

An Introspective View into Haruki Murakami's Works from the Point of View of Business

Ryosuke ASAKURA
Babeş-Bolyai University

Abstract

Why is Haruki Murakami popular in the whole world? I would like to propose considering Haruki Murakami from the point of view of Business Science. His works fall roughly into two phases and can be characterized by five distinctive keywords: Innovation, Cross-culture, Diversity, Economy and Society. First, the word "innovation" represents the style of his works, as most of his works are plotted without empathy and theme, which is uncommon in works written by other novelists. Second, when reading his works, we sometimes feel as if we read books written by an American author. This is because he was affected largely by American authors, such as Richard Brautigan and Kurt Vonnegut. Third, we often encounter something interesting and unpredictable in his novels, something such as a bizarre "another world" or a "sheep man". What I want to point out through the concept of "diversity" in Haruki Murakami's work is that he goes beyond the common notions of "normality" and that deploys a colorful type of charm which fascinates a wide range of readers throughout the world.

Keywords

innovation, cross-culture, diversity, economy, society.

1. Introduction

One of the reasons for the popularity of Haruki Murakami is that in his work there are few expressions particular to Japan. For instance, in most of his novels, Western food comes out instead of Japanese food. Therefore, such novels are easier to translate from Japanese to other languages; his novels have been translated into many different languages. This could also be one of the main reasons why his novels are popular all over the world. Numerous attempts have been made by scholars to analyze, provide literary critique and assessment on Haruki Murakami's literary popularity, by looking closely at the content of his novels. What seems to be lacking, however, is the reason for which his novels are popular in the world from a business point of view. This paper is intended to investigate and to reveal what elements make Haruki Murakami popular in the world, apart from his literary excellence. Therefore, rather than considering the literary content of his novels, this paper focuses on his background and the social situation at the time he wrote his novels.

2. Innovation

First of all, we will focus on innovation. This word represents the style of Haruki Murakami's novels, because the characters of his novels are usually depicted without empathy and theme, practice which is rarely found in novels written by other novelists. In addition, many paradoxical conjunctions, simple sentences and short sentences also create charm and attractiveness to readers. Haruki Murakami's novels are constantly different from other writers' novels insofar, which confers readers a different experience and as a result, his novels have been widely accepted all over the world. Especially, *Norwegian Wood*, which Haruki Murakami himself called the 100% romance novel on the wraparound band of the book, has been a best seller on bookshelves in many countries. Kodansha, the printing house which published *Norwegian Wood*, showed that sales in Japan exceeded 10 million in 2009. Since the publication of his first novel, *Hear the Wind Sing*, he has won the prestigious Gunzo Award and enjoyed great reputation around the world. At the same time, his fiction has been often criticized by the Japanese literary establishment as un-Japanese. Actually, he never received any major prize coveted by Japanese writers and novelists, such as the Akutagawa Prize, which is one of the most famous literary prizes in Japan. Meanwhile, his novels have become popular gradually not only in Japan but also overseas, and now overseas sales far exceed the domestic ones. At this point I would like to consider the criticism provided by the Japanese literary establishment from *The Innovator's Dilemma*. *The Innovator's Dilemma* is the most well-known work of the Harvard professor and businessman Clayton Christensen. According to Clayton Christensen, innovation can occur with the support of sustaining or disruptive technologies.

“Some sustaining technologies can be discontinuous or radical in character, while others are of an incremental nature. What all sustaining technologies have in common is that they improve the performance of established products, along the dimensions of performance that mainstream customers in major markets have historically valued.”

(Clayton Christensen 1997: 15)

Clayton Christensen goes on to say that:

“Disruptive technologies bring to a market a very different value proposition than had been available previously. Generally, disruptive technologies underperform established products in mainstream markets. But they have other features that a few fringe (and generally new) customers value. Products based on disruptive technologies are typically cheaper, simpler, smaller, and, frequently, more convenient to use.”

