

# What I Talk about When I Talk about Haruki Murakami

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## Introduction

In his article “The Harukists, Disappointed,” Roland Kelts relates the following memory:

My seventy-year-old Japanese mother sat me down at home in Boston and opened two books, one by the literary lion Yasunari Kawabata, the other by Murakami. “This,” she said, pointing to Kawabata’s stoic lines of traditional kanji characters, logographs inherited from the Chinese, “is Japanese literature. This,” showing Murakami’s mish-mash of katakana and hiragana, syllabary writing systems used for words with no kanji, or borrowed (usually) Western terms, “is something else.” (Kelts 2012)

Kelts’s mother appears to be making a simple comparison, but her words reveal an interesting truth, namely, that Murakami’s works do not always reverberate with a traditional Japanese audience. Whenever Murakami comes out with a new book, long lines of young Japanese form, eager to get their hands on it. However, it is a different story entirely when it comes to getting “seventy-year-old Japanese” people such as Kelts’s mother to unequivocally accept Murakami’s writings.

The difference between Kawabata and Murakami is clear, with the former representing traditional literature, and the latter contemporary writing. They also belong to different generations. When Kawabata put an end to his life in 1972, Murakami had yet to write a novel. And before this, in 1968, when the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to Kawabata, Murakami was hanging around university lecture halls, watching the demonstrations, rebellions, and suicides of his friends. When Murakami was asked about his favorite authors, he went so far as to state that he did not care for Kawabata. “[Authors I like are] Soseki Natsume (1867–1916) and Junichiro Tanizaki (1886–1965), whose writing skill is excellent. Also, Shotaro Yasuoka (1920–2013). Authors I do not like are [Yasunari] Kawabata (1899–1972) and [Yukio] Mishima (1925–1970). I cannot accept their works instinctively. When I read Ryu Murakami’s *Coin Locker Babies* (1980), it made me want to write a novel like that. Then I quit my job to concentrate on writing novels” (Morishita 2013).

Murakami's problem was not only one of personal taste, but it was also related to his desire to break free of his native culture. "I didn't read many Japanese writers when I was a child or even in my teens. I wanted to escape from this culture; I felt it was boring. Too sticky." He added, "I just went toward Western culture: jazz music and Dostoevsky and Kafka and Raymond Chandler" (Wray 2004). This statement demonstrates a specific characteristic of Murakami. The time when Murakami was a child and teenager was the heyday of literary giant Kawabata. From 1949 (Murakami was born in this year) to 1968 (the year Kawabata was awarded the Nobel Prize), Kawabata published his famous novels *Thousand Cranes* (1949–52), *The Sound of the Mountain* (1949–54), *The Lake* (1954), *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* (1961), *The Old Capital* (1962), *Beauty and Sadness* (1964) and *One Arm* (1964). However, Murakami did not seem to be interested in Japan's Nobel Prize-winning author. The above-mentioned "many Japanese writers" undoubtedly included Yasunari Kawabata. Murakami wanted to escape from traditional Japanese culture so it stands to reason that he did not want anything to do with Kawabata, one of the best traditional practitioners of Japanese literature. It is therefore not a large leap to go from "Japanese literature," as defined by Kelts's mother, to Murakami's brand of "something else."

### 1. Haruki Murakami in Vietnam: Doubts and Reactions

Kawabata is known as foremost figure in Japanese literature in Vietnam, and his genius is undisputed. By contrast, Haruki Murakami is a new name in literary circles in Vietnam, and some harbor doubts and has negative reactions to his novels. Murakami's novels debuted in Vietnam a little late (1997) when compared to when his first work was published in Japan (*Hear the Wind Sing*, 1979). His first work to be published in Vietnam is *Norwegian Wood*, which was translated by Hanh Lien and Hai Thanh, and published by the Literature Publishing House (Nhà xuất bản Văn Học) in 1997 (Dan 2012: 147). This means that it was eighteen years after his literary debut in Japan (1979), and ten years after *Norwegian Wood* was published in Japan (1987) that Murakami made his Vietnamese debut. This time lag is related to "the barrier of censorship," "cultural barriers," and "the act of publishing itself" (Dan 2012). As a result, the translation by Hanh Lien and Hai Thanh disappeared quickly.

