Unveiling The Enigma: Women's Representation in *After Dark* by Haruki Murakami

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution of societal perceptions and role of women in Japan, particularly in the context of patriarchal ideologies, social and cultural constructs. Drawing on various scholarly perspectives this endeavour explores significant shifts in perceptions and treatment of women in Murakami's novel *After Dark*. Through his novel, Murakami aims to explore the male dominance and female resistance in Japanese society, highlighting the ways in which women have been marginalised and relegated as secondary to men due to the ingrained customs. The study also looks at how women respond to these opinions within the family and society. Using literary analysis, this work contributes to a deeper understanding of the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the quest for female authority by encapsulating the complex interplay of historical, societal, and literary dimensions shaping the status and agency of women in Japan. Murakami delineates the intricacies of societal expectations, interpersonal relationships, and individual autonomy by portraying women with multifaceted identities, each navigating their own struggles and aspirations. This study portrays the female confinement in Japanese tradition which took several years to gain recognition but has since become a distinctive metaphor of the evolving literary period.

Keywords: Beauty, Existential Crisis, Identity, Gender, Prostitution.

Introduction

Japan has gained a reputation for being a traditional and conservative Asian country that has consistently prioritised the preservation of its cultural heritage and practises. The advent of Western hegemonic power and imperialistic influence brought about a shift in normative ideologies in Japan, which consequently impacted the perception of various philosophies. The status of women underwent a transformation, resulting in a shift in societal perceptions towards them. According to Suzuki's publication titled "Becoming Modern Women," the measurement of a nation's advancement can be determined by the extent to which it esteems women. The unwavering dedication exhibited by nations in upholding the principles of gender parity, fundamental human rights, and societal inclusiveness serves as a robust testament to their progress and advancement. When women partake in the pursuit of education, they exhibit a heightened propensity to engage in gainful employment and exercise discernment in their decision-making processes. This, in turn, is anticipated to yield a substantial contribution towards the advancement and progress of the nation (1). The societal role and status of women have been constructed over an extended period. This primarily positions women as subordinate to men, relegating their life activities to domestic matters. This form of construction is inherently intertwined with an ideological framework that perpetuates male dominance across all domains, commonly referred to as patriarchy. Women continue to be regarded as marginalised individuals, frequently labelled as "second-class citizens" whose presence is disregarded. The concept of unbalanced positioning and its implications have emerged as a significant factor within the context of the "domestic" and "community" sectors. In this framework, women are typically associated with the domestic sector, while men are seen as contributors to the public sector. The presence of patriarchal ideology serves as a constraining factor on women's ability to actively participate in the public sphere.

The current societal framework restricts women to a role that primarily serves to complement and support the long-term achievements of men. This is due to the historical exchange of women's rights, resulting in a diminished and non-essential position for women in society. Beauvoir remarks that a woman is described and distinguished in relation to man, rather than him being described in relation to her; she is considered secondary and non-essential, as opposed to being essential. He is the focus, he is the ultimate authority—she is seen as different (2). Japanese society is organized in terms of age and sex, and the sexual segregation system cannot simply be called as "repressive" of women, for, while excluding women from men's world, it also provides them with a secure shelter through their own autonomy and resources (3).This highlights the idea of women being defined in relation to men, with men being considered as the norm or standard in society. It can be argued that women in Japan remained predominantly voiceless for an extended period, and when they eventually started engaging in written expression, they had already experienced a lack of ancestral female figures to draw inspiration (4). After centuries of being forced into creative silence, female writers in Japan have gained the opportunity to voice their concerns again in the country's history (5). Examining how women have acted or might be expected to act in power environments is crucial. It also reveals how they have managed the discursive elements that have been placed upon them and how they have managed to survive and encode their own subjectivities in even the most constrictive situations (6). Women's inequality cannot be adequately addressed simply by working to get women "a bigger piece of the pie." If this is all we do, some women will succeed. But the women who succeed will be those who are male-centred and male-identified; who conform to patriarchal values; and who do not seriously threaten the patriarchal order (7).

