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Murakami on the Shore: beyond the dialogue between Japan and the West

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ABSTRACT. The novel *Kafka on the Shore* is one of the most enigmatic works of contemporary writer Haruki Murakami. Since its very release, critics and scholars have been sharing their impressions and interpretations on various aspects of the book, one of them being the abundant references to Western elements (myths, songs, writers, icons and so forth). The present paper is the final draft of the postdoctoral research ‘Murakami on the shore: the dialogue with the West in the construction of the novel’, developed from July 2015 to June 2016. It aims at rethinking (as well as questioning) the way the study of the relation between Japan and the West can be addressed in the novel. The research, conducted as a bibliographical investigation, used key concepts like cultural identity (Hall, 2006) and border-blurring (Auestad, 2008). It defies the tendency of studying cosmopolitan authors like Haruki Murakami from the perspective of East-West duality, and defends that such analysis ought to consider East and West as complementary, almost inextricable, not regarding them as opposite or impermeable, and never as a limitation to the author himself.

Keywords: Haruki Murakami; Japanese literature; cultural identity; borders.

Murakami à beira-mar: para além do diálogo entre o Japão e o Ocidente

RESUMO. O romance *Kafka à beira-mar* é uma das obras mais enigmáticas do escritor contemporâneo Haruki Murakami. Desde seu lançamento, críticos e estudiosos têm compartilhado suas impressões e interpretações acerca de vários aspectos do livro, um deles sendo as referências abundantes a elementos ocidentais (mitos, músicas, escritores, ícones, entre outros). O presente artigo é a versão final da pesquisa pós-doutoral intitulada ‘Murakami à beira-mar: o diálogo com o Ocidente na construção do romance’, desenvolvido de julho de 2015 a julho de 2016. Ele objetiva repensar (bem como questionar) a maneira como o estudo da relação entre o Japão e o Ocidente pode ser abordado no romance. A pesquisa, cuja metodologia é bibliográfica investigativa, usou conceitos-chave como identidade cultural (Hall, 2006) e apagamento de limites (Auestad, 2008). Ela desafia a tendência de se estudar autores cosmopolitas como Haruki Murakami da perspectiva da dualidade Oriente-Occidente, defendendo que tal análise deve considerar um e outro como complementares, quase inseparáveis, não os observando como opostos ou como impermeáveis, e nunca como uma limitação ao próprio autor.

Palavras-chave: Haruki Murakami; literatura japonesa; identidade cultural; bordas.

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Introduction

This paper presents the results of the postdoctoral research named ‘Murakami on the Shore: the dialogue with the West in the construction of the novel’, developed from July 2015 to June 2016¹. The research aimed to study Murakami’s novel *Kafka on the Shore* (*Umibe no Kafuka*), starting from elements of Western literature and philosophy used by the author. Beyond the obvious reference to the Czech writer Franz Kafka, whose name Murakami takes for his protagonist, there are elements from Greek tragedy (more specifically the Oedipus myth, in the son who lives under the constant burden of a prophecy according to which he would kill his father and marry his mother), the poetry of Yeats, Hegel’s philosophy, to cite some. He also

¹ Postdoctoral research conducted with financial support from CAPES, Brazil (Higher Education Improvement Coordination), through the National Program of Postdoctoral Research (PNPD).

brings Japanese literature to his work, like *Genji Monogatari*² – notably referring to the image of *ikiryō*³ – and Sōseki's *The miner*. There are plenty of intertextual references in the novel, either Japanese or foreign, not all of them evident at first glance.

Haruki Murakami's cross-bordered view cannot be studied exclusively under the label of Japanese literature; it must be explored instead with the instrumental of Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies. Because of his multi-layered aspects, this research sought to study researchers who wrote about this novel in particular – but not exclusively – to have a broader idea of what this 'dialogue with the West' could be.

This bibliographical research could not disregard some basic concepts like identity and intercultural. The research's first intention was to explore intercultural aspects in the novel, i.e., the cultural elements in touch, juxtaposed, or opposed. However, this purpose soon brought some other interrogation marks.

First steps, new questions

You have a strange feeling after you finish the book. It's like you wonder what Soseki was trying to say. It's like not really knowing what he's getting at is the part that stays with you. I can't explain it very well (Tamura Kafka in *Kafka on the Shore*) (Murakami, 2005, p. 98).