This situation changed in 2006, the year that marked a new Vietnamese translation of *Norwegian Wood* by Trinh Lu. This was the start of a monumental Haruki Murakami phenomenon in Vietnam, with differing reactions, including both praise and censure. The most noticeable difference between the Trinh Lu translation and the first Vietnamese translation is that the former is almost completely loyal to Murakami's original text. This meant that "paragraphs where sex was depicted were maintained as in the original

version. Therefore, the integrity of the novel was maintained” (Dan 2012: 148). Trinh Lu’s endeavor truly brought Murakami to a higher level of esteem among Vietnamese literary circles.

I read *Norwegian Wood* (which was also the first work by Murakami that I ever read) in 2006 when I was a third-year university student. Due to my major in literature, I was at an advantage in approaching the Murakami phenomenon. Unfortunately though, I did not approach Murakami’s novel actively, but rather from a defensive position. At that time, there was so much controversy about *Norwegian Wood*, most of it related to the sexual issues in the book. As a traditional man who adheres to the traditional rules of Vietnamese culture and society, I had an almost allergic reaction to some scenes in *Norwegian Wood* that my friends told me about. I heard from some of my female classmates that they did not like reading Murakami’s novel because of all the sex scenes. However, surprisingly, they seemed to pass the book on from one person to another to read in secret!

It did not take long for *Norwegian Wood* to become a hot topic in the lecture halls of my department. Some professors gave us the book to read and expand our opinions about it. As can be imagined from this situation, Haruki Murakami and his book were all over our university. And the phenomenon spread over almost the entire country. Many people paid attention to this novel from Japan, including critics, professors, students and even ordinary people, some for and some against.

Why did this novel captivate Vietnamese readers so quickly? One of the primary reasons is to be found in the sexual images, depicted so graphically, throughout *Norwegian Wood*. This issue spoke directly to the cultural system of Vietnam where there are contradictions between traditional and modern perspectives. However, Murakami’s book was not the only one to depict sexual images in Vietnam at that time (2006). Along with *Norwegian Wood*, some other novels were published in Vietnam, for instance, *Cánh đồng bất tận*<sup>1</sup> by Nguyen Ngoc Tu, *Bóng đẽ*<sup>2</sup> by Do Hoang Dieu (two local writers), *Les Particules Elementaires*<sup>3</sup> by Michel Houellebecq (a foreign author), and so on. Depictions of sex in these books were confrontational for Vietnamese readers. Although the books by Do Hoang Dieu and Michel Houellebecq were shocking, in the end they failed to convict the readers and quickly lost favor amongst a critical backlash. The book by Nguyen Ngoc Tu, on the other hand, ended up in a more fortunate position despite initial criticism.

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1 Translated to mean “The Endless Field,” a collection of thirteen short stories, published by Da Nang Publishing House, 2005.

2 Translated to mean “Sleep Paralysis,” published by Da Nang Publishing House, 2005.

3 The Vietnamese title is “Hạt cơ bản,” published by Da Nang Publishing House, 2006.

When *Cánh đồng bất tận* was released, Nguyen Ngoc Tu was severely criticized by the Provincial Committee of the Party (Ca Mau province, her hometown). The book was accused of lacking educational value. The committee highlighted the author's limitations in the book, such as her description of the worthlessness of the countryside using "heavy language," the gross exaggeration of censorship in Vietnamese society, showing more negatives than positives, and a general lack of ideals or educational instructions useful for society and humans ("NGUYỄN NGỌC TU" 2006). Despite these accusations, Nguyen Ngoc Tu and her book overcame this tempest and won a place in the hearts of Vietnamese readers. Therefore, *Cánh đồng bất tận* is an example of how a book can be valuable, despite the sexual content.<sup>4</sup>