Murakami illustrates the strength of the patriarchal mentality that underlies this immense chasm of gender normativity, challenging the underlying systems of oppression. He writes to undermine patriarchal norms and foster environments that uphold gender equality, diversity, and inclusivity. He masterfully portrays both weak and strong female characters, showcasing a spectrum of strengths and vulnerabilities, each with their own unique journey towards self-discovery and emancipation. These characters exude a quiet determination and inner strength that empowers them to confront challenges head-on and carve out their own paths. On the other hand, Murakami also presents weaker female characters who are grappling with their own insecurities, fears, and limitations. Their journey towards emancipation is marked by moments of introspection, self-discovery, and ultimately, liberation from the constraints that once held them back.

Murakami's portrayal of female characters offers a nuanced exploration of the complexities of womanhood, resilience, and the quest for autonomy in a world fraught with challenges and expectations. Mari is depicted as a resolute individual who challenges societal conventions and defies the expectations imposed on her. Mari in contradiction to her other female characters, despite their collective display of power presents herself as a resilient and self-reliant individual who rejects the influence of societal norms in determining her destiny. Instead, she aspires to dismantle the prevailing patriarchal structures and gender limitations deeply ingrained within the fabric of society. The portrayal of Mari serves to underscore the fact that women, who had endured in silence for an extended period within a male-dominated society, had reached a point where they were no longer willing to tolerate similar forms of mistreatment.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse how gender relations in context of societal expectations, and existential angst are portrayed in the novel *After Dark* by Murakami, with an emphasis on the experiences of the female characters. Through an examination of familial dynamics, sexual exploitation and conventional beauty standards represented in the novel, this research seeks to shed light on Murakami's portrayal of the difficulties encountered by women in Japanese culture. It also aims to draw attention to the ways in which Murakami uses the experiences of his characters to make larger statements about issues like power dynamics, cultural identity, and the pursuit of meaning in a usually indifferent world. The study also intends to investigate how literature, like that of Murakami, illuminates the

more sinister facets of Japanese culture while emphasising female characters' empowerment, resilience, and autonomy.

Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative approach, and it analyses the complex portrayal of women in *After Dark* through the lens of feminist literary criticism. It blends the close reading of the text with character-centric analysis, concentrating on Murakami's depiction of gender in connection to themes of interpersonal relationships, selfhood, and solitude in contemporary metropolitan settings. The research examines the psychological and emotional experiences of pivotal female characters, particularly Mari and Eri Asai, emphasising how they deal with societal expectations, power struggles, and the desire for autonomy. The article connects Murakami's depiction of women with more general feminist issues particularly in relation to gendered realities in modern Japanese culture. Murakami's use of language, narrative structure, and symbolism—especially the recurrent themes of darkness and mirrors—to explore themes of objectification, sexual exploitation, and traditional beauty standards is examined in depth. To provide a thorough comprehension of women's depiction in the novel, the study uses an interdisciplinary method in addition to close reading, incorporating viewpoints from gender studies, sociology, and psychology. Feminist theorists' perspectives are used to examine how Murakami's female characters represent, subvert, or adhere to conventional gender stereotypes in Japanese culture. To demonstrate how these societal systems influence Murakami's representation of women, research on Japanese gender norms, patriarchy, and urban alienation is included into the novel's historical and cultural backdrop. By taking a comparative approach, *After Dark* is positioned within the broader framework of Murakami's corpus and contemporary Japanese literature.

This study focuses mostly on Mari and Eri Asai due to their distinct roles in portraying different aspects of gender dynamics in modern Japanese society. Mari's rejection of conventional beauty standards and her resistance to societal expectations reflect female autonomy, while Eri's submissive portrayal highlights female objectification and societal control over women's

bodies. These characters were chosen as they represent the spectrum of women's experiences in patriarchal societies. Key instances, such as the sexual exploitation of a Chinese prostitute, further emphasize Murakami's critique of the commodification and dehumanization of women in urban settings. Feminist literary criticism provides the framework to examine these dynamics and their broader cultural implications. The incorporation of these components ensures a thorough analysis of women's representation in the novel from a new perspective and is accessible to a large audience.

