

# Haruki Murakami's "After Dark"

REVIEWED BY DR. SHIBLI JABIR

**H**ARUKI Murakami is a popular contemporary Japanese writer with impressive credentials. His work has been translated into more than 50 languages, and he has won several prestigious awards including Franz Kafka Prize. "After Dark" (translated by Jay Rubin) is a post-modern novel which starts with an everyday scene at Denny's, a fast food restaurant in Tokyo, and takes us through various themes: alienation of two sisters living in Tokyo; some events, almost random, from midnight to dawn; and various social issues, including prostitution, growing pains, and Japan's fascination with western culture.

humdrum of everyday existence. While the time line Murakami sketches runs from midnight to dawn, he branches off in different directions and we learn about many aspects of modern Japanese life, including American baseball league, convenience stores, fast-food restaurants and western pop music (including references to Tower Records). Murakami is known to like American pop music and we notice the eclectic genre of music he keeps track of including Hall and Oates, Pet Shop Boys, and Duke Ellington. I am sure he would have talked about

As a post-modernist, Murakami does not hesitate to paint a detailed picture of the seedy side of Tokyo. He takes us to the happenings in the love hotel Alphaville where men take their paid lovers to spend a few hours, but in this instance, also brutalizes a Chinese woman-for-hire. He gives us a few snapshots of Tokyo that is usually missing from the glamor pages, "All kinds of stuff is scattered on the street: aluminum beer cans, a trampled evening newspaper, a crushed cardboard box, plastic bottles, tobacco butts. ... Vomit too. A big dirty cat is sniffing

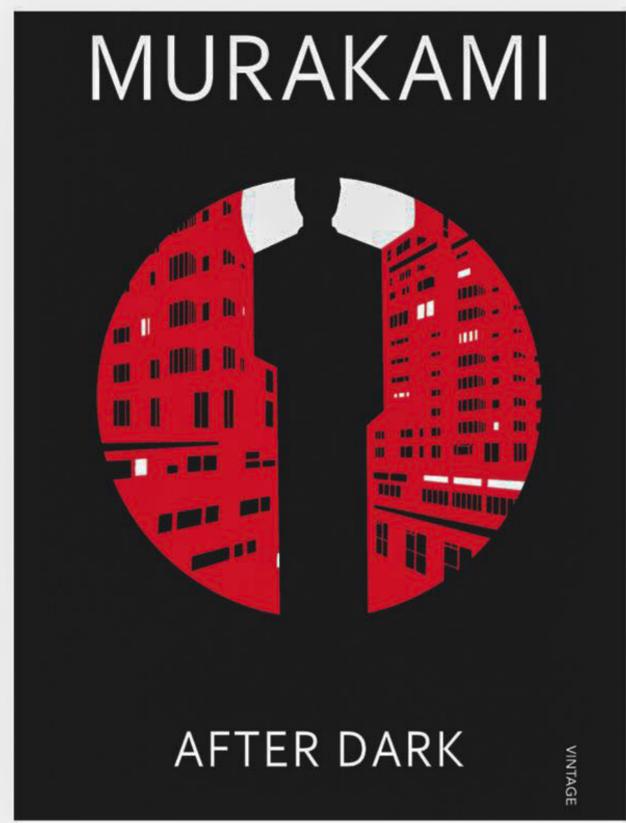
"Some kind of agency or intent transported her to that other room and sealed her in there as she slept." In contrast, Mari in talking about her sister with Takahashi points to other influences in Eri's life. "Pills and fortune-telling and dieting: nobody can stop her when it comes to any of those things", but it may be because Mari is disappointed with her sister, because she also complains, "She just didn't have any openings for me. In other words, when I needed her most, she had the least freedom to respond to my need". Sibling rivalry, one might think! In describing Eri's allergies and other health problems, Mari sarcastically comments, "I've never been sick. In our house, we had the delicate Snow White and the hardy shepherd girl".