The most pressing issue is how images of sex are depicted and what meaning is attached to these images. The story of Nguyen Ngoc Tu demonstrated that sexuality did not have to be a gratuitous means of attracting an audience (and does not lack educational value, as critics claimed). As can be seen, *Norwegian Wood* was not unique in its sexual content at the time (2006), but it did go on to be one of the foremost novels dealing with sex at that time in Vietnam. As its reception in Vietnam shows, Murakami's novel did not disappear off the face of the earth, but it actually climbed to the top of the literary heap and went on to win the hearts of the majority of its readers. This success is due to the author's skill in depicting sexuality in a fascinating way, and using this sexuality as a means to convey a profound message.

I could not avoid reading *Cánh đồng bất tận*, *Bóng đèn* or *Les Particules Elementaires*, or, obviously, *Norwegian Wood*. I had to read the book with both points of view in mind: as a man (with personal opinions about the appropriateness of sexual depictions in literature) and as a student (with the mission to research and decode the writing). I did this with *Norwegian Wood* and reread it several times. The result was that I was not astonished at why the sexuality in the book made such an impact in the literary landscape of Vietnam. Murakami's images of sex are realistic lively, and contain overtures of death and loneliness. Beside the sexuality, I became interested in the way that Murakami

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4 *Cánh đồng bất tận* by Nguyen Ngoc Tu won the award of the Vietnam Writers Association (2006) and the ASEAN Literature Award (2008). It was translated into Korean in 2007 (published by Asia House, Seoul), and into Swedish in 2008 under the name *Fält utan slut*. In 2009, a play adapted from *Cánh đồng bất tận* was performed by director Minh Nguyet. In addition, a film with the same title of the story was directed by Nguyen Phan Quang Binh in 2010.

depicted Japanese youth in the 1960s. There are many contradictions between the new and the old, many questions about true essence, and many scenes of searching for a way to live. Murakami succeeds in communicating Japanese images to Vietnamese readers in his own style. However, all of these elements had still not persuaded me that Murakami and his novel, despite it being worth reading, was completely deserving of all the praise heaped upon it.<sup>5</sup> I was still a little dubious about the fuss made over *Norwegian Wood*.

However, everything changed when I read the Vietnamese translation of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (by Tran Tien Cao Dang), published by Nha Nam and The Writer Association House, also in 2006. The book reached out to me and drew me in with its words as soon as I started reading it. In my opinion, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* is one of the most remarkable novels in contemporary Japanese literature. In this book, Murakami writes about a modern Japan where human loneliness wells up, and there are many self-journeys where people search for their real identity. Reality and fantasy merge and break up into fragments, showing the fall of the value system of postmodern society. War is also seen in a unique way, manifested as an interaction between good and evil, justice and unrighteousness, in which neither side is favored. Violence, sexuality, death and other sensitive subjects appear in this work of Murakami as instruments for him to build meanings, and in particular, profound messages. As Hoa Binh has written, “Haruki Murakami always has life lessons in his books which are essential to share with the reader. [In a literary career] spanning almost four decades with a lot of beloved novels and short stories, Haruki Murakami has become the leading symbol of modern literature, both in Japan and over the world. The philosophies of life which are summarized from the reality and transmitted concisely in Murakami’s writings are always absorbed and shared with the sympathy by the readers” (Binh 2013).<sup>6</sup> Actually, with *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Haruki Murakami really creates his own philosophy: life is a long journey to search and identify the true essence; human beings are human beings, and there are no any value boundaries in this life.

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5 In the Vietnamese version of *Norwegian Wood*, the publisher (Nha Nam and The Writer Association House) listed on the cover positive comments from many magazines over the world, such as *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *World Literature Today*, *New Statesman*, *London Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Daily Telegraph*, *New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *New Yorker*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, *Independent on Sunday*, *Guardian*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Publisher Weekly*, and so on. This helped to promote and sell the book.