Results and Discussion

Murakami's portrayal of women in *After Dark* reflects the intersection of gender with race, class, and sexual orientation, offering a nuanced exploration of their identities. Eri Asai embodies feminine beauty and upper-class privilege but is restricted by societal expectations. Her passive, sleeping state critiques how class and gender objectify women, reducing them to visual commodities. In contrast, Mari represents a working-class woman navigating the nighttime urban environment. Her intellectualism and independence highlight the different ways class and gender shape identity and agency. The novel also addresses ethnic dynamics, particularly through the portrayal of Chinese migrant labourers, such as prostitutes, who face layered exploitation due to their gender, race, and immigrant status. Murakami critiques how patriarchal and capitalist systems marginalize these women, emphasizing their vulnerability. Sexuality plays a central role, especially in the objectification of Eri, whose unconsciousness symbolizes women's passive role under male dominance. Mari, however, challenges traditional sexual norms, navigating her relationships with independence and ambiguity. Power relations, especially in the context of prostitution, underscore how women's bodies are commodified, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. By examining how gender intersects with race, class, and sexuality, *After Dark* critiques the social structures that limit women's agency, offering a multifaceted perspective on gender dynamics. The novel exposes the sharp dichotomy of compassion and exploitation faced by women in the society. Murakami's subtle narrative style provides a commentary on the challenges that women

confront, highlighting their tenacity and unwavering search for purpose in the face of hardship. Murakami breaks through traditional narratives by questioning social norms and promoting a more compassionate view of marginalized people and demolishing long-standing preconceptions. The work deftly examines the ways in which these characters negotiate their complex inner and outside worlds, highlighting the need to reconsider and reshape society's ideas about women. By using this perspective, *After Dark* not only draws attention to the widespread problems but also honours the unwavering spirit of women pursuing independence and value in a society that frequently aims to commercialize their own being.

Gender and Prostitution in Japan

Instances of sexual violence against women in Japan have persisted since the period of wartime. A specific demographic of women was designated as "comfort women" due to their vulnerability to military, colonial, and gender-based acts of violence (8). The presence of comfort women can be seen as a manifestation of the brutal violence that arose when hierarchical colonial structures intersected with gender-based hierarchies. This historical appropriation shows how women's bodies were commodified during the war, acting as both tools for sustaining male power systems and as vehicles for sexual gratification. Women were pushed into positions that validated the patriarchal expectations placed upon them, turning them into inanimate objects used in the service of male dominance and war. This is particularly pertinent to Butler's concept of the "performative body" (9). In *After Dark*, Murakami endeavours to explore the darker aspects of Japanese culture, specifically the instances of assault against women occurring within disreputable hotels and back alleys. This setting emphasises the connection of gender and class, as women from disadvantaged families, like the Chinese girl, become embroiled in the selling of their bodies to survive. The novel depicts the cruelty of this commercialisation without holding back, yet it also offers the idea of resilience via people like Kaoru. By using Rubin's investigation on the political economy of sex, we can see how these objectified women are navigating and occasionally fighting their exploitation through their behaviour, searching for agency even in the most marginalised areas of society (10). While the author does not hesitate to portray the more negative aspects of the industry, he also emphasises the presence of compassion. Incidents of sexual violence against women in Japan have persisted since the period of wartime. Korogi's nightmares, which represent the unavoidable pain that haunts women who are exploited, demonstrate that this violence is not just physical but also psychological. In her book titled "Infamous Commerce," Rosenthal presents a compelling narrative regarding the evolving portrayal of individuals engaged in prostitution. The author posits that during the early 18th century, prostitutes were depicted as "desiring women" due to their yearning for sexual satisfaction, with monetary compensation being a secondary consideration. The writer elucidates the gradual transformation of these women into portrayal of entrepreneurial capitalists who eventually became involved in sexual activities only as a secondary aspect (11). The commodification of women's bodies has been a longstanding phenomenon throughout the history of various societies. Women have historically been subjected to exploitation, whether through coerced marriages aimed at expanding kingdoms or the utilisation of their bodies for sexual slavery during times of conflict. In the same manner, women's bodies are commodified in *After Dark* in two ways: first, the sex trade helps many women survive, but second, it is their only source of income in a patriarchal, predatory society. This novel by Murakami portrays various instances that highlight the prevalence of sexual abuse, the limited agency women possess over their own bodies, and the objectification of women's bodies to articulate psychological distress. As Mari accompanies Karou to the hotel to assist with translating the story of the mistreated woman, Karou makes a conscious effort to help Mari feel at ease in her unfamiliar surroundings, where she has arrived to provide support.