This is an extract where Tamura Kafka, the protagonist in *Kafka on the Shore*, expresses his feelings after having read Soseki's *The miner*. Mainly, I can say I had the same feeling after I finished my own read of *Kafka on the Shore* – I could well change 'Soseki' for 'Murakami' in the sentence. From all the questions and doubts raised after the reading, I needed to identify the ones who were linked to the proposed research.

First, in which proportion the highlighted 'foreign' elements do represent the West (such a generic term), and in which proportion Murakami represents Japan since he is such a cosmopolitan writer? Donald Keene (1988), one of the most prominent students of Japanese culture and literature, listed four characteristics that seemed to compose the Japanese aesthetic sense: suggestion, irregularity, simplicity, and perishability. Are these characteristics still valid for contemporary Japanese literature? Which of them – if not all of them – can be seen in Murakami's book? Or to what extension has globalization affected literary production as to blur the limits?

Second, a more practical concern: is there any need for categorizing Eastern/Western elements in Murakami's book – or, could we say, books? If the study remains an effort of building a catalog of these elements, separating them into East and West references, what is the point in doing it?

With these questions in mind, the research started from the Greek tragedy, the Oedipus' myth, and the family entanglements from Kafka and his father figure.

Kafka, tragedy, and identity

What does Tamura Kafka have from Franz Kafka? In *The Metamorphosis*, the protagonist (Gregor Samsa) has similar family issues: he does not show family love, even though his sister plays the role of a protector (yet in the end, she abandons him to his own destiny, in his monstrous state). Gregor Samsa is transformed into an insect, a disgusting nasty creature. Other works from Franz Kafka, like "Letter to his father," also echo in Tamura Kafka's relationship with his father.

As Konder (1974, p. 209) writes, in Franz Kafka solitude is a profoundly tragic condition; Tamura Kafka, on the other side, not only shares this melancholic atmosphere but also has a stronger tragic trace because of the prophecy that relates him to Oedipus' myth, bringing Greek tragedy to the storyline.

To reflect on how tragic his position can be considered, it is necessary to understand the conditions for the tragic effect. Albin Lesky (2006, p. 32-34) mentions the dignity of the fall (or the considerable height of the fall) from safety and happiness to an "[...] abyss of disgrace." Lesky (2006) also mentions the possibility of a relationship with our own world (the time or space when/where the work was written not being an obstacle for this relation); as a third requirement, he mentions the character's conscience that the conflict does not have a solution. In what measure these requirements, elaborated from classical Greek tragedy, can be found in *Kafka on the Shore*? Tragedy, as we know it, is in the Western roots, but it is necessary to verify if it can be really considered an example of a Western mark in the novel. Was Tamura Kafka ever happy in his life before his escape from home? If not, there is no 'dignity of the fall', for there is no safe and happy place

² *Genji Monogatari* (源氏物語): *The tale of Genji*, Japan's oldest novel, probably the first one in world literature.

³ *Ikiryō* (生霊): a spirit that leaves the body of a living person during sleep time to haunt other people (Japanese folklore).

to fall from. The possibility of a relation with our own world is clear, but, as for the third requirement, young Tamura Kafka does 'find a solution': "You did the right thing," the boy named Crow says. "You did what was best. No one else could have done as well as you did. After all, you're the genuine article: the toughest fifteen-year-old in the world" (Murakami, 2006, p. 435).

The boy named Crow is Tamura Kafka's alter ego, a kind of conscience that arises when the boy is deeply thinking about some important issues in his life. It is not without reason that Murakami chose this bird: not only because of the mystery around it but also because Kafka is "crow" in Czech. But let us get back to tragedy for now.

Amitrano (2016, p. 101) says that Murakami "[...] shares the enigmatic quality of the Sphinx, but not her clairvoyance and certainly none of her violence". That is to say, he does not give any unique answer to any of the matters in the novel. Amitrano also cites Yōichi Komori's correspondence between the characters in Oedipus' myth and in *Kafka on the Shore*:

According to his interpretation, Oedipus is both Tamura Kafka and Nakata; Laius is Tamura Kōichi (Kafka's father) and Johnnie Walker (his double); Jocasta is both Tamura Kafka's real mother, who left him as a child, and Miss Saeki; the Sphinx is Ōshima and Johnny Walker; Antigone is both Sakura and Hoshino, and Apollo is Colonel Sanders, another fantastic character in the novel (Amitrano, 2016, p. 100).