However, the sisters at the end seem to be heading for reconciliation. A spoiler alert! For readers who want to read about the beautiful ending of the tension between the two sisters, I would direct you to Chapters 11 (3:42 AM) and 17 (5:38 AM). After Takahashi asks Mari for a date, she softens and tells him that she is scared to go to China as planned as an exchange student. She also tells him of an incident that reveals the bond between the two sisters. The book is worth reading to catch a glimpse of this magical aspect of this dimension of the story.

Murakami has become an idol in western literary circles. For the last three years, he has been a favorite to win the Nobel Prize for literature. One critic observes that he "... moves from mesmerizing drama to metaphysical speculation, interweaving time and space as well as memory and perspective into seamless exploration of human agency". Another admiring reviewer, in comparing Kafka and Murakami, wrote:

"There are - of course - many differences and perhaps the main divergence of the two writers is that Kafka doesn't write as touchingly as Murakami; doesn't illustrate the human ache like Murakami can and the reader feels no natural sympathy with Kafka's characters. Although, this may well be the point, with Kafka - the more existential of the two writers - there are not meant to be any clear 'sides', the reader is not meant to feel an affinity with a character, as this implies trust and the world of The Castle is one where nothing is to be trusted or taken as given, instead everything is shifting and illusory".

The reviewer is a voracious reader and writes frequently for these pages.



Of the two sisters, Eri Asai, the elder one, is a fashion model and we observe her from a distance as she sleeps away during the entire novel, from 11:56 PM to 6:52 AM. In the opening scene, the younger sister, Mari, a 19 year old freshman in college is seen reading a book by herself at a Denny's where she meets a jazz trombonist named Takahashi on his way to a rehearsal with his band, and who just happens to pick the empty chair at the table where Mari is seated. Takahashi recognizes Mari from a chance encounter many years ago, and initiates a conversation that lasts in fits and starts throughout the night, although at different places and at different points on the time line.

Each chapter is marked with the image of a clock which logs the advance of time from 11:56 PM and ends at 6:52 AM the next morning. During these seven hours, we track these three people. Takahashi, we learn soon, has decided to give up music and become a lawyer.

Takahashi was brought up by his father, a shady character, and his step mother, but he is not very close to either of them. The sisters on the other hand live with their parents who gave them all middle-class comforts. An interesting aspect of the story line is the complex relationship between the sisters and the developing friendship between Mari and Takahashi after their first meeting. Takahashi also recounts to Mari how they met many years ago, on a blind date, when she was a pre-teen and had accompanied Eri who had arranged the double date.

For me the three aspects that I take away after reading the book, other than Murakami's style, philosophy, and keen observation of modern life in Tokyo, are the blossoming of love between two young people, the endurance of love between two sisters, and the

Taylor Swift, One Direction, and Rihanna if the setting for this novel were in this decade. Another of his specialty is the sparse language. A chapter starts with a few strokes of the brush as follows: "Skylark interior. Fewer customers than before. The student group is gone. His use of allegorical references is also elegant as in the following: "The new day is almost here, but the old one is still dragging its heavy skirt. Just as ocean water and river water struggle against each other at a river mouth, the old time and the new time clash and blend."

at a garbage bag, intent on securing a share for the cat before the rats can mess up or dawn brings the ferocious flocks of crows."

But he is at his best in describing Eri's sleep, and the manner in which he interweaves the sisters' lives. In the opening scenes, it appears Eri is in a coma, but only gradually do we realize that the sleep might be a metaphor for her state of mind or her consciousness. His eloquence is revealed at various hours in the timeline. To construct an image of Eri's existential station, he treads gently to paint a mystical picture:

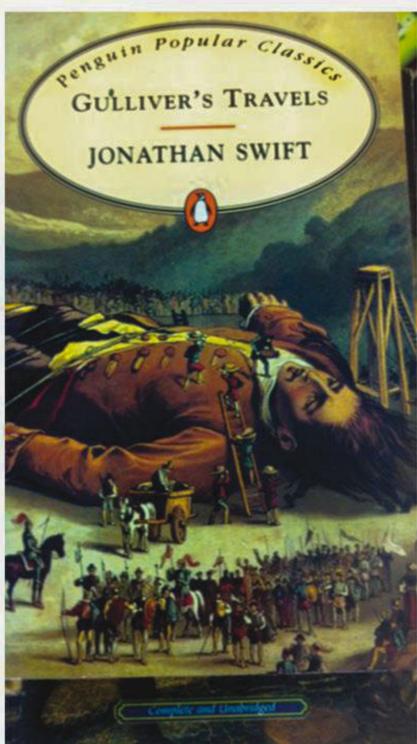


# GULLIVER'S TRAVELS: Jonathan Swift's Allegoric Masterpiece

REVIEWED BY SAJIDA AKHTAR CHOUDHURY

**J**ONATHAN Swift (1667-1745) was one of the top-ranking English writers of the eighteenth century. He is widely known as a satirist. His main aim of satire was to reform mankind's follies and vices. Swift was a man of piercing intellect who keenly observed the negative features of human beings. Gulliver's Travels is his most popular book.

Gulliver's Travels is an adventurous book describing several voyages of Lemuel Gulliver who served as a physician on a ship. His ship drowned during one voyage but he somehow swam to the shore and fell unconscious. As he woke up he found himself surrounded by a great number of tiny people called Lilliputians. The Lilliputians were only six inches tall while Gulliver was a giant in comparison to them. Gulliver became an object of great interest to them. They captured him instantly. As a captive he was carried into the capital city on a special wagon drawn by fifteen hundred horses and was chained while he was placed on display for the ordinary Lilliputians. The Lilliputians won a battle against their enemy Blefuscu with the help of Gulliver who alone captured all the ships of the Blefuscu navy. Some people got jealous of Gulliver's popularity which led him to be trapped by political intrigues. After being sentenced to be blinded, Gulliver somehow managed to escape and reached England. He made his second voyage to the land of the giants Brobdingnag. This time he looked like a tiny creature in comparison to the huge physical size of the Brobdingnagians. Being interested in Gulliver, a farmer took him to his house. His little daughter took care of Gulliver with deep curiosity. She treated Gulliver like a toy. The farmer sold Gulliver to the queen and she presented him to the king. Gulliver informed the king about the politics, culture and traditions of England. The



Gulliver's voyage to a land of horses with human-like intellect is the climax of the book. This island is inhabited by two kinds of creatures the Yahoos and the intelligent horses. He discovered that the rational horses are the masters of the ugly, half-humans called Yahoos. The Yahoos acted like savage animals. They attacked Gulliver for no reason. He is saved by the horses. The benevolent horses gave him shelter, protected him from further attacks and treated him with kindness and sympathy. Those horses seemed far more civilized and wiser than the human-like creatures, Yahoos. Gulliver was shocked at the fall of the physical and intellectual superiority of humans on that island. Gulliver was impressed with the behavior of the horses. He started to feel disgusted at the Yahoos even though they looked like humans.

The book Gulliver's Travels serves a significant moral purpose. Jonathan Swift attempted to stir up our conscience through this story to correct the faults in human nature. It's actually an allegoric book. The Lilliputian race represents human pride, conspiracy, malice and political disputes. They overestimated their power though they were too small to be properly noticed. The Brobdingnagians are totally opposite to the Lilliputians. The Brobdingnagians are kind and compassionate despite their enormous physical height and power. The Brobdingnagian ruler refused to take gunpowder from Gulliver because he opposed the idea of antagonism and destruction. In this way, Jonathan Swift through his masterpiece Gulliver's Travels, extended a message to the readers about the value of peace and rationality.