Then she says to Mari, "You have probably never been in a place like this before."

"No this is the first time." "Oh, well, there are lots of different businesses in the world" (12). Karou's dialogue with Mari sheds light on the disparity between the perceived normalcy of women's experiences during daylight hours and the hidden mistreatment and assaults that occur

under the cover of night. This discrepancy is particularly evident among women who work unconventional jobs under pressure or due to unfavourable conditions, an aspect that has received limited exploration. Individuals with psychopathic tendencies, those suffering from mental disorders, individuals who do not conform to societal norms, and who exhibit chauvinistic attitudes perceive the nighttime as an opportune period to seek out vulnerable individuals who are readily accessible and susceptible to manipulation. Murakami delves into the shadowy underbelly of the hotel industry, shedding light on the unfortunate circumstances that some women find themselves in. These individuals are often coerced or compelled to work as hostesses, escorts, or even engage in sex work as a means of survival for themselves and those they support. This emphasizes the vulnerability of women who are poor or facing challenging life circumstances, and how they can fall prey to exploitation . Suzuki pinpoints that though the rhetoric of denial dismisses the oral testimony of women who were harassed, and they speak from personal experience arguing that this testimony is unreal and fabricated even though some personal accounts have been tested in different courts of law and found credible (13). This severe kind of double standard has been justified by the male establishment to preserve their daughters' virginity and distinguish between good and bad women (14). Murakami endeavours to interweave narratives depicting the exploitation of women who confront adverse circumstances throughout their lives. The assault of Chinese prostitute in the novel delves us back to the complex human behaviour and society.

Kaoru gives Mari's shoulder a little tap from behind. "Sorry, but we need this room for the next customer. We're gonna take her to the office downstairs. Come along, okay?" Kaoru shakes her head. "He stripped her clean so she couldn't report him right away. What a bastard!" Karou takes a thin bathrobe from the closet and hands it to Mari. "Just get her to put this on for now." The woman rises weakly to her feet and, looking half-stunned, drops the towel, exposing her nakedness as she puts on the robe, her stance unsteady. Mari quickly averts her gaze (12). The mistreatment endured by the Chinese woman at the hands of the man, who not only deprived her of financial resources but also left her without necessities, highlights the inherent vulnerability experienced by women in such situations. The incident serves as a testament to the prevalence of such occurrences, to the extent that even the female employees of the hotel had become desensitized, perceiving it as an insignificant event that failed to evoke any emotional response. The proactive attitude and strategic approach of the staff in promptly preparing the room for subsequent customers effectively dispel any lingering uncertainties regarding the incident's unexpected nature. The nudity of the escort symbolizes the removal of societal norms and stereotypical roles that individuals adopt to conform to a hypocritical society. Additionally, it denotes the absence of protective measures or obstacles, implying that victims are in a vulnerable state, susceptible to potential scrutiny, censure, or harm. Unlike to the case of Kaoru, an individual who possessed expertise in professional wrestling, she found herself assuming the role of a manager at the Alphaville love hotel after a back injury which rendered her jobless. Kaoru allocated the funds acquired during her wrestling career towards the acquisition of a residential property in Yamagata for her parents. Moreover, the remaining funds were utilised to settle her younger brother's outstanding gambling debts and to support distant relatives with whom she possessed limited familiarity. After the occurrence of these events, everybody ceased to have any association with her, prompting Kaoru to retrospectively examine the various factors that contributed to the deterioration of her circumstances. Kaoru's experiences of being financially exploited by her family and the isolation that followed serve as an example of a larger social problem in which women frequently find themselves powerless to take complete control of their lives and are instead left at the mercy of outside factors. Kaoru's financial liberty was jeopardised despite her professional achievement and self-reliance, which is consistent with a pattern where social and familial expectations erode women's economic independence. Her experience is consistent with wider feminist discourse regarding women's autonomy and financial independence, as emphasised by Virginia Woolf. In her essay "A Room of One's Own," Woolf astutely asserts that women require the means to sustain themselves