Amitrano (2016) also cites the reference made to Greek priestess Cassandra, who was cursed by Apollo always to make correct predictions but never being believed. The context in which Cassandra is mentioned in the novel is when Ōshima, who works at the Komura library and is a kind of counselor/guardian of Tamura Kafka, tells him he seems to be seeking something but running away at the same time. In his words, "[...] whatever it is you're seeking won't come in the form you're expecting" (Amitrano, 2016, p. 97) In fact, young Kafka left home on a personal journey, not knowing exactly what to find. So does Nakata, first led by the mission of finding a stray cat, and after by the mission of finding Miss Saeki.

Other elements of Greek culture could be added. The labyrinth, for example, a very common *topos*, is present in the novel, represented by the forest that surrounds the log cabin Kafka goes to in order to hide, after he knows about his father's murder. Little by little he enters the forest, until one day he finds two soldiers who take him to another realm in it. The forest, the shore, the library, the painting in the library – they are all places where Kafka takes his quest, crossing the borders sometimes, coming and going.

In fact, the novel develops in borders, the shore being only one of them; reality and imagination take turns until it is impossible to tell for sure where each one of them begins. As in the shore, the little sea waves show that the border is not static. Nevertheless, we also have the stone of the entrance, which marks beginning and end – this double character reminds us of Roman god Janus, the god of doorways, of transitions, of beginnings and ends. Some scholars read Nakata and Kafka being only one in two different levels, until their lives and destinies finally meet, even though they do not really see each other. The boy named Crow proclaims the end of the journey, yet it must be understood as the beginning of a new start – no father, no past, healing from mother and sister: Tamura Kafka is ready for his adult life. After all, a very deep and unusual metamorphosis.

The whole novel shows a coming from and going to another world. Reiko Auestad (2008) calls these images 'border-blurring' rather than 'border-crossing'. Concerning the twofold 'other world' in the novel, she goes further as to say:

The forest near Ōshima-san's cabin [...] dominated by cultural references foreign to Japan, whereas 'the other world' in the shrine is loaded with Japanese cultural symbols. These two other worlds can perhaps be interpreted metaphorically as the hybrid Japanese cultural unconscious with two strata overlaid onto each other, in which the collective and individual unconscious cross and merge. They are full of symbolic images, bits and pieces of memories from the past presented in a nostalgic and fantastic mode (Auestad, 2008, p. 315).

The Shinto shrine refers to the native and traditional Japan, as well as the library, full of *haiku* and *tanka* books⁴; the forest leads to foreign (especially Western) symbols and references. Tamura Kafka is not out but in both of these worlds. So is contemporary Japan. Is *Kafka on the Shore* a metaphor of post-war Japan, divided into past and present/future? Is he trying to find peace by setting himself free from his cat-killing father and rescuing love through the healing from his mother? Maybe the idea of associating Tamura Kafka with Japan might not be that absurd.

⁴ *Haiku* (俳句): short poem of seventeen syllables, divided in three verses (5-7-5); *tanka* (短歌): short poem of thirty one syllables, divided in 5 verses (5-7-5-7-7). Both forms are representative of *waka* (和歌), "Japanese poetry."

Following this, the matter of identity should also be addressed, especially because the topic of the study relies on intercultural elements. To explore it, Stuart Hall's idea of identity serves as a theoretical base. He deals with identity in the sense of national identity. Hall (2006, p. 48) advocates that "[...] national identities are not things we are born with, but they are formed and transformed inside representation". According to Welch (2012, p. 214), "[...] in much of Murakami Haruki's fiction, landscapes become dreamscapes, sites of contestation, and arenas where characters challenge individual, regional and national identity on multiple levels". Applying this to the present research, it could bring to debate the studies called *nihonjinron* – literally, the 'studies concerned with what is/what is not to be Japanese'⁵. However, this would demand many discussions, since the field of *nihonjinron* is abundant, and the plurality of perspectives would make a separate object to research. It is different to read a Japanese that writes in the beginning of the 20th century about what being Japanese is like and a foreigner that writes today about it. Furthermore, depending on the nationality of the foreigner (if American, Chinese, Korean, or anything else), the perspective can shift significantly.

Western references – western?

