

Murakami's Kafka on the Shore A Personal Voyage of Introspection

ISHTIAQ AHMED

When Kafka Tamura runs away from his Tokyo house the day he turns fifteen to escape a strange curse his father set upon him, little does he know his life will end up with so many twists and turns. Same goes for Satoru Nakata, a whimsical sixty-year old, who has very little idea about what he wants from life. They never meet, yet Haruki Murakami's "Kafka on the Shore" is the epic depiction of the convergence of the strange paths taken by these two protagonists, standing on totally different ends of the life spectrum.

Here if I may ask, for you, what defines a decent fiction? What ingredients are required to be in the recipe of a good story? Well, for me, it works out something like this: a good fiction will make you think and reflect hard on what you've read. It can be open-ended and that's why it's prone to individual interpretations of the storyline by each reader. It can have blank spaces (not literally) that the author wants the reader to fill for themselves. Kafka on the Shore is such a novel. It will make you think, contemplate and introspect.

Fifteen-year old Kafka Tamura embarks on a solitary journey that takes him to the southernmost island of Japan, Shikoku, to the city of Takamatsu. He finds his idyllic respite in an old library – where he finds work and Oshima, one who will have a significant impact on his life in the coming days. He also meets Sakura, who is of the same age his elder sister would have been. He comes across the mysterious Miss Saeki, who, strangely is of the same age his mother would have been. Kafka settles himself steadily in the unknown environment of an unknown city, gets absorbed in classical literature and refined music, until the news gets to him that his father has been stabbed and killed violently in their Tokyo house. Things start to change drastically in Kafka Tamura's life, who up to that point was captivated by a record that he found on the old library's archive namely "Kafka on the shore".

Satoru Nakata, meanwhile, experiences a different life. He goes on with his innocuous ways of living and finding cats for neighbourhood households. There's something strange about him, and he isn't the everyday person you're going to meet. In his words, "Nakata is not so bright!" Well, his eccentricity is attributed in the novel to a certain incident that took place in a bright summer morning back in the days of WW2 when nine-year old Nakata went to collect wild mushrooms with fifteen other classmates and their teacher. His life has never been the same again. And, he can talk to cats.

Murakami's works have sometimes been categorised to have elements from magic realism, which to some extent might be true, but the fact always remains that being a Japanese, Murakami is always inspired by the age-old *Shinto* beliefs and that can sometimes be attributed to the slightly unnatural things that happen in this particular novel.

Kafka on the Shore is not the quintessential Murakami book, in the sense that it doesn't involve middle-aged men, their sad love life, jazz, rain and cats (it has cats, still) that many people associate Murakami with. Murakami experiments here with prose, placing Kafka and Nakata's story on alternate chapters. He encapsulates the essence of Japanese folklore and at the same time borrows elements from Western capitalism i.e., Colonel Sanders of KFC and Johnnie Walker. Murakami sets brilliant scenes and at the same time, puts great emphasis on dialogues. If you plan to read at least one Murakami book, my suggestion would be to start with this. And also, *Kafka on the Shore* is perhaps the least mentioned coming-of-age novel in any listopia, but it should be there somewhere on the top. The book is sure to have an overwhelming effect on a thinking reader, who'll enjoy every bit of the reading experience. Happy reading.

*"...Kafka sits in a chair by the shore,
 Thinking of the pendulum that moves the world,
 it seems.
 When your heart is closed,
 The shadow of the unmoving Sphinx
 Becomes a knife that pierces your dreams.
 The drowning girl's fingers
 Search for the entrance stone, and more.
 Lifting the hem of her azure dress,
 She gazes -
 At Kafka on the shore..."*

Ishtiaq Ahmed is a travel enthusiast who devours fictions, dreams of Paris and writes only when his brain parasites need a place to crash. Can be reached at Ishtiaq_Ahmed_26@yahoo.com

