mere words. Arrange them and rearrange them as I might, I will never be able to explain to you the form of will the Boss possesses. My explanation would only show the correlation between myself and that will be done by means of a correlation on the verbal level. (Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase*)

Introduction

The historiography of narrative or narratology is quite nonlinear in process; emphasis on narrative that first appears in Vladimir Propp's

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analysis of folktale, and the identification of *ostranenie* by Victor Shklovsky show ‘how’ the narrative functions. The profound growth of narrative function shows an inclination towards the concept of ‘Embodied Mind’ by Francisco Varela. As per Monika Fludernik, Russian formalism is considered to be the childhood era of ‘Proto narratology.’ In French structuralism (1960s-1980s), the narrative analysis focus on spatial and temporal qualities of the narratives as explored by Gerard Genette, Tzvetan Todorov, and Roland Barthes. According to Monika Fludernik, this French era is supposed to be the golden age of narratology. Postcolonial narratology is a second-generation narrative term coined by David Herman, where narratology becomes interdisciplinary, integrating ideological, cultural, historical, feminist, and cognitive perspectives. According to Dan Shen, narratology has evolved from structuralism to poststructuralism, from formalism to contextualism and from classical to postclassical approaches. Notably, despite being a postcolonial form, *cognitive narratology* emphasises the analysis of narrative structure and abstract pattern. Ansgar Nunning puts forward a narratology that shifts textual analysis to a dynamic interplay between the spatial and temporal qualities of culture, text, and the reader’s cognitive process. In the words of Farmasi Lilla,

... traditional narratology, the object of narratological research is not the “what” but the “how of storytelling, which means that researchers should pay attention to structures and workings (how is it represented, with what strategies, etc.) instead of the content of a narrative (i.e. what it is actually about). This approach allows narratologists to theorise about universal themes and problems, such as the narrator or the plot in general. Postclassical narratologies, especially feminist or postcolonial approaches, often focus on the “what” of narratives, and even add the “why” to their most important questions, hence “contaminating” the previously clear and objective field with ideologies and relativism according to some proponents of classical narratology. Cognitive approaches- to which this thesis wishes to contribute- in this respect seem to return to the examination of the old “how” of traditional narratology. (Lilla 2019, 25)

Unreliable narration, in contrast to reliable narration, challenges the credibility of a narrative by deviating from established norms and conventions or expectations, thereby creating ambiguity and uncertainty. According to Kathleen Wall, reliable narration involves sticking to conceptual facts, language should be transparent, and there should be a constructive alignment of thoughts. In contrast, an unreliable narration is characterised by its challenging, disrupting,

disorienting effects which question the rational expectation and blur boundaries. There is an internal contradiction between the utterance and the action of the narrator, who is detached. Silke Catherin Zimmerman's "Intratextual Dissonance" highlights inconsistencies within the text, such as shifts in narrative voices, temporal or logical incoherence, and extratextual frameworks like the reader's mind, aporias, etc. This research paper analyses the unreliability of the Nameless Narrator in Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase* at the cognitive level.

Cognitive narratology is a postclassical narrative approach that examines texts through the nexus between narration and mind. It is "transmedial" in nature, focusing on the perception, memory, and emotion manifested within the narrative. This approach explores how narrators shape events, recall and construct narratives, and make sense of what they experience. Cognitive narration examines how narrative representations reflect and shape mental processes, revealing the dynamic interplay between perception, experiences and cognitive organisation. The shift in emotion, memory, and thought often evokes a state of 'cognitive dissonance' that leads to an unreliability in the narration.

Cognitive unreliability refers to the intersection of *cognitive narratology*, which examines the mental processes behind a narrative, and *unreliable narration*, challenges the conventional code of conduct or conceptual facts within a narrative. This research paper aims to analyse cognitive dissonance in narration, genre conflicts, intratextual dissonance involving alternative and conflicting voices, and temporal inconsistencies within the narrative. A text might be considered reliable when it aligns with known psychological frameworks, historical facts, or scientific principles.