and establish an environment conducive to introspection and artistic expression. The absence of autonomy to pursue personal interests and the lack of necessary resources hinder women's capacity for artistic and intellectual accomplishments (15). Woolf effectively incorporates discussions pertaining to financial matters, individual autonomy, artistic expression, and societal expectations regarding gender roles to shed light on the obstacles encountered by women in their pursuit of intellectual and economic fulfilment. She contends that financial independence grants women the freedom to express their thoughts and ideas without having to cater to the male expectations or the demands of traditional gender roles. Even if working in patriarchal capitalism was exploitative and oppressive, Yusuf, F et al., posits that Beauvoir believes that the work nonetheless gave women a variety of opportunities. Women can recover their transcendence and tangibly assert their status as subjects who can actively shape their own futures. Women can reject internalising their shortcomings by identifying with the opinions of the dominant social groups (16). Karou left home after her family took advantage of her finances. Mari's decision to leave home reflects rebellion against the frequently strict expectations placed on people, as well as their yearning for autonomy and a desire to seek out and discover the world beyond their shackles. Karou's decision to pursue a non-conventional path in business, contrary to societal norms, shows her asserting her autonomy by embarking on such a journey. Nevertheless, she exudes self-confidence, with her aptitude for managing a business and achieving financial independence.

Woolf examines how social systems reinforce gender inequality. Her assessment of the obstacles women encounter revolves around the idea of power, which goes beyond financial independence. It comprises of the various ways in which women in patriarchal systems are exploited and controlled. This problem is not specific to Woolf's setting; rather, it is prevalent in many cultures and eras. Women can discover ways to express their autonomy even in exploitative systems, as noted by Simone de Beauvoir, but these routes are paved with obstacles due to the prevailing power structures (2). In *After Dark*, the intricacies of gender relations within modern Japanese culture

are brought to light, therefore vividly reflecting this struggle for autonomy and control. In the novel, Murakami endeavours to illuminate the darker aspects of Japanese culture, specifically the instances of women being subjected to assault in disreputable hotels and back alleys. While the author does not hesitate to portray the negative aspects of the industry, he also emphasises upon the compassionate nature exhibited by the female employees. Nietzsche's assertions in his genealogy of moral virtues are fundamentally intertwined with power dynamics. He posits that the concept of 'good' encompasses qualities that are perceived as 'noble', 'aristocratic', and 'high', whereas 'bad' encompasses attributes that are deemed 'common', 'plebeian', and 'low' (17). He contends that moral principles are created by those in positions of authority in order to uphold and defend their domination, not because they are intrinsic or objective facts. *After Dark* explores the pervasive influence of male dominance over women, particularly those who originate from challenging backgrounds and ambiguous environments. Murakami portrays the character of Shirakawa as a representative of those socially esteemed individuals who, despite their respectable standing, seek solace in establishments like hotel Alphaville to channel their frustrations and exert power over women. These women, already burdened by the unfortunate circumstances imposed upon them by their gender within a male-dominated and chauvinistic society, additionally confront challenges stemming from cultural, social, or geographical factors. During Mari's visit to hotel Alphaville, she encounters women who have experienced significant challenges and demonstrate a strong emotional response to the commodification of women involved in the sex trade, likening it to the transactional nature of selling and purchasing food items such as pizza and pancakes. The women employed at this establishment have made the decision to abandon their previous lives and assume new identities to shield themselves from the distressing past and miscreants who would readily cause them further harm. By shedding light on the derogatory and exploitative tendencies exhibited by men towards women, the female employees in the hotel experience a moral duty to expose the abhorrent behaviour of men towards women whom they