6 My translation.

Through reading *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, I was able to gradually cast off my doubts about Murakami's literature. After that, many of his other works were translated and introduced to Vietnamese readers, including *South of the Border, West of the Sun* (by Cao Viet Dung, 2007), *Kafka on the Shore* (by Duong Tuong, 2007), *After Dark* (by Huynh Thanh Xuan, 2007), *Sputnik Sweetheart* (by Ngan Xuyen, 2008), *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (by Le Quang, 2010), *A Wild Sheep Chase* (by Minh Hanh, 2011), *Dance Dance Dance* (by Tran Van Anh, 2011), and *IQ84* (by Luc Huong, 2013). In addition, seventy-seven short stories,<sup>7</sup> *Underground* and *What I Talk about When I Talk about Running*<sup>8</sup> also appeared in Vietnam in 2009. This impressive list of translations has made me, and others, more and more of a fan, and I have little, if any, doubt now about Murakami's greatness.

## 2. Inside the Pages: the Genius of Murakami's Literature

So how did I go from a doubter of Murakami to a believer? Any reader of Murakami's works will soon see that he understands what his characters' needs really are. Most of protagonists in Murakami's novels are men who live ordinarily, lose (or lack) something, and embark on journeys to search for meaning. Murakami knows how to put them into hard situations, which are very magical and strange. His characters are forced to take part in unfathomable journeys to find out how to live their lives authentically. They face much difficulty in defining what life means exactly and there are also many dangerous tasks that they have to overcome. The characters try to find connections between the reality of the journey and the other reality (their real life) in order to explain what really happened. In real life, most of the connections among humans are broken, as Morten Oddvik stated in his article "Murakami Haruki and Magical Realism—A Look at the

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7 Murakami's short stories are published into six collections, including: *Firefly* (Vietnamese title: "Đom đóm," 2006), *A Perfect Day for Kangaroos* ("Ngày đẹp trời để xem Kangaroo," 2006), *After the Quake* ("Sau cơn động đất," 2006), *Lexington Ghosts* ("Bóng ma ở Lexington," 2007), *TV People* ("Người Ti-Vi," 2007) all translated by Pham Vu Thinh, and *Haruki Murakami's Short Stories—Research and Criticism* ("Truyện ngắn Haruki Murakami - Nghiên cứu và Phê bình," 2006) translated by Hoang Long.

8 Vietnamese titles: 1) "Biên niên kí chim vặn dây cót," 2) "Phía Nam biên giới, phía Tây mặt trời," 3) "Kafka bên bờ biển," 4) "Sau nửa đêm," 5) "Người tình Sputnik," 6) "Xứ sở diêu kì tàn bạo và chốn tận cùng thế giới," 7) "Cuộc săn cừu hoang," 8) "Nhảy Nhảy Nhảy," 9) "Ngâm," 10) "Tôi nói gì khi tôi nói về chạy bộ."

Psyche of Modern Japan”: “The characters in Murakami’s novels and short stories are often missing something and searching for it. Lost love, ruined relationships, psychological distance between people and the concern for the meaning in human relations are Murakami’s principal interest and are frequently symbolized by images of the magical” (Oddvik 2002: 5).

In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Tōru Okada is a typical Murakami character: he has lost almost everything, his job, his cat and his wife. He is doomed to pass each day with no meaning to his life. However, one day, he discovers a dry well near his house. Tōru Okada climbs down into the well and everything changes because of this event. He finds a way, an unusual way, to connect to life. He drops into the world of darkness, an unbelievable surrealist dream. The enemy now for him is not only Wataya Noboru (his brother-in-law), but also invisible things (including himself). Specially, from the darkness, Tōru Okada sees the light, which signals that he has a self-image and has gleaned the truth from the many fantastical events that have happened to him inside the well. He knows that his life flow has stopped and it is his responsibility to dig himself out of it. Despite the danger, he succeeds, saves his wife, and obviously, his own life.

Murakami likes to weave mysterious journeys, like that of Tōru Okada, into his narrative, giving it the air of a detective novel. The main characters have to search and analyze a lot of misleading clues in order to escape from the situation that they are placed in. The protagonist’s journey always goes hand-in-hand with death, lending a sense of oppressiveness to his tales. At the end of his stories, the protagonist often returns to their real life from the brink of hell. The return of the protagonist becomes a victory of the very essence of humankind.