The nameless narrator in *A Wild Sheep Chase* does not evidently display any traits of cognitive dissonance. However, the narrative's fragmentation and tension between the first-person perspective and shared or embedded narratives (such as those of the Rat, the Black-Suit Guy, and the Sheep Mam) generate a dissonant structure. The narration oscillates between history, memory, and metaphysics, producing cognitive dissonance not within the narrator's mind but the entire narrative structure and, upon close examination, within the reader's mind. The 'signifier' (narrative) tends to create a 'signified' (narration) that is elusive in nature.

Murakami Haruki gensho is translated as “Haruki Phenomenon,” delving into the *Kokusai-ka* (internationalisation) and *gurobaruka* (globalisation) of Murakami Mania that has spread all around the world. This phenomenon is characterised by Murakami’s unique ability to captivate a global audience with his narratives. His characters are often portrayed as alienated to an urban lifestyle, which exhibits a distinctively detached taste that resonates with broad and diverse readers around the world.

A Wild Sheep Chase (2003), translated by Alfred Birnbaum and initially published in Japanese in 1982, begins with the nameless narrator reading an obituary of an unidentified woman from his college days, described as “who would sleep with anyone” (Murakami 2003, 5). He is a 29-year-old man, bored and lonely, living with a nameless cat and running a PR agency with his friend, an agency that, like many other elements in Murakami’s world, remains unnamed. Murakami’s tendency to withhold names is a dominant feature of his narrative style. A name provides a sense of identity and certainty; without one, a character becomes subaltern, subordinate, insignificant, or even erased from recognition. Murakami himself states that “Cognition that is the fantasy, the man cut in” (Ibid, 120): the real fantasy is not the Boss’ idea, but rather ‘cognition’ itself. It is believed that humans can truly understand and define reality through thinking, but it is an illusion.

Review of literature

Several scholars have examined Haruki Murakami’s *A Wild Sheep Chase* through the lens of philosophy, existential reality, and historical consciousness. Laura Emily Clark explored Japanese masculinity through Mikhail Bakhtin’s heteroglossia and R. W. Connell’s hegemonic masculinity. Japanese salarymen are seen as ideal from the outside, but internally they exhibit the signs of convenience’s sake-fragmented, contradictory, and plural voices. Such a difference will offer cognitive unreliability. Rhys Tyers appraises Murakami’s *A Wild Sheep Chase* as a metaphysical detective novel which subverts traditional detective novels. The maze of unreliable narrative does not have epistemological closure. This dissonance deliberately disorients the reader’s mind. Furthermore, David Joel Benhammou’s thesis is a historical exploration of sheep and its relation to the Japanese war and Hokkaido. Sheep’s diabolical nature resembles ideological and institutional control over people. It is an embedded narrative where realism, surrealism, and historical consciousness are layered, yet it

remains unreliable. None of the works explore cognitive unreliability, which is explicitly presented in the narrative. This research attempts to bring out cognitive unreliability in the narrative.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative research method grounded in literary and theoretical interpretations. The study focuses on Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase* to expound on the dissonant narrative, which leads to cognitive unreliability. The primary source of the research is the novel itself, examined in accordance with the selected theoretical and critical framework. In the theoretical grounding provided by Ansgar F. Nünning's concept of unreliable narration, David Herman's concept of cognitive narratology, and Leon Festinger's 'cognitive dissonance' are applied to the narrative. This framework can highlight the cognitive unreliability in the narrative.

Cognitive dissonance in the narrative

'Cognitive dissonance' is a term first introduced by Leon Festinger in 1957. It discusses psychological disequilibrium, in which the person experiences a state of 'difference' Barend Van Heuden explains it as the non-linearity of the mental state, with thought and action conflicting with each other. In Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the inconsistency transcends the psychological perspective since the dissonance happens at the level of narrative. The narrative is constantly dissonant throughout the story, caught between short-lived, arbitrary elements and a predetermined, non-coincidental definite order. The dream of a cow chasing a pair of pliers, parallel to the nameless narrator's search for the Sheep and his missing friend, named Rat. The dream itself is a symbolic representation of the narrative, both arbitrary and predetermined. The cow's search for pliers fails; thus, the absurd and existential quest of the narrator is quite Kafkaesque. As Joe Cooper (2007, 24) rightly points out, "an action is different from an attitude which, in turn, is different from an observation of reality".