The first intention of this research, as we said before, was to analyze the references of Western music, films, books, and other media in the novel one by one. However, they do not seem to have a collective meaning other than their particular ones. So, every passage has a reason for the reference, but not to highlight the West itself. Moreover, it is necessary to remark that there are many references to Japanese traditional culture and literature as well. Having this in mind, one must not wrongly deduce that Western references are a sign of cultural subservience. Let us remind that Haruki Murakami transcends the tightness of labels and is beyond the discussion about 'pure literature' (*junbungaku*)⁶. As Kawakami (2002, p. 309) points out, Murakami's work "[...] has evaded easy categorization as either *junbungaku* (pure/high literature) or *taishū bungaku* (popular literature)⁷ – labels that have conveniently hierarchized modern Japanese literary works". Being so widely read and translated, one has to wonder the secret of drawing so much attention. His books do not explore samurai sagas, neither geisha love stories, what is to say, he does not abuse Japanese stereotypes, so admired in the West. Tamura Kafka's story could have taken place in any other city in the world. He is like any other average urban teenager – the tough relationship with his father being only one of the features in common.

Beyond the Greek myths, we can cite other Western references, for instance, William Butler Yeats' famous sentence 'in dreams begin responsibilities'. Yeats is in fact quoted in the novel. Much more than this, not evident in the novel, the same sentence is the title of a short story by Delmore Schwartz; in this story, a young man dreams he is in an old theatre watching a movie that shows one of his parents' Sunday afternoons before they got married. The young man realizes they were not really happy or even really satisfied and reacts, shouting at the screen. People in the theatre try to control him, and the usher drags him out, finishing his 'lecture' on him with the words 'everything you do matters too much'. And then the young man wakes up on the morning of his 21st birthday. Does not this story have a lot to do with Tamura Kafka's own dilemma? Waking up leads to facing reality – the solution, however, seems to be hidden in dreams. Like in the typical *mukogawa* fiction⁸, where we see "[...] a strange journey into a world on the other side of reality, a world of myth and supernatural" (Ambury 1997, p. 4), both worlds are complementary and cannot be taken alone. Dream and reality form parts of the same existence, affecting each other, with blurring – not crossing – borders, to cite Auestad (2008) once more. Anyway, bringing Yeats and Schwartz to the novel has nothing to do with the fact that they can be classified as Western references; it has to do with the meaning they convey in a given context, a relevant and suitable one for the character's own story.

Colonel Sanders, one of the characters, is the image of American KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken), but not the colonel himself. He likes to say that he is a concept, an idea; he is the one who arranges a prostitute for Hoshino, who is accompanying Nakata in his quest. It happens that the prostitute studies philosophy and, in a very unusual situation, during the intercourse, explains Hegel to him:

Hegel believed that a person is not merely conscious of self and object as separate entities, but through the projection of the self via the mediation of the object is volitionally able to gain a deeper understanding of the self. All of which constitute self-consciousness (Murakami, 2005, p. 254).

⁵ *Nihonjinron* (日本人論): theories about what it means to be Japanese; studies on Japanese identity and related issues.

⁶ *Junbungaku* (純文学): 'pure literature' as in the concept of *belles-lettres*: refined, complex, canonic literature.

⁷ *Taishūbungaku* (文学): the 'literature of the masses', considered shallow and made only for entertaining people, not for addressing deep issues.

⁸ *Mukogawa* (向こう側): 'the other side'.

Building identity requires self-consciousness, and the ‘other’ is part of the process. Sometimes there is a sudden revelation, a *satori*, that makes a difference in it⁹. As the Colonel says, “[...] a revelation leaps over the borders of the everyday. A life without revelation is not a life at all. What you need to do is move from reason that observes to reason that acts” (Murakami, 2005, p. 255). Nakata (whose first name is Satoru, by the way) and Tamura Kafka are both seeking something they do not really understand, willing to find some revelation. It is an exercise of experiencing what this being-in-the-world is. It is shaped in the individual but resonates in the collective.

