

# Reader Response Criticism/New Historicism in Correlation: Cultural Familiarity and Its Impact on a Better Understanding of Murakami's Colorless

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## Abstract:

文芸批評は、伝統的に、二項対立の思考様式を宿している。文学作品に関するある特定の読み方を支持する批評家は、通常、他の視点をすべて否定しまう。ポストモダンの時代になって、批評家はようやく白と黒の中間に灰色の領域があることを認めるようになった。本稿は、文芸批評の方法論として一見相対立するかに見える「新歴史主義」と「読者反応批評」を相互に関係づける。この2つの理論を結合して用いることで、テキストの意味をよりよく理解できる場合があることを示す。このことを例証するために、村上春樹の『色彩を持たない多崎つくると、彼の巡礼の年』からの抜粋を用いる。

## キーワード:

literary criticism theories, postmodernism, reader response criticism, new historicism, Haruki Murakami

Literary criticism had the binary opposition in its tradition from the beginning. Usually the critics who were advocating one way of looking at the literary works used to negate the other views. This tradition went on like that until the revolutionary time of Postmodern philosophers like Jacques Derrida and others who came up with the ideas of relativity and deconstruction of binary oppositions. From Postmodern era, the critics started to see there could be the color gray between black and white. Relativity theory changed not only science but also humanities. In this article New Historicism and Reader Response

criticism will come to a correlation. We are in an era where there is not just one way of seeing the world. The reader is the main concern in Reader Response criticism but here we will also consider some important concepts in New historicism to prove these two apparently opposed criticisms can help us in a better understanding of some novels if combined. The cultural and historical backgrounds and the reader's familiarity or unfamiliarity with them can make a huge change in the reader's impression of a literary work. This article will use some extracts from the novel "Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and his years of pil-

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grimage” by Haruki Murakami to show the importance of those cultural backgrounds.

Throughout the history of literary criticism, there were times that the critics came to negate the previous doctrines and in a way they defended the exact opposite concepts. One good example could be the Formalism of 1920s to 1940s which was emphasizing the aesthetic values of literary works completely exempt from any historical, biographical or cultural backgrounds. The formalists considered the literary work as an independent work of art which should be analyzed based on its own existence and not the writer’s biography or the historical era. Of course Formalism was a reaction against another way of seeing the literary works which was called Biographical criticism and its main focus was the life of the writer and the incidents around her/his life. The Formalists coined the term "biographical fallacy"[1] to describe criticism that neglected the imaginative genesis of literature.

One interesting point about all these different ways of analyzing the literary works ( or critique) is that, when they are considered individually, they make sense. For example when we consider the logic behind the Biographical Criticism which simply could be acknowledging the impact of a writer’s life events on formation of a literary work, it is difficult to just ignore that as a possibility. Yet as a basic prerequisite to the understanding and evaluation of a literary work it is often ignored even by the most sophisticated literary critics. The exploration of otherness is what literary biography and biographical criticism can do best, discovering an author as a unique individual, a discovery that puts a burden on us to reach out to recognize that uniqueness before we can fully comprehend an author's writings."[2]

Although some concepts behind the biographical criticism is logical and useful in understand-

ing of the literary works, but Formalism which is the counterpart of Biographical criticism also has proposed some ponderable points. The Romantic way of looking at literary works as an independent work of art to focus on its language and the possible interpretations based on the literary work itself sounds acceptable too. As Mary Ann Cain proposed “formalism asserts that the text stands on its own as a complete entity, apart from the writer who produced it”. Moreover, Cain says that “one can regard textual products as teachable and still maintain that being a writer is a "natural" act, one not subject to instruction.[3]

The only thing which can discredit both criticisms is the absolute emphasis on the credibility of only one of them and the insistence on discrediting the other. This binary opposition, or the necessity to pick only one, to choose only between black or white was the key characteristic of the European philosophy and hence the literary theories before the Postmodernism or more spe-

Deconstruction. In the Postmodern philosophy the “relativity” was emphasized, saying there is no absolute truth. Postmodernists negated the grand narratives, ideologies, and various tenets of Enlightenment rationality, including the existence of objective reality and absolute truth, as well as notions of rationality, human nature, and progress.[4]

Before Postmodern criticism, since the notion was based on the existence of one truth or the right way of seeing the world (or in this case the correct way of analyzing the literary work), each critical theory believed that’s the better , if not the best, way of reading literature. But after Post modernism , the worldview changed and the one truth didn’t have its past credibility. There is no only one way of looking at the world and its meaning anymore. Hence the era of multiple impressions and also Deconstruction of the binary

opposition has begun.