When the narrator enters the "Warm" universe as Murakami portrays it, the narration becomes a symbolic representation of the Boss -the epicentre of the narrative. The narrative constantly moves in and out between the Building and the Boss: the Building, an ancient structure that has lost its original shape, stands solitarily detached from its surroundings and later evolves unquestioningly into an architectural marvel in its own right. On the other hand, the Boss is an ordinary man

from a farming family in Hokkaido, who, after being possessed by the Sheep, evolves into an immense power, almost like a mythical figure. The Boss turned into a quasi-governmental authority that can control the media, military and corporate.

A constant psychic tension is sustained in the reader through the fluid movement of the narrative between the temporal and spatial boundaries, such as the building, and the Boss is both aspatial and atemporal because mythical sheep bestowed his power, and the narrative refuses to stay grounded. Joel Cooper (2007, 4) in his work *Cognitive Dissonance*, states that this kind of "... dramatic inconsistency would create the state of cognitive dissonance." Even the Black Suit Guy warns the narrator that if he refuses to go on a search for sheep, his PR Agency will be demolished without a trace. This psychological coercion is "... caught in an inconsistency among their belief, behaviors, and observation of reality" (Ibid, 5).

Festinger divides cognition into "consistent" and "inconsistent", and the discrepancy is calculated by the degree of incongruence. Festinger and Carlsmith's (1959) case study came up with a term, 'induced compliance,' which discusses "the discrepancy between believing the task was boring but saying it was exciting created cognitive dissonance. But dissonance is not just about discrepancy. It is also about cognitions consistent with the behavior. The cognition about the inducement was such a cognition" (Cooper 2007, 17). After hearing the story of a sheep with a star-shaped mark on its back, and it has the power to possess people, the nameless narrator states that "This all has got to be, patently, the most unbelievable, the most ridiculous story I have ever heard" (Murakami 2003, 124). Nevertheless, the nameless narrator embarked on the quest for the sheep. This exemplifies a psychological dissonance between what the narrator believes and how he chooses to act. The bureaucratic language and the surreal logic of the Boss and his people disorient the narrator's autonomy. The intricate conflict between randomness and order keeps the reader in constant interpretational dissonance, reflecting the narrator's divergent reality.

In the seminal experiment of Elliot Aronson and Jud Mills, it is stated that "one way of reducing cognitive dissonance was to find something wonderful about the experience that would be inconsistent with, or justify, the suffering" (Cooper 2007, 22). In Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase*, his cognitive dissonance in narrative creates an induced compliance. The narrative unfolds with a nameless narrator

who is in search of sheep, which follows as a series of inconsistencies and distortions that resist epistemic stability.

Moreover, psychological disorientation is evident not only in the nameless narrator, but also in *Rat* highlights the pervasive nature of the theme. Narrator is portrayed as someone who lacks a “religious temperament, or an artistic temperament, or a psychic temperament” (Murakami 2003, 78) and admits, “I think I’ve gradually lost my sense of time” (Ibid, 75). Murakami deliberately detaches the narrator from any spiritual or moral order (religious), emotionally flat and insensitive (artistic), and remains passive (psychic). The narrative is set in a nameless town in Hokkaido, and the narrative employs this ambiguous location to blur the boundaries between consciousness and the unconscious, reflecting Murakami’s distinctive narrative technique. These suggest that *Rat* is the one who initially comes into contact with the sheep or its power, but ultimately proves incapable of bearing it, thereby transferring the burden onto the narrator. His psychological instability, along with the ambiguous space of the nameless town, reinforces the narrative’s ongoing cognitive dissonance, where perception, memory and responsibility are constantly in flux.

