

# NAMELESS IN MURAKAMI HARUKI'S *A WILD SHEEP CHASE*

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The main characters of many of Haruki Murakami's novels are missing something. In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the main character's emptiness, whether it is emotional, physical or mental, is present in everything he experiences throughout the course of the novel. This is mainly demonstrated by his and the other characters' notable lack of names. The main character's lack of a name, and attitude towards names, reflect his attitude towards the emotional connections they symbolize. By examining individual characters' emptiness and disaffection, as he does in *A Wild Sheep Chase* and many other novels, Murakami is really critiquing the emptiness and disaffection of postmodern Japanese, and perhaps the new global, society. But his critique is not completely fatalistic, offering both despair in the state of society and hope that a healing is possible, without any clear-cut certainty about the future.

The works of Haruki Murakami (村上春樹), including *A Wild Sheep Chase* (羊をめぐる冒険; *Hitsuji o meguru bōken*, 1982; trans. 1989), have become symbolic of the movement to define postmodern Japan, but who is Murakami himself? Born in 1949 in a suburb of Kobe, he is part of and in some ways represents the relatively rich post-World War II generation of Japanese. Interestingly, it is the generation that followed, sometimes dubbed "new humans" or shinjinrui (新人類), that see him as, "the spokesperson of their generation."<sup>1</sup> Murakami's parents were both high school teachers of Japanese literature, which led to his interest in writing from a young age. As early as high school he was already fascinated with many works of Western literature, and followed this interest to Waseda University, where he studied screenwriting and Greek drama. When he began writing, he embraced a style which combined his background in Japanese literature and a more straightforward, Western-influenced prose. The Japan he depicts in his novels is also heavily influenced by the West. In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, for instance, many of the cultural references are to American and European popular culture phenomena rather than Japanese. However, this style is suited to describing postmodern Japan, which itself is also heavily influenced by the West. Despite touches of the supernatural, the world in which the unnamed protagonist sets out on his allegorical journey to find a mysterious sheep is relatively reflective of postmodern Japan and its hybrid cultural landscape.

By the beginning of *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the main character has become bored with his routine existence, and his wife has left him. The strangeness begins when he starts dating a girl with magical ears, and is sought out to perform a task for "the Boss," the head of a mysterious power conglomerate that all but controls Japan. The protagonist then quits his job to embark on a search for a special sheep and for his old friend (nicknamed "the Rat") who disappeared without saying anything years earlier. But despite the change of pace and unusual nature of his journey, the protagonist for the most part remains a static character, unable to make emotional connections with others. This is largely demonstrated by his lack of a name.

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<sup>1</sup> Hirata, Hosea. *Discourses of Seduction: History, Evil, Desire, and Modern Japanese Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center: 2005, pg. 45.

Namelessness is not unprecedented in Japanese literature, and it is especially prevalent in Murakami's works. *Hear the Wind Sing* (風の歌を聴け; *Kaze no uta o kike*, 1979; trans. 1987) and *Pinball 1973* (1973-nen no pinbōru, 1980; 1973年のピンボール; trans. 1985), which are in fact prequels to *A Wild Sheep Chase*, feature the same unnamed protagonist, referred to by many critics as "Boku", Japanese for "I". Murakami's earlier *Norwegian Wood* (ノルウェイの森 *Noruei no Mori*) names its characters but has the same detached ethos and feeling of disconnectedness (the final scene has the protagonist asking someone to come meet him, but realizing he does not know where he is). Names and the lack of them have been used to illustrate various points for some time. But first, what is a name? Why is a name important? Names serve two main purposes, to distinguish individuals and to describe them. They are important during the process of recognizing and forming opinions about people, which in turn are key to making personal connections and having relationships. In short, names are equivalent to emotional attachment. Therefore, the most obvious proof that the protagonist's life is empty and lacking in purpose is that he remains unnamed throughout the entire novel. And because it is a first person narrative, the reader experiences firsthand what it is like to see the world from an undefined place with unfocused eyes. Though the reader knows the protagonist's marital status, job, and personal habits, his feelings, opinions and views often go unexpressed. A name seems to be connected with these things, and is part of what makes people memorable. Commenting on a girl whose name he has forgotten, he says, "I forgot her name. I could pull out the obituary, but what difference would it make now. I've forgotten her name."<sup>2</sup> This statement applies to the girl in question, but it also applies to the main character. Murakami's point is, this man is nameless, but even if he had a name, it would not make a difference. His namelessness is symptomatic of more deep-seated problems: loneliness and an inability to connect with others.