With the advent of Postmodernism a new way of looking at literature also started. Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity triggered a revolution in both science and humanities. There is not one correct way of analyzing literature and also through Post structuralism, language was viewed as a complex phenomenon whose function is not independent from other factors like culture or hegemony etc. Therefore the critics started to view literature as a complex work which obviously cannot be restricted to one way of analysis. Postmodernism's emphasis on relativity and pluralism made the previous strict literary theories open their locked gates to other phenomena. For example the Biographical criticism evolved into New Historicism and expanded its horizons to not only the author's biography, but also the society, culture and hegemony of its time or the time before them but "New" Historicism's adjectival emphasis highlights its opposition to the old historical-biographical criticism before the advent of New Criticism. In the earlier historical-biographical criticism, literature was seen as a part of the time which it was produced and history was viewed as stable, linear, and recoverable--a narrative of fact. In contrast, New Historicism views history skeptically (historical narrative is inherently subjective), but also more broadly; history includes all of the cultural, social, political, anthropological discourses at work in any given age, and these various "texts" are unranked - any text may yield information valuable in understanding a particular milieu.[5,6] According to Ann Dobie:

The new historicist critic works in two directions. He or she seeks to understand a text by examining its cultural context?the anxieties, issues, struggles, politics (and more) of the era in which it was created. She

also seeks to understand the culture by looking at its literature. Even a work that is not overtly political or ideological affects the culture that reads it and is in turn affected by that culture; the two are intimately bound up with each other, making it impossible to read a text in isolation. In particular, the new historicist critic is interested in understanding a culture's power structure. She may even try to explain one incident in a text in terms of the concerns of the period in which it was written.

When dealing with a contemporary work, however, the critic may not be content with simply understanding the power structure. Instead, she may see a text as an instrument of political awareness and a statement of ideology. Critics who work from this perspective often want to change the culture, and the stories they bring to light are deemed to be tools for modifying it. Like the Marxists who preceded them, these critics assume that literature addresses cultural concerns and can affect society's attitudes and values.[7]

The role of cultural and historical matters on creation of a novel is an important one, but also there is the reader who could be familiar or unfamiliar to those issues. Since the role of the reader has been emphasized in the recent literary criticisms, familiarity of the reader with the cultural issues that are important in creation and understanding of the literary work not only cannot be omitted but is of an important value.

The importance of the reader in literary criticism was highlighted by the Reader-Response criticism which could be the worst nightmare of the Formalists. As Ann Dolbie argues:

The audience was expected to shake off its deference to the authority of the text (or to

the published critic's or classroom teacher's explanation of the text) and become an active participant in the creation of meaning. The focus moved away from thinking of a work as a self-contained aesthetic object to considering the experience that transpires when the reader and the work come together. No longer could any reading be taken as unbiased and objective. The reader had moved to center stage.[8]

According to Reader-Response Criticism, the reader and her/his background knowledge, memories and feelings etc are all involved in the meaning which can be extracted from a literary work. Of course this way of analyzing the work of literature does not ignore the role of writer. According to reader response criticism, the writer creates the work considering an implied reader:

A literary work, Iser said, is an intended act of the writer's consciousness, an artistic effort that is then re-experienced in the consciousness of a reader, who engages in an aesthetic endeavor. The text supplies the materials and determines the boundaries for the creative act of reading. It creates for itself an implied reader and uses certain structures to predispose the actual reader, who brings his own unique set of experiences to the act of reading the text, to respond as the implied one.[9]

Although Reader-Response criticism also had its own exaggeration of the reader's more important role in creating the meaning of a literary work, but as it went on the critics like Louise Michelle Rosenblatt (1904 -2005) and many others, took a more balanced view towards the role of the writer and the reader. Rosenblatt

believed that the process of literature is fundamentally a negotiation of meanings between reader and writer, or in other words a transaction of Text acting on the reader and the reader acting on the text. There are some signs and points created by the writer to evoke a special reaction in a reader. For example describing a scene in which a meaningful song has been playing which to most of the readers it could be the reminiscence of a national catastrophe. And at the same time the reader can act on the text by bringing her own expectations, values, personal experiences, gender, past readings and so on.[10]