In 1936, the Japanese Military ordered the sheep professor to come back to Japan from the Manchurian-Mongolian border. This return and the sheep professor’s background allude to the Japanese colonial invasion and displacement. During his return, he had a vivid dream in which a Sheep asked him to let it inside his body. Since it was a dream, the sheep professor passively agreed to the sheep’s vessel. His realm of consciousness was shattered as a consequence, showing a cognitive dissonance in the sheep professor because all the decisions are made by sheep. Despite thinking of it as phantasmagoric or hallucinatory, he believes that he was turned into a vessel, which shows that there was a consequent fracture between Lucidity and oblivion. Murakami’s plausible narrative is picturesquely centralised, that is, intangible, implausible and irreversible, and more verisimilar.

The time shift alternates between the time of *Rat*’s letter and the narrative present, where the narrator faces the consequences of the photo attached to the letter that *Rat* has given. The Nameless Narrator uses the photo offered by *Rat* as an advertisement for the life insurance company, which induces the anarchic figure, the Black Suit Guy, into the narrative, who blackmails the narrator into searching for the Sheep in the photo. Suddenly, the narrative concerns about the hills and mountains that are bulldozed to expand the cities and roads and the

chaos that initially shaped the world are currently nullified. The nameless narrator ponders over parenthood, and eventually the narrative turns towards authorisation of the river, which created the town from the beginning, not the town. These shifts between the narratives disrupt the coherence and logical meaning of the text. The text has a conflicting viewpoint, which shows a narrative unreliability.

Genre conflict in the narrative

Narratively, the genre conflict reflects a mutation between multiple thematic strands, where one can find a deliberate juxtaposition of different narrative forms that challenges traditional genre boundaries, producing a hybrid narrative that promotes fragmentation and resists categorisation. In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the narrative is fragmented across various modes: the quest for the Sheep a “holy grail”-like the journey is interspersed with the historical account of sheep in Japan, the embedded narrative of the Rat, the spectre-like presence of the Sheep Man, Susan Naiper (1995, 96) in her *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature*, states that

...a quest for a phantom sheep which is both monstrous in its bizarre powers and ghostlike in its ability to summon up certain hidden aspects of modern Japanese history....

The complexity of the alien brings forth appropriately complex and memorable literary treatments. Indeed, fantasies of the alien in modern Japanese fiction contain some of the best and most powerful works of modern Japanese literature, especially in the short story form. Many of these fantasies are of what I term the “internal alien”, works where the alien presence is an interior, psychological one.

The sudden insertion of sheep history reveals that China introduced sheep to another East-Asian country, Japan during the Heian period. After the Ansei era, sheep disappeared. The nameless narrator and other characters who are disengaged from their roots, but quest for a phantom lead to the rediscovery of history, and “Japanese Empire’s prewar activities in Manchuria” (Murakami 2003, 206) that is something that the current Japanese people want to cut down from their memory. Murakami seems to parody and deconstruct the genre itself, turning the “quest” into a satirical and absurd narrative and the “detective search” into an introspective void, making the novel a metafictional commentary on storytelling.

The narrative elaborates: “... before the end of the late feudal period there probably was not one sheep in all of Japan; and that once

imported, sheep were subjected to rigorous government checks” (Ibid, 111). Moreover, there is a sudden commotion of the world’s mediocrity, which Murakami discusses. The exposition of Murakami’s mediocrity states that

In the beginning, the world was chaos, and chaos is not mediocre. The mediocratization began when people separated the means of production from daily life. When Karl Marx posited the proletariat, he thereby cemented their mediocrity, and precisely because of this, Stalinism formed a direct link with Marxism. I affirm Marx. He was one of those rare geniuses whose memory extended back to primal chaos. And by the same token, I have high regard for Dostoyevsky. Nonetheless, I do not hold in favour of Marxism. It is far too mediocre” (Murakami 2003,115).