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# Mind revealing micro-fictions

"MIND READER"

AUTHOR: ANWARUL KABIR

REVIEWED BY THEOTONIUS GOMES

PUBLISHERS: KALJOYEE PROKASHONI PRICE: TK. 80.00

**A**NWARUL Kabir's latest compilation of fifty two micro-fictions Mind Reader got published in Ekushey Boi Mela of 2015. Mind Reader is a handy collection of mind revealing micro-fictions where stories primarily deal with psychological suppression and social hypocrisy. Some of these micro-fictions are only a couple of lines long while the longest ones are of a page or two at most. Thus, the pace of these narratives, grips the reader. These micro-fictions draw out troublesome questions of coping in the world that hastily embraces modernity and false moralities in urban setting. Stories like Change, Irsha and Prem:2015 and Propose capture the theme of fleeting love. Sensitive individuals in these and other stories are often intrigued by the urge of sensuality that creeps in their daily interactions. The author is consistent in his portrayal of desire driven situations where the chemistry between opposite sexes is depicted in myriad hues. Alongside, stories like Somoyer Songshoyee Shash, Froyodio Bekkha explore the uncanniness of Freudian hints that characters like Jafrin and Jamal succumb to. The collection has quite a few stories that capture the dilemma of Freudian slips, or suppression. Deep yet unfulfilled attraction continues to appear in Karjokaron and Nostalgic Bhalobasha. Author's perspective is clear as he suggests that while an individual is caught up in the deceptive cobweb of love, it is quite useless to seek out Freudian interpretation. Therefore, in Froyodio Bekkha the insoluble solution is rather taking a sedative from his physician and suppressing desire rather than asserting his love.

The title story 'Mindreader' is an apt anti-thesis. The major pre-occupation in the story is to reveal what is unsaid in unusual interactions of attraction. The anonymous self-indulgent narrator, who loathed her own appearance, surprisingly discovers a genuine affectionate gaze from her uncle at the airport. Thus, these interactions are often friendly, often Platonic and often drenched with desire.

On a different note, stories like Mofiz Ekta, Kicchu Bujhe Na and Godhulilogne wittily depict mid-life crises in unexpected turns of mid-life years along with courtship during youth. A number of stories deal with societal and political phenomena and abounds with hinted sarcasm. Stories like Progoti, Dimension and Civil Dress-e find bathos or, baffling twists that will surprise the readers, make them agree at other times, or, leave them chuckling.

Beside the themes of unrequited affair or, mismatched couple, readers will find sharp social awareness throughout the collection - be it in the campus setting, rural setting or, cosmopolitan. Stories quite consistently depict mostly middle class issues. Thus Arnob has to write a letter to both the parents that their divorce is going to ruin his life, therefore, they must look before they leap. The ending leaves us with question whether or not Mr. Sourav, the father will also be in tears as Mrs. Neela, the mother. Another poignant reality is found when a rickshaw puller, while pulling his rickshaw in intensely humid mid-day puts forward the question that why must only the poor be cursed by fate and not the rich. Thus, beyond sexual politics, stories present dilemma between the financially haves and the have-nots.

A number of the micro-fictions have an anonymous narrator. Characters like the eldest brother in Opphekkha, Kobi Farzana Zaman in Kobita Path, and Razzak Chacha in Artonaad reveal the hypocritical notions of modernity, of post-modernity and of traditional notion of life. Occasionally, the author plays with black humor while addressing the absurd like situations of our lives and times. Thus, modern day corporate marketing finds poetry quite sellable if it is accompanied with provocative music videos as promotional commodity. In Shiri a novice writer would rather make her way up by attracting her aged editor, an elderly boss would rather propose his employee. Altogether, Mindreader is an easy read and a thought provoker simultaneously.

The reviewer is Lecturer, American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB).



# A NOVEL ON WAR TIME RAPE VICTIMS

AUTHOR: SHAHAZADA BASUNIA

PUBLISHER: FARID AHMED SOMOY PRAKASHAN PRICE: TK. 300, US \$ 15

A SECRET OF A WAR BABY, written by Shahazada Basunia is a novel which mainly focuses on the war time rape victims who made their supreme sacrifices for the sake of achieving independence. The plot of the book is very vivid and convincing and the psychological analysis through character-portrayal is deep and in details. The author is the son of renowned novelist, Haider Bosunia. He has years of experience in teaching in college and university. A good number of his books have already been published from different publications.