Lacking a name, the reader only identifies with this antihero as an attitude or personality: a disaffected, cynical personality. One Japanese critic wrote that, "Murakami's "Boku" (僕) is a transcendental self-consciousness, which secures its own existence by assuming an air of superiority over those who are passionately engaged in something they believe meaningful and purposeful."<sup>3</sup> Yet the protagonist's jaded persona begs the questions: what has made him this way, what keeps him this way? Is there anything beyond his dryness and unexcitable exterior? It seems as if Murakami has created such a flat character in order to force the reader to look deeper, at problems that affect both the protagonist and Japan.

The other characters may be nameless, but they still have identities of sorts. Most are known for the role in which they play in the narrator's life: the girlfriend, the chauffeur, the friend, the Sheep Professor. "Boku," conceives of others only as they relate to his own life. In a way, this makes him an extremely self-centered person. He does not spend time talking or thinking about things other people may have done that would have no effect on him. But in another way, this very utilitarian world view can be perceived as a survival mechanism, one that exists even outside of Murakami's fictional world. As Japanese consumerism becomes more and more pervasive, people are using consumption to satisfy needs previously satisfied by interpersonal relationships. At the same time, increasing isolation due to such activities

<sup>2</sup> Murakami, Haruki. *A Wild Sheep Chase*. Trans. Alfred Birnbaum. Kodansha International, New York: 1982 (original) 1989 (English translation), pg 5.

<sup>3</sup> Karatani Kōjin. *Shūen o megutte*. Tokyo: Fukutake Shoten, 1990, pg 90-91.

creates a market for products like *tamagotchi* dolls which, “fill in for the absence of human contact or relationships.”<sup>4</sup> So, like the Japanese people, the main character has realized that if he does not care for himself, no one will. He has realized that it will not be his wife, or any number of the other characters who abandon him or die. The reader will not find him playing with a *tamagotchi* doll – Murakami’s protagonist is a little more old-fashioned than that – but he still feels the same loneliness and isolation. This distance between the protagonist and the other characters in the novel may be a self-fulfilling prophecy – if he only reached out to them, they might reciprocate – but there’s no way to know. This, along with the protagonist’s feelings about it, is a mystery.

The only character with a real name is the cat, Kipper, who starts out without one. When asked at a later point why he never gave the cat a name himself, the protagonist reflected, “I think I just don’t like names. Basically, I can’t see what’s wrong with calling me ‘me’ or you ‘you’ or us ‘us’ or them ‘them’.”<sup>5</sup> There are two main interpretations of this statement. The first is that, for the main character, names are not important, and the characters’ lack of names is a statement that names and other kinds of labels overcomplicate life. In this light, perhaps “Boku” is just too busy concentrating on living to remember trivial things like names. He is more focused on their meaning and essence, and not concerned with the many trappings of life in postmodern Japan. Michael Stretcher argued for this interpretation in his book *Dances With Sheep*, saying that along with the search for the object of his desire, the protagonist was making, “a movement away from language, an attempt, fruitless though it may be, to recover the thing itself.”<sup>6</sup> Viewed from this angle, the omission of names symbolizes not an insecurity about one’s identity, but a total security in it, rendering names and other labels unnecessary.

However, the second interpretation is that the protagonist is in denial about the importance of names, which for him at least unconsciously represent attachment and personal connections. Not naming people or animals seems in this light to be a rejection of intimacy. He is unwilling to attach importance or significance to people in his life because he fears that they, like his wife and countless other people, will eventually leave him. Evidence points more towards the latter interpretation than the former, as the protagonist has no trouble at all remembering the names of things, like the Rat’s Seven Stars cigarettes or the Boss’s Mercedes limousine. He makes frequent references to things, especially those of foreign origin, throughout the entire novel. This attachment to material things and distance from people is not just a phenomenon in fiction. Anne Allison, in her recent book *Millennial Monsters*, wrote about this, citing Japanese psychiatrist Ōhira Ken’s claim that there have been an increasing number of people seeking counseling whom psychiatrists call *mono no katari no hitobito*, or “people who talk about things.”<sup>7</sup> They concerned themselves mainly with material goods, primarily more expensive and name-brand items, and experienced trouble with interpersonal relationships. While Ōhira argues that “acquisition [of these goods]

<sup>4</sup> Allison, Anne. *Millennial Monster: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press: 2006, pg 183. Tamagotchi dolls are hand held digital pets that require their owners' constant care and attention as they grow from egg to adulthood.