Suddenly, there is a parallel narrative of how Boss becomes a quasi-omniscient figure, and how it is connected to mythical sheep, and a blood cyst, which gives Boss power and the American Intelligence’s interrogation of Boss. The Black-Suit Guy believed that the Boss might have undergone severe cross-examination, as he had resisted imperial government. In prison, if the prisoner tried to sleep, water would be splashed on their face, and they would be beaten with bamboo sticks or shone torch light on them, which leads to disrupting sleep patterns. This might be a plausible hypothesis for Boss’s blood cyst. Boss is the 3rd son of a farming family in Hokkaido. At the age of 12, Boss left home and went to Korea and returned to Japan as a right-wing activist and when he re-returned to Japan with blood cyst he was rise to the top ladder in Japanese hierarchy.

In short, Boss became “... a revolution of labor incarnating capital and capital incorporating labor” (Murakami 2003, 120). Usually, labourers and capital are separate in society. However, the Boss made a revolution where labour and capital became part of each other. “Crime-occult double” is a phrase taken from *A Wild Sheep Chase* itself, where Murakami’s narrator talks about a movie, but here the researcher considers the novel itself as a crime-occult double. The novel juxtaposes between metaphysical detective fiction, surreal-occult fiction, and historical fiction.

In the middle of nowhere, the narrative turns its gaze towards the origin, development and destruction of Junitaki Township as an embedded narrative. Now, a detailed account on Junitaki Township, which was a name given by the territorial government in 1889, people started living in 1881 with the help of Ainu Youth, a farmer group of

18, with the head of the family living there. Junitaki is a fictional location created by Murakami.

Shunya Yoshimi (2000) in his article “Consuming ‘America’: from Symbol to System” states that Tokyo Disneyland is a precedent symbolic representation of ‘Americanization.’ It is no longer a transformation but an internalised or mutated cultural influence that is embedded within the Japanese consumer society. Murakami’s characters are culturally re-coded in their lifestyle, consumer habits, and symbolic identification, and it is visible in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* ([1985] 1991). Murakami’s genre-blending internalises the philosophical reflection, like mediocrity or Mythical/Fantastical Biography of Boss or Junitaki Township documentary style narrative.

Intratextual conflict

In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the unattributed cat of the nameless narrator is a symbol of narrative fragmentation in the postmodern tradition. In general, animals have symbolic names, attributes or functions that place them in a moral or allegorical context. However, Murakami twists this convention, offering a cat that is nameless like the protagonist’s own ambiguous identity. This lack of a name challenges the reader’s expectations, based on previous reads, producing a contradiction. Vanishing into this silence, without origin, the cat becomes a metafictional device, pointing out how the novel subverts not just plot and character but inherited literary form itself.

The narrator shifts focus onto the ‘stud ram’—the breeding male surrounded by females in a harem. On the surface, it sounds like a privilege, but the narrator considers the stud ram to become a symbol of objectification, exploitation, and pressure. The stud ram symbolises the Boss or any influential societal figure- seemingly revered, but ultimately a tool within a layer of a ruthless system. Once his strength is gone, he is no longer protected or respected. This reflects the novel’s broader theme: the illusion of power, the cost of being useful, the loneliness and disposability of those at the top, the violence of competition and dominance.

Conclusion

Murakami’s artistic creation and the topological schema of the novel are the unrepresentable core of cognitive movement. This echoes the common phrase ‘life is uncertain’ and it is unreliable as Monika

Fludernik (2005, 3) states "... tale of frustrated mastery over the symbolic 'other' the natural thus operated both as the prime signifier and the elusive signified". Eventually, the cognitive unreliability of the narrative becomes the *effet de réel* as Roland Barthes (1968) states in *The Reality Effect*. There is a constant representation of the narrative of narrative temporality (time) and spatial referents (place) that act as a simulation of reality, yet there is a metaphorical quest for oneiric chimerical sheep.

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