Colonel Sanders is an American icon, but in the novel, it is difficult to tie him to a label of ‘Western’ – it does not seem to be the reason why he was used by Murakami. However, if we relate the character to the ‘curse of the Colonel’ superstition, we can approach him as a kind of agent of fate. In 1985, when the Hanshin Tigers won the game against the Seibu Lions in the Japanese professional baseball championship series (something not expected to happen, since Hanshin was considered one of the weakest teams, if not the weakest), the fans went crazy. By the Dōtonbori River, as tradition commands, fans who resembled the players one by one dived into it, along with music and shouts. The problem was that there was no one who resembled Randy Bass, the American player. The solution was in front of a KFC restaurant nearby: a plastic statue of Colonel Saunders. The fans threw it in the river, and only in 2009 it was partially recovered. Needless to say, the Colonel is linked to the long wave of defeats that came after this episode. Back to the novel, the Colonel is ‘a concept, an idea’: he is the one that helps Nakata close the circle and bring things back to their proper places – just as the finding of the Colonel’s statue was believed to free the Hanshin Tigers from bad luck. The Colonel is a “kind of an overseer, supervising something to make sure it fulfills its original role” (Murakami, 2005, p. 263). He is not worried about good or evil. He wants things to move back to their proper places.

What about Johnnie Walker? He is the cat killer, and in his appearance in the story, he wants Nakata to kill him. When Nakata does it – despite his lovely personality –, it is like moving on to the next stage. Nakata’s innocence is killed as well. As for Tamura Kafka, he wakes up in a Shinto shrine, sees a bloodstain in the form of a butterfly – a clear reference to a metamorphosis – and does not understand what happened. He then sees the news mentioning his father’s murder. Not in reality, but psychologically or in dreams a boy kills his own father to become mature, and it brings up Oedipus’ myth again. However, why having Johnnie Walker’s image here? Is it because of the ‘keep walking’ motto (growing up is inevitable)? Does Johnnie Walker have to do with time? In this case, we can refer to the Greek myth of Chronos, who devoured his own children, even though it is not clearly stated. When old man (Nakata) kills Johnnie Walker, young man (Tamura Kafka) wakes up from a metamorphosis that can only happen in the roots, in the past. Time is destroyed. Young and old are one. Is it because drinking spirits is considered one of the marks of the transition from boyhood to adult life? Is it because the whisky business grew considerably from father to son and to grandson, becoming a symbol of perpetuation? Another possible reading for Johnnie Walker is that he refers to war. Only when he is stopped, the innocent lives will be spared, but he “keeps walking.” The victim of war – Nakata – has the mission to prevent the “walker” from getting further. Anyway, being any of these reasons, or all of them, or none, the fact is that the image of Johnnie Walker is not being used just because it is a Western symbol itself.

Conclusion

The original idea of seeking and studying Western elements in *Kafka on the Shore* was destroyed for good when Murakami himself said in an interview, published in his own website: “When I write a novel I put into play all the information inside me. It might be Japanese information or it might be Western; I don’t draw a distinction between the two” (Murakami, 2006). Taking Murakami’s words in that interview into account, the distinction between Eastern and Western elements became secondary, even futile. They are the portrait of a writer whose background is cosmopolitan, whose formation has multiple sources. After questions and riddles, and not enough answers (at least definitive ones – but are they really possible?), the research brought up an interpretation – not the only one, of course – concerning the dialogue Japan-West. As he says in the same interview, “*Kafka on the Shore* contains several riddles, but there aren’t any solutions provided. Instead several of these riddles combine, and through their interaction the possibility of a solution takes

⁹ *Satori* (悟り): Buddhist word that means ‘awakening’, ‘understanding of something once obscure’.

shape. And the form this solution takes will be different for each reader” (Murakami, 2006). Maybe this openness is the main reason for him to raise so many passionate opinions from critics and readers all over the world, either liking or disliking his books.

Kafka on the Shore is a novel where the destiny of a young man (immature in his relations with the ones next to him) and an old man (once brilliant in his childhood, but struck by the war and by the rigid discipline of his *sensei*) meet and fuse. The young is old, the old is young – a picture of contemporary Japan?

After all, maybe Murakami is the definitive proof that labels like Western and Eastern, as mere categorizations of culture and/or literature, should be abandoned immediately; beyond being vague (how many cultures could we pack inside the term ‘West’, or ‘East’?), they are not useful since Murakami does not choose a writer, a song or an icon for being Western. He chooses his elements according to their meanings, not to their origin. By doing so, his work appeals to people from both East and West, arousing the curiosity of the readers, who can finally relate to the story at some point. Indeed, the Western elements in the novel do not seem to have a collective meaning other than their particular ones, not being representative of the West itself. Places, in geographical terms, are not the main focus of the novel; the duality East-West may not obscure other dualities in the novel – Tamura Kafka and Nakata, reality and phantasy, past and present. Neither are they separated or immaculate: the borders are liquid and dynamic.

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