<sup>5</sup> Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, pg 157.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pg. 123.

<sup>7</sup> Allison, *Millennial Monster*, pg 87-88.

gives a sense of control”, he also finds that the *mono no katari no hitobito*, “did not enjoy being solitary, and are actually seeking a way to communicate.”<sup>8</sup> While the protagonist is not obsessed with expensive items, he does show a marked preference for certain items—a particular brand of beer, or certain old records—that create an air of nostalgia, his own “constructed reality.”<sup>9</sup> In any event, as far as people and animals are concerned, the protagonist is not volunteering his name or asking others for any others, in a way that suggests he rejects personal names and all things associated with them as a matter of course. The only recipient of a true name, the cat called Kipper, is perhaps the story’s most minor character.

During the portion of the story dealing with the cat’s naming, the nameless protagonist discusses what is and is not named with his girlfriend: “Why do boats have names, but not planes?” she asks, to which he responds, “Mass production.”<sup>10</sup> This starts a conversation about the development of a society in which naming everything – planes, city buses, and such – would be an absurd waste of time. It appears, then, that the unnamed characters of the novel are from a period in time where humans are also mass produced and indistinguishable from one another. To think that one deserves a name is presumptuous – what makes the main character, or any of the other characters special or important enough to have one? Modern society has already exposed the individual to so much that he realizes his own smallness. So, the protagonist’s isolation of himself, unconscious or not, is unavoidable given the state of society in current times. One scholar says of this phenomenon, “few things are as striking in the protagonists of Murakami as their loneliness, even when they are with other people. It is this self-imposed solitude which makes it possible for them to avoid the shocks of social life in modernity.”<sup>11</sup>

Also, talking about the relationship between a culture of mass production and naming, Murakami makes a point about the interchangeability of workers in Japanese companies, and of people in a society where interpersonal connections are weakening. Personal connections – family and social – are being replaced by the connection of the individual to his employer and his consumption. At the time of its writing, in the early 80’s, *A Wild Sheep Chase* seemed to criticize the salary man’s existence, and wryly question the security it seemed to promise. Since this was far from the height of the bubble economy and more than half a decade before its burst, the voice of this novel is almost prophetic. The message was clear – nothing is a substitute for real emotional connections. During the portion of the novel dealing with Kipper’s naming, the protagonist references the plight of the Jews during World War II, saying, “for purpose alone, numbers are enough.”<sup>12</sup> Could Japanese salary men, then and now, also be experiencing the same kind of namelessness as the Jews in Auschwitz? Are they both being used and conceived of as objects rather than as people? The idea that employed people in a highly developed country and a ruthlessly persecuted minority group in

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pgs 87-88.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pg .88.

<sup>10</sup> Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, pg 153.

<sup>11</sup> Cassegard, Carl. “Murakami Haruki and the Naturalization of Modernity.” *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*. 2001, Vol. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, pg 154.

an economically depressed war-torn nation have so much in common is absurd, but it contains a bit of truth, at least in Murakami's world.

Because of this connection, however tenuous, a name or lack thereof is intentional and meaningful. So if he has no name, how is the "hero's" life meaningful to himself and others? He is not the good member of society that the old generation of Japanese held in such high esteem, and he has not fulfilled his duty to join an established company, get married, and have children. By the time the story starts, and perhaps quite a while before, the protagonist seems to have come to the realization that the only things anchoring him to reality are his routines. In fact, his life is filled with routines. He often references his showers, shaving, smoking, drinking, snacking, and changing clothes to fill in space that might be taken up by attachment to others or meaningful thoughts. His life seems to be built around these routines, even more so when important events occur. He thinks it is important to note that he showered and shaved after his wife left him, and that he ate and made his bed when his girlfriend left him.<sup>13</sup> These concrete descriptions of his actions belie the emotions he must be feeling and draw attention to his unwillingness to believe that anyone might be able to empathize with him. In fact, his emotions have been so invisible to others for so long that he himself has become blind to them. This represents a loss of hope that a more person-centered worldview can be restored in Japan – both for the protagonist, disillusioned ever since the student protests of the 60s, and for Japanese today.