clandestinely transport from the mainland. Consequently, these women are coerced into engaging in prostitution and other degrading forms of flesh trade, for which they are compelled to offer their bodies in exchange for payment. The women who appear to be vulnerable and unfortunate often find themselves ensnared in pernicious schemes, leading them into an ongoing cycle of excessive exploitation. It is always the same dream. Somebody's chasing me. I keep running and running until they finally catch me and take me away. Then they stuff me inside a refrigerator kind of thing and close the lid…They are chasing me when I am awake, and they are chasing me in my dreams when I am asleep: I can never relax…" "You mean that you're running away from something?" "Uh-huh. I think they kinda suspect, though" (12). During their conversation, Korogi (one of the ladies working in hotel Alphaville) opens to Mari about her tumultuous past and the scars it left on her body and mind. Korogi talks about her recurring pattern of worry and anguish, which is the reason she has nightmares all the time. It's clear that she feels uneasy and vulnerable about her past and anxious about the future. This inability to escape the approaching anxiety adds a degree of paranoia about being discovered or pursued by others, and it implies a pervasive feeling of suffering. Bordo highlights that the self-surveillance model is insufficient in addressing all forms of female subordination, as women are frequently forced into submission through coercion—either physical or emotional—or economic (18). She draws attention to the fact that women's subjugation is frequently enforced through various forms of coercion and manipulation rather than being the exclusive consequence of their willing compliance to cultural norms.

Beauty Stereotyped

The historical postcolonial relationship between the United States and Japan, the coloniser and colonised country, greatly encouraged the "Americanization" of Japan leading to the country's cultural dependence and loss of identity (19). Murakami has been subject to critique from proponents of traditional Japanese ideologies who contend that his literary output demonstrates a tendency towards Western influences and deviates from established societal norms. But this seeming departure is Murakami's deliberate response to

Japan's evolving cultural environment, where Western ideals—especially those related to beauty—have permeated conventional Japanese standards. Murakami abstains from utilising embellishment or distortion in his portrayal of situations and objects. This novel by Murakami dives into the examination of the mechanisms underscoring the stereotyping of women, and the necessity of reinterpreting and reevaluating these stereotypes. The author discovers that rather than simply opposing established literary works, it is more effective to present alternative perspectives on gender roles and challenge the sexist labels attributed to women through the reappropriation, redefinition, or reassessment of these roles in his novel. Murakami's depiction of women in the text serves to accentuate his objective of providing an authentic representation of the unequal treatment experienced by women in the societal context in which he operates. He aims to elucidate the various societal expectations imposed on women, which compel them to adhere to specific gender roles. Apart from denouncing the rigid beauty standards imposed on women, Murakami delves into the psychological ramifications of conforming to these ideals. In the opening pages of the book, the author introduces the contrasting personalities of the two sisters in the novel by utilising the character of Takahashi. The subsequent analysis delves into the distinct differences that exist between the sisters' individual dispositions. He thinks about her words for a few moments and then says, "I wonder how it turns out that we all lead such different lives. Take you and your sister, for example. You're born to the same parents, you grow up in the same household, you're both girls. How do you end up with such wildly different personalities? At what point do you, like, go your separate ways? One puts on a bikini like little semaphore flags and lies by the pool looking sexy, and the other puts on her school bathing suit and swims her heart out like a dolphin (12). In these lines Takahashi differentiates between the nature of the two sisters where Eri seems to have taken on the role of a person who believes in social constructs and adheres by the definition of beauty held true by social parameters which are lopsided and ask for redefinition. She happens to think that women are supposedly meant to look good on all occasions where they have to be ethereal and attractive outwardly and irrespective of the event they have to put focus on

fitting in the set social standards of beauty while Mari thinks quite differently and does not let the world dictate to her about the how to make herself appropriate so as to fit in socially. Mari's views on beauty are more internalized and she concentrates more on polishing her ideas and emotions than fiddling unnecessarily with the worldly view of exquisiteness and beauty. Mari lives in the moment and tries to make the most of the experience at hand rather than worrying about how odd or different her behaviour is according to the norms. Murakami has been able to navigate and overcome the stereotype that his works are overshadowed by the influence of west and that his novels contain commentary on the changing cultural landscape of Japan as well as its interactions with the west. This self-awareness allows his novels to engage with the influence of western culture. Through *After Dark,* he challenges the ways in which Western ideas of beauty have permeated Japanese culture, illustrating how Mari defies these ideals while characters like Eri are constrained by them. Murakami has chosen to show the beauty standards that his characters grapple with and how it is woven in the broader fabric of things in his novel *After Dark.* In the novel, Mari expresses her admiration for her sister during two distinct occasions while conversing with Karou and Takahashi. She praises her sister's involvement in pageants and the numerous modelling opportunities she has received since her early adolescence, even while attending school. From the time she was a little girl, her job was to play her assigned role and satisfy the people around her. She worked hard to be a perfect little Snow White (12). Mari draws a parallel between her sister and the Disney character Snow White, highlighting the portrayal of attractive females as vulnerable individuals in need of rescue due to their perceived fragility, sensitivity, and emotional disposition in the face of the world's challenges. The impact of Western culture is readily apparent, as it is commonplace for young girls of a tender age to be placed in competition against one another in beauty pageants with the aim of securing modelling contracts. The prevalence of the commercialization of women's bodies contributes to the early development of body consciousness, self-image concerns, and a heightened focus on external appearance among young girls. Consequently, this phenomenon gives rise to