Considering the importance of cultural, historical and social events on creation of a literary work, we can also relate all those factors to the readers as the other half of the act of reading. If those factors are not separable from the writer's mentality in creating her work, it is also true about the readers. As said before according to Reader Response Criticism, the transactional act of reading is consist of text acting on the reader and the reader acting on text. The cultural factors involved in the writer's mentality or in the stream of the story in a novel are related to the reader's understanding of them to respond to the text and also to bring her own feelings, memories and expectations etc. to create the text of her own in her mind. Therefore it is essential in a way for the reader to be familiar with these cultural factors in order to be more alert with the events of the story, the characters' mentality and the possible reason behind their motives in the story. Although a text can be read without having any background information about the society and the culture in which the novel or poem etc is written, but the fact that familiarity with that culture and historical events can play an important role in understanding the novel, and as the Reader Response critics might say, in reader's part of creation of literary reading

is undeniable.

In order to support this idea, Haruki Murakami's novel "The colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage" is the subject of analysis with extracts from the novel and their connection with some cultural and historical issues which are critical in a better understanding of this novel and its characters' mentality.

Haruki Murakami's "Colorless" (2014) is the story of a boy who was brutally cut out of the friends group from high school days, for no apparent reason in his own mind. It depicts his life in the college and how that incident affected him and changed his life and also affected his work and later relationships. As a huge fan of Murakami's novels I got to read some of his works before coming to Japan. I always believed that I could communicate with his style of writing and got his characters and storyline. Fortunately I got the chance to move to Japan and after one year of living there and getting familiar with many cultural facts and also some historical events, I read his novel *Colorless*, and while I was reading it I was in awe how much I could understand things which were related to the cultural facts. It amazed me that how different my understanding of this novel is from what I would get if I wasn't living in Japan. Although it was so exciting but at the same time made me realize most likely, all these years of reading many novels and literary works, although I enjoyed them a lot, but I also lost a lot of it based on lack of information about the importance of cultural and historical impacts on the creation and understanding of almost all the novels written. Thus I started to pay more attention to New Historicism and also Reader Response criticisms' importance on considering the point mentioned earlier.

The story begins with the narrator and the main character, Tsukuru, describing how he

became depressed and thought of committing suicide after his high school friends cut him out of the group. The time that incident happened was after he got into the college in another city. Now his reaction to this event might be a little extreme to the readers of other cultural background. It was to me for a little bit but I didn't rely on my own impressions and contacted some of my friends living in other countries with other cultural backgrounds. I asked them about their impressions of Tsukuru's reaction to this event. Interestingly almost all of them told me it was a little odd for them, the amount of impact this event could have on someone who has entered a new era (college) seemed extreme. I am pretty sure this would be my reaction too, if I had read this novel before coming to Japan. But the reason behind this reaction is related to Uchi-Soto phenomenon in Japanese culture. Uchi-soto in the Japanese language is the distinction between in-groups (uchi, 内, "inside") and out-groups (soto, 外, "outside"). This distinction between groups is an important part of Japanese social custom and even directly

in the Japanese language itself. Groups play an important role in Japanese culture. These circles are important from the days of school until job hunting and also between the colleagues and companies. Although in many countries, the students usually have a group of friends they hang out with in the school or after school, but group making in Japan has an importance in its existence and usually individuals who do not belong to any groups are rare or are considered a case of consulting from the school staff. Tsukuru expresses his feeling of having a group of five friends at the high school in this paragraph:

And naturally Tsukuru was happy, and proud, to be included as one indispensable side of the pentagon. He loved his four

friends, loved the sense of belonging he felt when he was with them. Like a young tree absorbing nutrition from the soil, Tsukuru got the sustenance he needed as an adolescent from this group, using it as necessary food to grow, storing what was left as an emergency heat source inside him. Still, he had a constant, nagging fear that someday he would fall away from this intimate community, or be forced out and left on his own. Anxiety raised its head, like a jagged, ominous rock exposed by the receding tide, the fear that he would be separated from the group and end up entirely alone.[11]

This paragraph describes the importance of belonging to a group and also shows the fear of losing it. As Tsukuru said it, these groups have a value different from what it is considered in other cultures.