However, some critics view this routine-filled style of narration as a humorous parody rather than an indication of the protagonist's emptiness. They argue that Murakami's curt, concrete sentences are an imitation of earlier "hardboiled" Western detective that gained popularity among Japanese long before Murakami was born. In these stories, the detective protagonist is a stoic, enigmatic figure. Says Susan Fisher, "imitation of the hard-boiled style is ironic. Murakami is not attempting to write detective novels; rather, he is parodying their stylistic conventions, using an American tough-guy style to recount the misadventures of his bookish, melancholy Japanese protagonists."<sup>14</sup> But humor is not Murakami's only aim. The hardboiled detective story style is not borrowed without reason. In a real detective story, the protagonist might be a kind of superman, and his cool, unflappable facade might go unquestioned. But by having a thoroughly mediocre, nameless everyman mimic the hardboiled style of the stereotypical cool, collected detective, Murakami encourages the reader to see how lonely such an outlook would be for anyone, no matter how talented. Once the reader is free to laugh at and question the protagonist, his personal flaws become more and more apparent. In this way, Murakami uses humor to show the reader the emotional problems caused by the protagonist's "hardboiled" attitude.

Yes, *A Wild Sheep Chase* is assuredly not a detective story – the absurdity of the hunt and the lack of resolution clearly set it outside of that genre. Says Murakami himself of this, "In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, however, I was *not* trying to write a mystery novel. In a mystery novel, there is a mystery which is solved during the course of the book. But I am not trying to solve anything. What I wanted to write was a mystery without a solution."<sup>15</sup> This, in a

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pgs 19 and 244.

<sup>14</sup> Fisher, Susan. "An Allegory of Return: Murakami Haruki's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*." *Comparative Literature Studies* 37:2 (2000) 155-170.

<sup>15</sup> Rubin, Jay. *Haruki Murakami & The Music of Words*. London: Harvill Press, 2002, pg. 81.

nutshell is the protagonist's search, the search for postmodern Japan – a mystery without a solution, a search so surreal that it involves magic ears, ghosts, and an all-powerful sheep spirit. Both the metaphorical and real searches for identity remain unresolved.

The increasing fragmentation of society that makes defining the identity of postmodern Japan impossible also makes it hard for the individual to connect with society. Accordingly, along with the emotional issues the main character has, he also has issues connecting events that occur throughout the story. Though everything appears to be intricately related, he observes events but rarely grasps the connections. It is only when outside forces intervene that connections are made, both in the protagonist's life and in the search for the sheep. His girlfriend, also unnamed, makes intuitive connections that further their search for the sheep, such as selecting the right hotel or talking to a certain person. He by chance finds a bookmark bearing a clue in the house up in Hokkaido. It is only with these clues, brought to light by chance or providence, that anything in his life or in his search for meaning makes sense, although neither mission could be said to have been successful. Beyond these, the search for the sheep is just stumbling in the dark. Fisher argues that, "since the entire novel is devoted to the somewhat ludicrous search for a sheep, one can perhaps assume that the real target of the quest is "modern Japan" itself."<sup>16</sup> The disconnection between events then represents the disjointed nature of postmodern Japanese society, where people live largely in virtual and constructed realities. However, the protagonist's girlfriend's clues, the letters he receives from "the Rat," and other chance happenings seem to tie the search together. All parts of the search itself seem to be bound intricately together, even though the eventual goal goes unrealized. So then, the desire for some tangible end product or neat resolution is the search for identity in postmodern Japan, or for the identity of postmodern Japan. This desire is shared, however impossible its actualization.

The protagonist's inability to perceive connections, then, represents his lack of sensitivity towards others and possibly a lack of ability to empathize with people who are sharing the same struggles. It is also rooted in his fatalistic outlook on the world, his pessimistic belief that there is no reason behind anything, and no other way it could have been. This is the hopelessness and resigned feelings of many Japanese. It is impossible to say which comes first: the protagonist's inability to form connections with others or his inability to form connections between events. In any event, each feeds the other because both discourage mental and emotional investment in anything beyond the self, much like consumerism does in today's global society. All of this leads, in fiction and reality, to a more disconnected personal reality and Murakami's characteristic loneliness.