additional issues, including dissatisfaction with physical appearance, weight, body structure, body frame, and various anatomical features. The impact of Western fashion and beauty ideals on cultural norms is jeopardising the independence of culturally rooted beauty standards that were historically aligned with ethnic features. The global prevalence of Western media has resulted in the adoption of Western ideals, leading to the marginalisation of non-Western ethnic groups and their aesthetic value in the realm of beauty. It is untrue that there is a universal standard of beauty for the human body in the minds of men (20). His perspectives appear to deviate from the traditional understanding of beauty, which frequently advocated for idealised forms and concepts that were considered universally attractive. Murakami also posits that the perception of attractiveness and beauty is not an intrinsic and immutable characteristic, but rather a fluid and contingent notion that can differ among various cultures and evolve over the course of history. Murakami's criticism encompasses the wider cultural consequences of Westernisation. Western media's widespread dominance has marginalised traditional ethnic values and beauty standards in addition to imposing similar norms on non-Western societies. It is a myth that beauty is fixed and universal. Murakami contends that the definition of beauty is mutable and impacted by historical developments as well as cultural influences. This concept opposes the idea that women should adhere to a monolithic definition of beauty and promotes a reconsideration of what beauty is in today's multicultural society. In addition to examining the effects of beauty standards on society, Murakami also looks at how these expectations affect interpersonal interactions, especially those that occur in families. The differences between Mari and Eri are a microcosm of the broader problems in society about attention, attractiveness, and value. Murakami shows how deeply rooted beauty norms can affect family interactions and personal identity through the conflicts between the two sisters. The disparity between the treatment Mari and her sister experienced from their family—which reflects the unequal focus on intelligence and beauty in their upbringing—becomes apparent in their chat with Kaoru. During her conversation with Kaoru, Mari expresses that Eri has

consistently received heightened levels of care and effectiveness, while Mari, who is perceived as highly intelligent, requires minimal attention, and is deemed self-sufficient. The lack of concern in the way both children were treated during their formative years resulted in the development of distressing recollections for both individuals. One of the female siblings experienced a sense of inadequate affection and neglect compared to her sister, while the other sister faced the burden of seeking attention and maintaining an attractive and captivating appearance consistently. Eri's lack of genuine interpersonal connections, particularly with her family, resulted in her feeling disconnected not only from them but also from the individuals in her immediate social circle. She experienced a diminished ability to connect with the events occurring in her surroundings due to her own objectification, resulting in a state of suspended consciousness. The family's differential treatment of the siblings contributed to the intricacies in the sisters' perception of the external world, ultimately serving as a catalyst for the challenges they encountered. I've never had a cat," says Mari. "Or a dog. My sister was allergic to fur. She couldn't stop sneezing." "I see." "From the time she was a kid, she had a ton of allergies-cedar pollen, ragweed, mackerel, shrimp, fresh paint, all kinds of things." "Well, she had it. She had strong reactions, too." "Like…?" "Like, she'd get a rash, and she had trouble breathing. She'd get these bumps in her windpipe, and my parents would have to take her to the hospital." "Every time she walked past fresh paint?" "Well, not every time, but it happened a lot." "Even a lot would be tough." Mari goes on petting the cat in silence. "And how about you?" Takahashi asks. "You mean allergies?" "Yeah." "I don't have any to speak of," Mari says. "I've never been sick. In our house, we had the delicate Snow White and the hardy shepherd girl." "One Snow White per family is plenty." Mari nods "And there's nothing wrong with being a hardy shepherd girl. You don't have to worry how dry the paint is every time." Mari looks him in the face. "It's not that simple, you know (12). Both sisters become emotionally estranged from one other because of this disregard for them, based only on the fact that one of them satisfies conventional beauty standards while the other does not. Eri's objectification as a "perfect little Snow White" causes her to eventually distance herself from