“We had several unspoken rules among us, one of them being as much as we possibly can, we do things together, all of us. We tried to avoid having just two of us, for instance, going off somewhere. Otherwise, we were worried that the group might fall apart. We had to be a centripetal unit. I’m not sure how to put it?we were trying our best to maintain the group as an orderly, harmonious community.” [page 19]

After finishing the high school those five friends decide to get in the university. Although all of them were clever students who could get into well-known universities, but all of them decide to stay in Nagoya to keep the group alive, but the only person who decides to leave Nagoya and enter a university in Tokyo is Tsukuru:

“When we were seniors in high school, we talked about where we were going to go to college. Except for me, they all planned to stay in Nagoya and go to college there. They didn’t come out and say it exactly, but it was obvious they were doing that because they wanted to keep the group together.”p22.....“I don’t know how they really felt about it, of course. But I’m pretty sure they were disappointed. Without me in the equation, part of that sense of unity we always had was inevitably going to vanish.”[page 23]

According to Tsukuru, his friends especially Aka and Ao, could easily get into better universities, but they decided to stay in a smaller city for maintaining their group. This shows the importance of groups in Japanese lives and their society. Since their decision has a cultural background, this part of the story could be more reasonable to those who are familiar with this part of Japanese culture, while for the reader unfamiliar with it, it could be a bit unreasonable.

The importance of groups in Japanese society does not stop at the personal life only. There is a part in the story where one of Tsukuru’s friends who has a very successful business in Nagoya talks about the importance of group discipline in a successful business:

“There are quite a few people who reject the program. You can divide them into two groups. The first is antisocial. In English you’d call them ‘outcasts.’ They just can’t accept any form of constructive criticism, no matter what it is. They reject any kind of group discipline. It’s a waste of time to deal with people like that, so we ask them to withdraw. The other group is comprised of people who actually think on their own. Those it’s

best to leave alone. Don't fool with them. Every system needs elite people like them. If things go well, they'll eventually be in leadership positions. In the middle, between those two groups, are those who take orders from above and just do what they're told. That's the vast majority of people. By my rough estimate, 85 percent of the total. I developed this business to target the 85 percent.”[page 161]

Another important point in understanding Tsukuru's psyche in this novel is the Japanese language and its relation to Uchi-Soto culture. The basic concept revolves around dividing people into in-groups and out-groups. When speaking with someone from an out-group, the out-group must be honored, and the in-group humbled. That is achieved with special features of the Japanese language, which conjugates verbs based on both tense and politeness. In Japanese language the pronouns are also related to Uchi-Soto. There are some formal and informal pronouns for I/me and You. [12]

There is a part in the novel about the way they called each other in the high school days:

Back when they were teenagers, Ao, Aka, and Tsukuru had used the rough, masculine pronouns ore and omae? “I” and “you”? when they talked to each other, but Tsukuru realized now, seeing them sixteen years later, that this form of address no longer felt right. Ao and Aka still called him omae, and referred to themselves as ore, but this casual way of speaking no longer came so easily to Tsukuru.”[page 157]

In this part of story, they met after a long time of losing contacts with each other and Tsukuru couldn't use informal pronouns with

that old friend anymore, which can mean that at this time they don't share an Uchi group anymore. But then later when they talk for a long time and bury the hatchet there is a change in using the pronouns again:

“Tsukuru suddenly realized he was using the familiar omae to address Aka. It came out naturally at the end. Aka walked with Tsukuru to the elevators.”[page175]

This part is very important in understanding the psyche of this novel's character. Being familiar with these pronouns and whether they are used in a formal or informal (or else in a very informal way which omae and ore can be categorized in) is of an enormous importance in understanding the novel and a lot of actions. The reader who is familiar with Japanese language will immediately get what's happening with Tsukuru. The fact that he can now use the very informal pronoun for himself and Aka again, shows he had this grudge at but later he forgave Aka and accepted him as an “in group” again and was able to use the informal pronouns easily.

An inseparable part of a culture is superstition which involves lucky and unlucky phenomena .