However, approaching the end of the story, the protagonist begins to express emotion. After meeting with the Rat, he falls into a disturbed sleep. As he feverishly drifts in and out of sleep, different people from his life come to him with accusations or unpleasant truth. He imagines the chauffeur saying, "Names change all the time. I bet you can't even remember your own name."<sup>17</sup> This dream, which takes place after the completion of his quest and realization that the Rat is dead, is a manifestation of his insecurity about his own identity. Now that everyone in his life is gone and his quest over, there is nothing left to distract him from his broken past and uncertain future. At this point, the thus far hardboiled "detective" is

<sup>16</sup> Fisher, Susan. "An Allegory of Return: Murakami Haruki's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*." *Comparative Literature Studies* 37:2 (2000) 155-170.

<sup>17</sup> Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, pg 288.

beginning to experience the emotional crisis he has been putting off throughout the novel. In this way, Murakami is arguing that without our many consumable distractions, like the protagonist up at the Hokkaido house, we will be forced to face the true emptiness of postmodern existence. Though many people characterize Murakami as a postmodern writer, he is very critical of the postmodern, and, “sees the postmodern as a harmful factor, suppressing the impulse to establish meaningful identity.”<sup>18</sup> In this particular passage, he is driving home the inevitability of such harmful effects. The protagonist’s awakening emotions are just that realization.

However, it is only in the final scene of the novel that the main character makes a meaningful display of emotion: “I sat down on the last fifty yards of beach, and I cried. I never cried so much in my life.”<sup>19</sup> It is not until this moment that the reader is able to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he has been affected by the events of his life, the deaths and failures and abandonment. This ocean seems to exist to intensify his smallness and aloneness, and its vastness is a foil for his insignificance. His old life is gone. His girlfriend is gone. His quest to find the mysterious starred sheep is over. To further underscore his full awareness of his life’s lack of direction, he says, “I...got up, as if I had somewhere to go.”<sup>20</sup> Yet it is this full admission of purposelessness that seems to bring the reader closer to him. No amount of keeping up appearances or killing time with meaningless routines can make up for true emotional experiences, which is precisely Murakami’s point. By allowing himself to hit rock bottom, the previously directionless Boku is finally fighting inertia, letting go of his mediocre life. This is perhaps the novel’s most hopeful moment, not in spite of the protagonist’s despair but because of it. Not even he knows where he is going, but he is going somewhere, and this inescapable emotional turmoil may motivate him to go in a new direction.

But unlike his contemporary, popular Japanese writer Banana Yoshimoto (よしもとばなな), Murakami does not attempt to tie up all the loose ends.<sup>21</sup> Many critics still consider his works humorous and lighthearted at points, but agree that they are less overtly optimistic than those of Yoshimoto. The protagonist and other characters of *A Wild Sheep Chase* remain nameless, and no one experiences dramatic realizations or epiphanies. While some authors write in these phenomenons to satiate the reader’s desire for wish fulfillment, Murakami’s decision to let the man character walk away in the final paragraph is a statement that, just as in real life, there are no easy answers to anyone’s problems. Because of his namelessness, problems with attachment, emotional struggles and ultimate uncertainty, the protagonist is an antihero that all readers can identify with. In fact, in the novel and in reality, there may *not* be a point to it all, a sheep at the end of the chase or a girlfriend waiting for you to come down the mountain. In the end the narrator and his surroundings seem to be in accordance about only one thing: “I could hear the sound of the waves as I started to walk.”<sup>22</sup> Life goes on.

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<sup>18</sup> Stretcher, Matthew Carl. *Dances with Sheep: The Quest for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Japanese Studies, 2002, pg 207.

<sup>19</sup> Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, pg 299.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, pg 299.

<sup>21</sup> Yoshimoto Banana is most well known for her 1988 debut novel. *Kitchen*. Trans. Megan Backus. Grove Press, New York, 1988 (original) 1993 (English translation).

<sup>22</sup> Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, pg 299.