

Book Review Haruki Murakami's *Killing Commendatore*

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Abstract: Murakami's *Killing Commendatore* is a post-modern fantasy novel depicting the stories of some interesting people very realistically along with a squeeze of fantasy. The protagonist is a middle-aged portrait painter who witnesses a series of strange events at night. This leads him to uncover the shrouded mystery behind all these events. However, during the course of the novel taking a fantastical turn are the stories of ordinary people trapped in the purview of the post-modern world. Murakami blends realism into fantasy and fantasy into realism to give us a beautiful work of unique art.

Keywords: Fantasy, realism, Alternative history, psychological novel.

Killing Commendatore is Haruki Murakami's latest novel. It was published in the original Japanese edition on February 2017 and re-published into English for the US and UK on October 9, 2018 by Philip Gabriel and Ted Goossen. Murakami needs no introduction. He has been the recipient of numerous prizes including the prestigious World Fantasy Award, Frank O' Corner International Short Story Award, The Franz Kafka Prize and the Jerusalem Prize. In 2018 he was nominated for the New Academy Prize in Literature, which is an alternate of the Nobel Prize, but he requested his nomination be withdrawn.

Killing Commendatore is a fascinating kunstlerroman: it traces the mental journey of an artist from a mere portrait painter to a finesse abstract painter. It is the work of a master craftsman riveting the world of *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Divine Comedy* and the post-modern world into a 681 page volume. 'Killing Commendatore' is Tomohiko Amada's masterpiece painting which was long concealed in the attic of the maestro, stashed away from all human eyes. The unnamed protagonist chanced upon it one day while living in his house. He observed the killing inside the painting: so drastically real that it seemed to take place before his very eyes. The painting, however, was enchanted and it led to an array of fantastical happenings and strange characters.

The prologue to the book is, in fact, the epilogue. It has been written in reverse chronological order to spark the curiosity of the reader and also prepare him for the general temperament of the novel. It is the brief conversation between the protagonist, a painter and an eerie faceless man

from the world of fantasy. The faceless man wants to commission the artist for his portrait in exchange for a small penguin charm.

There are interesting characters in the novel: a protagonist whose life moves as helplessly as a paper-weight object on a broad table, a Jay Gatsby who keeps a watch-out from the other side of the hill and whose history is a complete mystery, an Alice who flutters about the hills through a secret rabbit-hole and inquisitively asks and curiously believes whatever is told to her, a Dobby-like-elf creature from the Harry Potter series who always talks in riddles, two married girlfriends and a wife awaiting divorce. What connects all of these sundry human characters is their loneliness; all of them are quite discontented with their present lives and seek happiness elsewhere. This is the looming flavor of all Murakami books. His *Men Without Women* depicts this with more austerity. Then there is the curious long history of the famous artist- Tomohiko Amada. A prodigious artist who went to Vienna to study Western Art but instead, after being repatriated to his own country at the onset of World War II, abandoned it altogether to do Japanese style paintings.

The book is divided into two parts-“The Idea made Visible” and “The Shifting Metaphor”. However, these are not to be understood as metaphorical titles for they are not. They are imaginative characters in the novel- Idea as well as Metaphor. The titles of chapters come from interesting thoughts in the novel, said aloud by the protagonist or other characters. The book is a semi-easy reading, although for that it does not lose its literary depth or quality. It is the story of man, a middle-aged painter, who is trying to find his feet in a chaotic and meaningless world, and wants to be a lasting name in the world of art. It is, in fact, many stories compiled in one, and the protagonist is merely the catalyst for the final outcome of those disconnected, individual stories. The plot has been well thought of and presented, and the climax that rises is spellbinding. The climax comes about with just a single line in the novel. One dialogue changes the entire meaning of the narrative and reverses the plot. Very few stories have the potential to do this. Two among popular choice would be Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Valley of Fear* and Rabindranath Tagore’s *Thakurda*. Murakami, by achieving this end, proves his mastery of the technique of story-telling.

The atmosphere of mystery which Murakami was experimenting in *After Dark* comes off most fruitfully in this novel. There is a logical explanation behind all the strange happenings and the fantastic ones may as well be considered a plausible dream. Sigmund Freud, the Viennese psychiatrist, connected memories, desires and thoughts to literature (which are wakeful dreams). What appears to be the Commendatore- an elf-like creature two foot long, may be the protagonist’s shrunken ego speaking to him. In fact, there are evidences to prove that all of the dream-like sequences are embodiments of repressed childhood memories. The Dantean pitch-black forest adventure that strikes towards the end of the novel may be a psychological delving

to finally address all of the deep seated troubles which were always at the back of the protagonist's mind. The "dark" memories of the past had been haunting the protagonist every now and then but had never been confronted openly. Finally the "dark" unconscious memories are confronted beautifully by resembling them to the dark forest where one gets easily lost, confounded and entangled. Murakami's novel is a handcrafted beauty which explores the plausible extent of literature as wakeful dreams. Furthermore, the novel displays in the protagonist, some habits of the novelist himself: early riser, working from six to ten, thereafter relaxing the entire day, living solitarily while working, etc. These may evince evidence of Murakami's own psychoanalysis within the course of the long novel; the story may not be completely fictional but a part of the picture which Murakami's himself tries to deal with each day. He might be recounting his own days as an artist, struggling each day with a new work until one fine day he became the goose that laid golden eggs.

What makes this book a classic among modern day novels is the fact that it experiments on multiple levels. The book is an amalgamation of many genres: realism (reality of presentation), fantasy, psychological, philosophical, alternative history, and finally post-modern. The characters have a philosophic depth to them and their feelings and relationships have been dealt very realistically. The book logically connects the action of the characters to their past history, which renders it coherent and meaningful. There is a long alternative world war historical narrative of a major character in the novel which had impacted his style of painting. In that sense, the novel becomes alternative history as well. Fantasy blends in naturally like sugar in tea, is realistically presented and logically connected. The modern day reaction against tradition and values which embodies the post-modern approach has always been Murakami's favorite blueprint and we see that in most of his novels, including this one. The world is a lonely, apathetic place with no fixed meaning. Meaning changes from day to day and so does one's ideals, for the worse, with the changing society. All of these genres come together to build a *kunstlerroman* in the making. They give depth and an innate understanding of the working of the world to the protagonist which makes him a better painter by the end of the novel. From a simple portrait painter, he rises to the ranks of an avant-garde abstract painter. *Killing Commendatore* is an absolute treat to savor on for Murakami lovers. It is a book full of specially assorted dry Autumnal flowers; each to be taken in the hand, delicately felt and smelt in the ripeness of Spring.