(Clayton Christensen 1997: 15)

All of this amounts to saying that there are two kinds of innovation, “sustainable innovation” needed in order to advance improvement of conventional products, and “destructive innovation”, commonly deployed in order to destroy the

intrinsic value of conventional products in order to create completely new products, services and business models. From this view point, one may say that Haruki Murakami's innovation is true case of destructive innovation.

3. Cross-culture

Reading Haruki Murakami's novels, we sometimes feel as if we read books written by an American author. One of the reasons of this phenomenon is that Haruki Murakami was impacted largely by American authors, such as Richard Brautigan and Kurt Vonnegut. Let us, for a moment, consider another world famous writer, Kazuo Ishiguro, a Japanese British novelist. Kazuo Ishiguro understood that his works have little similarity with Japanese novels, although he was born in Nagasaki in Japan, as can be seen in the following statement from a 1990 interview:

"If I wrote under a pseudonym and got somebody else to pose for my jacket photographs, I'm sure nobody would think of saying, 'This guy reminds me of that Japanese writer'".

(Allan Vorda 1994: 25)

What the passage helps clarify instantaneously is that Haruki Murakami, similarly to Kazuo Ishiguro, may be said to be a writer with his values different from the Japanese writers' who have published until now.

Let us now return to Haruki Murakami's background. Haruki Murakami said in "*Walk, Don't Run!*" that "his parents were teachers of the Japanese language, and rebelling against them, he was reading foreign literature from his early childhood."

(Ryu Murakami and Haruki Murakami: 1981)

Also, Alfred Birnbaum, one of his translators, pointed out that "Haruki Murakami is not a Japanese writer; rather, he is an American writer who happens to write in Japanese".

(Mamiko Nakano: 2016)

Before he read Haruki Murakami's works, Alfred Birnbaum was studying Japanese literature written in the Taisho period at Waseda University and the further he dove deep into Japanese literature, the more bored he felt.

"Japanese literature seems to be dark, I thought, it includes a family discontent, lamentation of the public's unrecognizable, it is absolutely something wet. In Murakami Haruki's works bright humor was fresh anyway, then American-like irony, I realized he was trying to write like an American."

(Mamiko Nakano: 2016)

Alfred Birnbaum goes on to say that:

"Haruki Murakami has been reading American novels as his hobby, I guess he wanted a light feeling in his writing." However, writing fiction in Japanese makes it absolutely heavy. "I think I realized that it makes it easier to write if he does it in English."

(Mamiko Nakano: 2016)

This point is argued by Murakami himself. In *A novelist as a profession*, Murakami himself said that he "wrote the beginning of the first novel in English. By writing the beginning in English which he could not write in Japanese, a new Japanese style of writing became emerging, which means that it became his own unique writing style."

(Haruki Murakami: 2015)

Turning now to Haruki Murakami's background, his hometown is Kobe, which has been a major international port since 1868. The foreign settlements built at that time still exist, and moreover, the proportion of the foreign residents in the city population is high. Kobe is one of the most exotic cities in Japan. Having lived there, Haruki Murakami has been familiar with different cultures from his early days in Kobe and from reading foreign literature. It can be said this combination of factors lead to the development of his style, that makes him come across somehow "American".

4. Diversity

Diversity is one of the most important elements of his long stories. We often encounter something interesting and unpredictable in his novels, something such as an unrealistic world, the sheep man and LGBT. Speaking of LGBT, in *Norwegian Wood*, a lesbian comes out as part of the story, while the reader meets a transgender person in *Kafka on the Shore*, where Oshima-san, the protagonist of the book, was born as a woman and began to act as a man afterwards. As a matter of fact, it is not rare that Haruki Murakami depicts sexual minorities. The main character of *Chance Traveller* is a gay person. As a synopsis, this short story depicts the life of a gay man who is a piano tuner. Also, in *Sputnik Sweetheart* there is a lesbian woman named Sumire. She is the main character in this story and is falling in love with a woman named Miu. Furthermore, even in *1Q84*, there are descriptions of such sexual activities of two women. Haruki Murakami is trying to write fiction with various diversity elements, including various diverse groups, such as sexual minorities. Diversity is well functional in his novels, influencing a group of writing followers called "Haruki's Children" both in Japan and throughout the whole world. It is probable that he understands diversity groups so well because he has lived in Europe and the United States for long periods of time since he gained explosive popularity in Japan with the *Norwegian Woods*. What I want to point out through diversity is that he deploys a colorful type of charm which fascinates a lot of diverse readers throughout the world.