Numbers have a special role in superstition worldwide. The most famous ones are number 13 being unlucky and number 7 a lucky one. In Japanese culture number four is considered an unlucky number because the word for four is shi ( 四 / し ) closely resembles the word for death shi ( 死 / し ). Likewise, the word for nine ku ( 九 / く ) sounds similar to the word for pain and suffering ku ( 苦 / く ). This is why gifts should never be presented in fours, but rather in sets of

Whether deliberately or not, Murakami's story has got a part where the unlucky number



“four” becomes significant in the lives of the characters. In Tsukuru and his friend’s lives everything was going great when they were people in their group. They all felt their lives have got a harmony and they enjoyed school days and the after school events. This continued until Tsukuru decided to leave the city and go to Tokyo. His departure to Tokyo made the group to be four people and that’s when everything became dark not only in Tsukuru’s life but also among his friends. Tsukuru was accused of rape and abandoned completely by his beloved friends and fell into the depth of despair, depression and suicidal thoughts. Aka was actually raped and had mental issues and the other four eventually became alienated with each other. The day their group lost one member and became a four person group, everything went wrong. Familiarity with the meaning of these numbers in Japanese culture can contribute to a better understanding of the hidden layers of this story.

The last cultural background regarding this novel which can be revealing about one of the abstract and queer parts of the novel is related to the part where Tsukuru’s friend Haida is telling him a story about a man called Midorikawa who was traveling alone and stayed in an inn for some time where Haida’s father was working at that time. Midorikawa was a strange man who was carrying a cloth bag with him which Haida thought might contain someone’s ashes. The strange man becomes interested in Haida’s personality for unknown reasons and later he tells him his story. He had a metaphysical power of seeing people’s colors. But in order to gain such a power you need to accept your own death which will happen soon:

Midorikawa shook his head. “No, it’s not innate; it’s a temporary ability. You get it in

exchange for accepting imminent death. And it’s passed along from one person to the next. Right now, I’m the one who’s been entrusted with it.”[page77]

“There is one way,” Midorikawa said. “You take that capacity — a death token, if you will — and transfer it to somebody else. What I mean is, you and somebody else to die in your place. You pass them the baton, tell them, ‘Okay, your turn,’ and then leave. Do that, and you’ll avoid death, for the time being. But I don’t plan to. I’ve been thinking for a long time that I’d like to die as soon as possible. Maybe this is just what I need.”[page76]

In the story there is a part that Haida’s father asks the stranger if he wants to commit suicide. Although his decision might sound a bit strange to some readers, martyrdom has an old history in Japan. We can go back to the concept of Seppuku at the Samurai time.

Bushidō expanded and formalized the earlier code of the samurai, and stressed frugality, loyalty, mastery of martial arts, and honor to the death. Under the bushidō ideal, if a samurai failed to uphold his honor he could only regain it by performing seppuku (ritual suicide).[14]

In an excerpt from his book *Samurai: The World of the Warrior*, historian Stephen Turnbull describes the role of seppuku in feudal Japan:

In the world of the warrior, seppuku was a deed of bravery that was admirable in a samurai who knew he was defeated, disgraced, or mortally wounded. It meant that he could end his days with his transgressions wiped away and with his reputation not merely intact but actually enhanced. The cutting of the abdomen released the samurai’s spirit in the most dramatic fashion, but it was an extremely painful and unpleasant



way to die, and sometimes the samurai who was performing the act asked a loyal comrade to cut off his head at the moment of agony.[15]

Unlike many cultures around the world where martyrdom does not have a value in itself, in Japan it is rooted in Seppuku and it did not stop there.

Familiarity with the concept of being willing to die for another cause and having this concept in one's culture can have an effect in communicating with the novel's characters and their aims. Reading this story through the eyes of the reader who knows and share this cultural background could end in a better communication with the story and also to a better appreciation of it.

Although throughout the history of literature there were literary works which were appreciated by the readers who had the least shared cultural backgrounds which makes those works to be canon of literature, but the important point in those canons is that the concepts included in them were comprehensible (thus universal) ones which people from different cultures and different eras could communicate with. But this is a rare phenomenon and we cannot ignore the fact that there are some writers who are more popular in some specific countries or a special area. One of the writers who could break some borders in the geographical sense is Haruki Murakami whose post-modern techniques in writing his novels made him very popular in the West.

Considering New Historicism's key concepts in a critique and applying them to Reader Response Criticism shows us that there is a thin line between different criticisms and also by analyzing Murakami's *Colorless*, it became obvious that the culture and history and the reader's familiarity with them are very important in understanding different levels of a novel. Considering all said in this article, one may be able to answer this

question easier : Why are some writers more accepted in geographical areas and also in different eras?

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