Another prominent feature in Murakami’s writing is his magical and deft management of plot. He often creates two (or more) worlds at the same time and his characters journey in and out of these worlds. The main characters often go under the ground’s surface, for instance, the underground in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, the dry well in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, emergency stairs under the expressway in *IQ84*, or the underground world in the short story *The Sheep Man’s Christmas*. The underground space in Murakami’s novels may be related to the way he writes. As Roland Kelts shares in “The Harukists, Disappointed,” “‘When I write novels, I have to go down into a very deep, dark, and lonely place,’ Murakami told me the first time we met, in the summer of 1999, describing his creative process with an image he has



now repeated in conversations many times since. ‘And then I have to come back, back to the surface. It’s very dangerous. And you have to be strong, physically and mentally strong, in order to do that every day’” (Kelts 2012). Although that world is a mysterious fabrication, Murakami describes it in such a realistic way that it makes it hard for his readers to clearly define what is real. Murakami’s imagination is boundless and specific. For this reason, he can create his own magical world, an un-real world but one so real that his characters have doubts about their real world. Readers are attracted to these surrealist worlds in his works, which pose many questions about the character’s destiny.

Moreover, the world of magical symbols is numerous and vivid in Murakami’s fiction, making it like a game of symbols. As Scott Esposito has noted, “Signs and symbols are essential to a Murakami novel” (Esposito n.d., I section, para. 6). In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Murakami employs one particular symbol: the wind-up bird. This bird is an imagined species that does not exist in reality. It just appears around evil and only some people can hear it. The sound “quick quick” is heard by a boy (at night), two soldiers (at the zoo), and Tōru Okada. Hearing the wind-up bird’s sound means hearing the call of Death: the two soldiers die in Siberia (one’s skull is beaten, the other dies of hunger); a boy loses his voice and Tōru Okada almost loses his life. The wind-up bird’s sound echoes at the very time evil takes form amongst humans and humans lose their way. It is the sound of consciousness to wake up the collective unconsciousness of life. The voice of the wind-up bird is a symbol to warn humans to look for balance and to abolish the curse of the wind-up bird.

Haruki Murakami incorporates elements like this in his other works. These are important keys that open up the gates to one or many special events: examples include the gate in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, the TV screen in *After Dark*, the pit in *The Sheep Man’s Christmas* (also the Sheep Man in some works), the entrance in *Kafka on the Shore*, two moons in *1Q84*, and so on.

This game of symbols makes Murakami’s novels more difficult to understand, and this is the reason why some Vietnamese readers do not like reading his works. This is the same mindset as those young Vietnamese people who prefer contemporary music

to the songs of Trinh Cong Son.<sup>9</sup> They cannot clearly understand the symbolic world in the lyrics of Trinh Cong Son's songs. This also happens to Murakami's writings where the impatient reader pays more attention to the surface details than the metaphors concealed within.

Another fascinating aspect of Haruki Murakami's works is the way in which he employs a musical landscape. Murakami clearly possesses a wide span of knowledge, especially of Western music and books, and he seamlessly incorporates this into his book. Kawamoto Saburō writes, "Names of discs, writers, directors, musicians, and movies appear in Murakami's works. He does not intend to create a special style, but merely feels that they are more familiar to all of us than so-called 'life'" (Kawamoto n.d.). Music, especially jazz music, and the Murakami's creative style are closely aligned. Murakami was the manager of the Peter Cat, a jazz club, before he became a professional writer, an experience that clearly influenced his literature. In general, Murakami has a deep and wide understanding of music. There are many Murakami's works narrated to the background of musical melodies. *Norwegian Wood* is an example. The name of this book, of course, comes from the John Lennon song of the same title. Moreover, Nat King Cole and Duke Ellington's songs are part of *South of the Border, West of the Sun*; the short story *The Girl from the Ipanema 1963/1982* is a tale told in a magical style using the character from the song "The Girl from Ipanema." *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* is a representative work that shows the importance of music in Murakami's novels. At the end of the world, the memory of the man who reads dreams was mostly empty, but fortunately he is able to finally remember a song, "Danny Boy." This is a unique sign that demonstrates that he had been in another world, and the melody becomes a bridge connecting him to that world. His memories resurface, all thanks to the power of music.

