

An Inner Ambivalence

The bond of a marriage is a result of several occasions in which each member actively opines, understands each other, and expresses their emotions. By bonding, a companionship is built — the couple is open and always counts on one. In the short story “The Second Bakery Attack,” Haruki Murakami illustrates both the existence of companionship—“Well, I'm your best friend now, aren't I?” (Murakami 42)—and emotional distance, primarily on the part of the man—“(...) she didn't explain and I didn't ask” (Murakami 44).” These mixed signals lead the reader to an important question regarding the narrator: does he build a bond with his wife? Although it seems that breaking the curse leads the narrator to an open and idealized marriage with his spouse, he does not express an inner change in his personality, indicating his preference for emotional reclusion rather than companionship. This position does not mark an eventual end to his engagement nor prompt further discussion, suggesting that his desires were neither properly expressed nor accepted. This behavior peaks at the end of the story when he is physically anchored to his wife but mentally by himself. Understanding the difference between the narrator's concrete reality and his internal one gives meaning to his behaviors: he has always aimed for emotional loneliness to comprehend himself.

The reader might believe that their whole relationship could be positively summarized as a companionship because of the temporary closeness caused by the second attack. By depicting “the first light of the sun” (Murakami 48) and an affectionate moment when “she rested her head on my shoulders” (Murakami 48), a clarifying and happy moment for the couple is indicated. This same closeness was introduced during the planning of the robbery. Despite their disparities, the couple found themselves united by reciprocal hunger and the collective need for a resolution, which culminated in a mutual consumption of the burgers emphasizing the use of first-person plural pronouns: “We drove...we ate...and drank” and

“Our hunger...vanished.” Similarly, their precise execution of the McDonald's attack reaffirms their bond and coordination built throughout their marriage. As a result, the proximity between the protagonists existed and did affect the narrator's closeness to his wife.

As he gradually interacts with his wife, his passivity suggests the detrimental effect she has on his perception of their companionship, presenting a clear motive for his emotional reclusion. To emphasize this claim, Murakami develops a self-recognized passivity inherent to the man. As the plot progresses, the character's unique perception of the surrounding people and the way he handles problems supports his emotional distance from his wife. Early in the story, the man reflects on his own lifestyle: "I myself have adopted the position that, in fact, we never choose anything at all" (Murakami 36). Consistently, he follows his words by ratifying each decision his wife makes and never having the determining power in major decisions. Furthermore, his stance becomes even more evident when his wife affirms the suggestion of the first bakery attack curse—according to her, it had never left his body. By inserting an unreal element as a curse into the narrative, Murakami shows how easily the man changes his mind based on abstract pieces of evidence presented by his wife. His constant state of doubt is clear when they try to break the curse: " 'Okay, suppose you're right. Suppose it is a curse. What can I do about it?' 'Attack another bakery. Right away. Now. It's the only way.' 'Now?'" (Murakami 39). The selection of short sentences and the use of questions answered by the wife signify how each moment of confrontation in their marriage is resolved. This questioning tool is later used to assert her dominance over him: " 'Do we really have to do this?' I asked, half to her and half to myself. 'Of course we do'" (Murakami 41). For his wife, every interrogation works as a rhetorical question, answered with such certainty that it becomes unarguable. Finally, by gradually ignoring his own doubts, the narrator chooses to deal with his emotions internally, considering that the external world was dominated by his wife.

The narrator, who tells the story as if he has always been accompanied by someone, shows how physically being with other people led him to the main negative events in the plot — a contradiction that implies his search for internal independence. Murakami uses the same tools he implemented to reinforce the man's passivity to indicate the way company was his biggest problem. Firstly, when talking about the first bakery attack, the wife starts asking several questions to his husband, who slowly provides details of each step of the robbery. The main character complies with her, introducing his best friend's role in the act and explaining how close they were before the episode. By attributing an unknown cause to their further separation, the man demonstrates the superficiality of his social relations and the correlation between company and bad happenings. Regarding his wife, despite the negative outcomes in the relationship, he does not suggest a later physical disconnection from his wife. While attributing passivity to the man, the constant use of questions also points out his concern that his wife led him to the wrong track: " 'Still, was it really necessary for us to do this?' I asked. 'Of course it was!' With one deep sigh, she fell asleep against me" (Murakami 49). The protagonist's approach to both attacks was cautious and regretful, not being able to maintain a sustainable companionship — after the McDonald's incident he lacked a sense of union with his wife, building up an impression of emotional reclusion.

To resolve his external and inner issues, the narrator resorted to his own imagination as a device to access a space in which he was alone and emotionally detached from everyone, going against the constant presence of physical companies throughout the story. The several hallucinations taking place in a boat could represent various meanings, but certainly, it was an outbreak from the concrete world, where everyone was. Firstly presented when the conflict arises, the unbearable hunger is compared to a volcano in the middle of the ocean. His introduction to a strongly oppositional scenario, matching the clarity of the surrounding water to the power and danger of a natural disaster, signifies, by the end of the plot, a moment of

enlightenment and freedom. Thus, by finding an intersection between the moment in which the man is the happiest and the time when a solution to the conflict is found, a lonely and enlightening episode erupts. This peak of optimism emphasizes his rejection of companionship: “Alone now...I stretched out...waiting for the rising tide to carry me where I belonged” (Murakami 49). The implementation of elements of joy, calmness, and solitude provides a new understanding of his imaginary world — his best company was himself. When he was finally “alone,” the man was able to find where he actually belonged, showing that the previous physical presence of a company inhibited the finding of external emotional stability .

In the end of the story, this relational duality is restated when the narrator’s search for an internal loneliness, while still physically engaged with his wife, is proposed by deconstructing the common belief over this opposition: emotional detachment from a partner as a goal. By creating a couple in which the man can have a relationship without companionship, the narrative contradicts the traditional view of marriage. When the narrator finds emotional stability on his own, he can maintain physical proximity to his wife—illustrated by her laying on his shoulder at the end of the plot—without being emotionally open or bonded to her. Therefore, because of his struggle to express his feelings to his spouse, two worlds are created: the concrete one — where he lives a superficial relationship — and the mental one — where he deals with his emotions.

Just as specific trees thrive in particular terrains, the narrator’s preference for a unique type of living can be seen in similar cases in the real world. Forcing someone to be a different person is like trying to make a flower blossom in the desert. Though Murakami bases his story on abstract elements and personal traits, the emotions remain inherently human. Those feelings are a part of marriage, which can often be an unbalanced relationship, with one partner frequently staying in an inferior position until the companionship gradually

disappears. Implicitly, by inserting this emotional emancipation of the narrator, the author shows the reader that fiction can easily become reality when depicting recurrent social phenomena — if not correctly addressed, eventually, a tree will die. The death of companionship symbolizes the end of a relationship where both partners share feelings and bond emotionally, rather than just being physically attached—much like what often occurs in the modern world.

Work Cited

Murakami, Haruki. “The Second Bakery Attack.” *The Elephant Vanishes*. New York, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1994.