5. Economy

In his novels, there are many close-up details on food and clothes. These descriptions represent a capitalist economy. In a capitalist economy mass production and mass consumption are praised, and what really matters is not necessarily “what” to buy, but just simply to spend money, as can be seen in the following quotation from *Dance Dance Dance*:

“That’s when I proffered my words of wisdom, that waste is the highest virtue one can achieve in advanced capitalist society.”

(Haruki Murakami 1994: 19)

There are two reasons why elements of capitalism are seen in his novels, especially *Dance Dance Dance*. First, when he was a university student, he opened a small jazz bar, which he ran together with his wife from 1974 to 1981. At that time, he was writing his fiction at midnight, after closing the bar for the day. By having the bar, it seems that Haruki Murakami became very familiar with the workings of the economy. Second, the Japanese economy was booming in the 1980s, phenomenon which was later called “the bubble economy”. It can also be said that by depicting an economy filled with material goods, the existence of characters who are not mentally satisfied becomes prominent. The characters in his novels usually have the ability to live alone because they can earn enough money to live their own lives, earn and cook well. However, in search of something (in most cases, their lover or their wife), they go out deep into the dangerous world outside, such as in *Dance Dance Dance*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, and *Sputnik Sweetheart*. From an economic perspective, Haruki Murakami also published a novel called *A Folklore for My Generation: A Pre-History of Late-Stage Capitalism*, and furthermore let us consider the following quotation in *Dance Dance Dance*.

“We live in an advanced capitalist society, after all. Waste is the name of the game, it’s great virtue. Politicians call it “refinements in domestic consumption.” I call it meaningless waste. A difference of opinion. Which doesn’t change the way we live. If I don’t like it, I can move to Bangladesh or Sudan. I for one am not eager to live in Bangladesh or Sudan. So I kept working.”

(Haruki Murakami 1994: 12)

What is immediately apparent from this quote is that there is a clear break in the era between *A Wild Sheep Chase* and *Dance Dance Dance*, and this seems to be almost equivalent to the change in the 1980s in the Japanese society. *A Wild Sheep Chase* was written about the economy in the 1970s, when the growth of the economy was remarkably slower than in the 1960s. On the other hand, the economy of the 1980s was booming. Everywhere throughout the country any type of investment was popular. In order to make as much money as possible, businesses began to purchase stock and real estate, financial activities which were done along detailed planning devised after thorough investigation. This quote from *Dance Dance Dance* is relevant:

“What we had here was a hotel founded on a proper outlay of capital and now enjoying proper returns. But how the hell had this come about? Well, I could guess, of course. Having once put together a PR bulletin for a hotel chain, I knew the whole process. Before a hotel of this scale is built, someone first costs out every aspect of the venture in detail, then consultants are called in and every piece of information is input into their computers for a thorough simulation study. Everything including the wholesale price and usage volume of toilet paper is taken into account. Then students are hired to go around the city- Sapporo in the case - to do a market survey. They stop young men and women on the street and ask how many weddings they expect to attend each year. You get the picture. Little is left unchecked. All in an effort to reduce business risk.”

(Haruki Murakami 1994: 23)

What the passage makes clear at once is that the economy was changing. The Dolphin Hotel in *A Wild Sheep Chase* which was not looking good at a certain point in time, was later transformed into the gorgeous and modernized Dolphin Hotel run by a large enterprise. When is the turning point between the 1970s and the 1980s? It can be said that one of the major turning points in postwar Japanese society was when Yukio Mishima killed himself in 1970. From the time that Yukio Mishima, who pursued the aesthetics of the spirit of the old Japan, old good Japanese values and aesthetics were completely forgotten and the Japanese people lost the way of connecting with the spirit of the old age.