Another remarkable feature of Murakami's fiction is the plentiful depictions of the impact of culture, including traditional and modern, past and present, and the East and the West. For this reason, some have voiced suspicions about the "Japaneseness" of Haruki

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9 Trinh Cong Son (1939–2001) was a famous composer, musician and songwriter from Vietnam. He is considered one of the most popular Vietnamese musicians. His musical legacy includes over 500 songs of love, anti-war, fate and other themes. He is often compared to Bob Dylan. In 1972, he was awarded the Gold Disk Prize in Japan for the song *Ngủ đi con* (*Lullaby*, about a mother grieving for her soldier son) sung by Khanh Ly. Trinh Cong Son is also the first Vietnamese person to receive a World Peace Music Award (2004).

Murakami, and some even consider him a Westernized man. However, to my thinking, Murakami is definitely not purely Western; he has a true Japanese spirit, fashioned on his own terms and in his own unique style. Although some of Murakami's statements in the past (especially during his youth and before 1995, when two terrible events happened in Kobe and Tokyo) reveal his Westernized-viewpoints, after that his way of thinking has changed as he has embraced his Japanese identity. Regarding his distaste for local culture, he has said, "I wanted to escape from this culture" (Wray 2004). This is the reason why Kim de Willigen argued, "He values the risk of social deviance, because he wants to break free from the Japanese tradition. He seems to be attached to the American consumer culture more than to the traditional Japanese culture" (Willigen 2012: 13).

In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, one of his best novels, he begins:

When the phone rang I was in the kitchen, boiling a potful of spaghetti and whistling along with an FM broadcast of the overture to Rossini's *The Thieving Magpie*, which has to be the perfect music for cooking pasta. I wanted to ignore the phone, not only because the spaghetti was nearly done, but because Claudio Abbado was bringing the London Symphony to its musical climax. Finally, though, I had to give in. It could have been somebody with news of a job opening. I lowered the flame, went to the living room, and picked up the receiver. (Book One: The Thieving Magpie - June and July 1984; 1 - Tuesday's Wind-Up Bird - Six Fingers and Four Breasts)

There are hardly any Japanese references in these opening lines. Murakami plentifully employs Western signs: spaghetti, overture, Rossini, *The Thieving Magpie*, pasta, Claudio Abbado and the London Symphony. He is not afraid of using such Western images in his works. This is the reason why reading Haruki Murakami's novels is like entering an international supermarket where the readers are cross-cultural consumers. In *Kafka on the Shore*, he even names his characters after global cultural symbols (which begun in the West): Johnnie Walker and Colonel Sanders. Furthermore, the Japanese writer often situates his protagonists outside of Japan:

Murakami often places his characters into a foreign country and, thus, into alien culture, which form a communicative environment and to a large extent determine an external context of communication. The writer's novels are characterized by a wide coverage of the plots: except Japan, the events take place in fifteen countries which form geographic context of communication, events take place in Korea, China, the United States, Vietnam, Canada, England, Malta, Mongolia, Russia, France, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, Germany, Finland. (Kuryleva and Boeva 2009: 193)

It could be said that in Murakami's writing globalization and cosmopolitanism delete these boundaries of contradiction in the cultural system of Japan. Murakami occupies a global space and, by contrast, the world stays in his writings. He has also expressed his own desire to have his Japanese identity recognized. "I think I am becoming some kind of a face for Japan," he explained a couple of years ago, shifting in his seat in his Tokyo office. "Maybe a kind of cultural ambassador. It's a privilege and a responsibility, and I am the only one who can do it" (Kelts 2012). He not only uses his works to open the gate to the West, but he wants to be the gatekeeper for this activity as well.