6. Society

Haruki Murakami's style of writing changed dramatically after the following incidents: the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995 and the Sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway that same year by the Aum Shinrikyou, a local religious group. Before these incidents, he was showing detachment to the society. However, after these incidents he has grown a special kind of commitment to the society. In 1995, there were a lot of casualties and many buildings and roads were devastated during the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake. On the other hand, massive terrorism by the religious group also shook the Japanese society. Mass terrorism was different from other disturbing things, such as earthquakes and huge tidal waves, because it was not natural disaster; rather, it was caused by others humans. After these incidents, Haruki Murakami's attitude towards the society changed dramatically. As a result, he wrote works about these incidents. Haruki Murakami came to terms with these events with his first work of non-fiction, *Underground*, and the short story collection *After the Quake*. *Underground* consists largely of interviews of victims of the gas attacks in the Tokyo subway system. Here, we notice, Haruki Murakami began to receive great influence from social incidents. At this point, we are able to divide Haruki Murakami's works into two parts. The former part is from *Hear the Wind Sing* to *Kafka on the Shore*. The latter part is from *After the Quake* onwards. In addition, Haruki Murakami's commitment to the society was symbolized by the fact that he

went to Jerusalem in 2009 to receive the Jerusalem Prize. Let us consider the following sentences:

“Between a high, solid wall and an egg that breaks against it, I will always stand on the side of the egg. Yes, no matter how right the wall may be and how wrong the egg, I will stand with the egg. Someone else will have to decide what is right and what is wrong; perhaps time or history will decide. If there were a novelist who, for whatever reason, wrote works standing with the wall, of what value would such works be? What is the meaning of this metaphor? In some cases, it is all too simple and clear. Bombers and tanks and rockets and white phosphorus shells are that high, solid wall. The eggs are the unarmed civilians who are crushed and burned and shot by them. This is one meaning of the metaphor. This is not all, though. It carries a deeper meaning. Think of it this way. Each of us is, more or less, an egg. Each of us is a unique, irreplaceable soul enclosed in a fragile shell. This is true of me, and it is true of each of you. And each of us, to a greater or lesser degree, is confronting a high, solid wall. The wall has a name: It is The System. The System is supposed to protect us, but sometimes it takes on a life of its own, and then it begins to kill us and cause us to kill others - coldly, efficiently, systematically.”

(HAARETZ 2009)

This is the speech held by Haruki Murakami in Israel. At that time, there was a fierce battle that was raging in Gaza in Israel and Haruki Murakami got the prize by participating in the ceremony after asking himself whether going to Israel and accepting the literary prize, and whether this would create the impression that he supported one side in the conflict. Although too many people advised him not to be there, Haruki Murakami finally made up his mind to deliver one personal message rather than saying nothing. Haruki Murakami did not mean that he endorsed the policies of a nation that chose to unleash its overwhelming military power. Haruki Murakami did not intend to be political and he just tried to show commitment to the society as a novelist.

7. Conclusions

It should be concluded, therefore, from what has been said above, that Haruki Murakami comes across like a huge multinational corporation. Each keyword described above is usually discussed in various fields of business. First of all, “Innovation” is surely a hot topic, as numerous established companies as well as start-ups are eager to create something new. “Cross-culture” is important especially when companies expand their business internationally. Regarding “diversity”, numerous attempts and corporate efforts have been made in the field of human resource management. As an example, Silicon Valley, known as the innovation hub where state-of-the-art technology companies gather together, is also famous as a place to share a certain type of modern corporate culture which values diversity more than anything. The profit of companies finally depends on the state of the “economy” to a large extent. This is because it is largely influenced by exchange rates, stock price, taxation systems, and so on. These days, companies are asked to take corporate social responsibility. They are sometimes required to make

products that are environmentally friendly, rather than just profitable. As described above, these five keywords are indispensable when considering multinational companies, and we therefore conclude that one strong reason for which Haruki Murakami is so popular throughout the world is because his works have been illustrating these major contemporary issues.

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