There is no doubt that because of Murakami's literary activities, he has helped readers all over the world to understand more about Japan. Despite the Western signs in his fiction, he still avers that he is Japanese to his core. "I don't want to write about foreigners in foreign countries; I want to write about us. I want to write about Japan, about our life here. That's important to me. Many people say that my style is accessible to Westerners; it might be true, but my stories are my own, and they are not Westernized" (Wray 2004). I believe that although there are differences arising from the generation gap, and differing literary styles and techniques, Murakami still firmly stands in the realm of Japanese literature, writing about Japan and popularizing Japan to the world. I am in complete agreement with Kelts's observation: "He was right about his ambassadorship. No one but Murakami can be the face of Japan while it languishes in confused politics and pressure from fast-rising neighbors. And no one but Murakami has earned the good will and respect from abroad that Japan so sorely needs right now" (Kelts 2012).

### **Conclusion: The Reception of Murakami's Literature in Vietnam**

Murakami's fiction often includes sexuality, violence, death (suicide), and broken relationships. Interestingly, these are the things I see in contemporary Vietnamese society. One of the most remarkable differences is that there is a huge difference in background between Japan and Vietnam. However, both countries are in the East and place importance on tradition. We can see the conflict between East and West, past and present, and many other aspects in Haruki Murakami's works. These issues are also crucial to Vietnamese society, especially in the context of modernization.

When I first read *Norwegian Wood*, I couldn't help but wonder why Tōru Watanabe so easily had sex. I also could not believe that Nagasawa did not remember how many girls he had sex with. But I came to realize that sexuality in Murakami's fiction is the way that humans connect to one another, and that it is the final connection when other aspects of human relationships are broken. Unfortunately, in many cases, this final bridge is also broken and they are enveloped by loneliness. This is the reason why Murakami's characters feel empty.

It should be noted that the social background of *Norwegian Wood* is 1960s Japan, a long time away from modern-day Vietnam. However, the sexual attitudes of Vietnamese youth today are undergoing change. The social system of Vietnam, influenced by Confucianism, has traditionally made people conservative when it comes to sexual matters. But this has all changed. As Dr. Nguyen Duy Tai, Medicine and Pharmacy University of Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), notes, "the first national research (in 2005) about under-age and adult sexual activity showed that the average age of first sexual intercourse in Vietnam was 19, but in the second survey (published in 2010), this had dropped to 18." However, clinical examinations and surveys of pregnant under-age girls and adults at Hung Vuong Obstetrics and Gynecology Hospital, Tu Du Hospital and the Reproductive Health Centre at HCMC demonstrates, "there are some cases of spontaneous sexual intercourse in 10–12 years old," and "the age of first sexual intercourse is 14, which is younger than the results of the national survey" (Anh 2012). These numbers have shocked some Vietnamese fathers and mothers. In Vietnam, sexual intercourse is seen as a moral issue, hence any change will affect the whole of society.

Moreover, suicidal behavior is rapidly increasing in those under the age of eighteen in Vietnam. Nguyen Trong An, Vice Dean at the Vietnam Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, said, "In 2005, there were about 400 suicides by those under 18, but

from 2010 until now (2013), this number has increased to about 600 cases per year” (Nga and Anh 2013). I have had a rather disturbing reaction from one of my students to whom I taught Murakami at university. Once day, a female student came up to me after class and asked, “Why are Murakami’s characters so lonely?” “You need to find out that answer for yourself,” I replied. And then, much to my surprise, she said, “I don’t want to read his novels any more. They make me want to die.”

In conclusion, despite the differing reactions to Murakami’s work, his literature has taken hold of literary life in Vietnam. From his debut in Vietnam until the present day, the story of Haruki Murakami continues, albeit without the heady excitement surrounding the publication of *Norwegian Wood*. One of the biggest reasons for this is that Vietnamese readers, including myself, see their own image in Murakami’s works, both positive and negative.

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