important relationships with people, while Mari's feeling of neglect encourages both her independence and her alienation from her family. Mari consistently held the belief that Eri was given the preferential treatment, as evidenced by the prioritisation of Eri's preferences and aversions. According to the Mari, her personal preferences regarding pets and food were not taken into consideration, while the focus of others was primarily on Eri's health, allergies, and dietary habits. Consequently, an implicit disconnection emerged between the two siblings, leading to a significant emotional distance that ultimately resulted in a cessation of mutual concern and communication. Mari's perception of her sister as a fragile figurine, aspiring to emulate the Disney character Snow White, and her perception of herself as a rough individual requiring minimal attention, serves to illuminate the deep-seated complexities she has encountered throughout her existence. Moreover, these perceptions suggest that Mari has, to some degree, come to terms with these complexities. The revisiting of her childhood circumstances and the challenges related to acceptance within her family and social circles indicates the underlying distress that is resurfacing as a form of validation. Mari's exploration of self-compassion involves her endeavour to comprehend her own identity without bias, while simultaneously seeking to comprehend her sister's behaviour without engaging in judgement or criticism.

Existential Angst in Female Characters

According to Aho, Jean Paul Sartre believed that existentialism was a form of humanism. It is a philosophical theory or method that asserts that human life and action is a matter of human subjectivity which is dependent on human sentiments and real beliefs (21). Cooper claims that Sartre believes "existence precedes essence". Man finds the meaning of existence after first existing. After being cast into a harsh, merciless, and indifferent environment, man eventually comes to understand who he is and what matters in life (22).The quest for a meaningful existence is a challenge for the women characters of Murakami. He has portrayed his characters as having tremendous bravery and tenacity, capable of fiercely battling against all obstacles and follies in their path through life. He has addressed the existential dilemmas faced by the female

characters, delving into their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. Murakami offers a multifaceted viewpoint on the issues faced by women whose struggles are portrayed with a balanced blend of sensitivity and authenticity. When Mari sits down to eat in the restaurant, she contemplates about the complexities of life as she takes time to introspect. She addresses her existential issues, her sense of alienation, loneliness, and otherworldliness. She breaks off her reading and looks outside. From the second-storey window she can look down on the busy street. Even at a time like this, the street is bright enough and filled with people coming and going people with places to go and people with no place to go; people with a purpose and people with no purpose; people trying to hold time back and people trying to urge it forward. After a long, steady look at this jumbled street scene, she holds her breath for a moment and turns her eyes once again towards her book. She reaches for her coffee cup. Puffed no more than two or three times, her cigarette turns into a perfectly formed column of ash in the ashtray (12). As Mari engages in the act of observing individuals in her immediate surroundings, she experiences a heightened sense of self-awareness, prompting her to contemplate her own state of isolation and the complex nuances of existence that she finds challenging to understand. Her contemplation prompts a reconsideration of the transient nature of time and the fervent efforts made by individuals to grasp onto the fleeting moments. She engages in a pursuit to comprehend the lamentable state of her existence, which has predominantly been shaped by the expectations of patriarchal norms. This circumstance has compelled her to depart from her place of residence to seek a distinct sense of self that deviates from the societal expectations imposed upon women. The nocturnal excursions she undertakes within the urban landscape is a deliberate act of reasserting her autonomy. Mari's conscious endeavour to challenge her alienation and assert her autonomy is symbolised by her intentional deviation from social conventions through her nighttime adventures. Through nighttime street walking, Mari enters a realm devoid of conventional norms and social restrictions, metaphorically enjoying the existential freedom that Sartre elucidates. In defiance of prevailing social conventions and notwithstanding the potential risks to her personal

safety, she embarks on solitary excursions and actively interacts with diverse individuals, thereby acquiring a range of experiences. This deliberate choice suggests her desire to witness life in its unfiltered state, free from any artificial facades of the daytime that may hinder her comprehension. Mari departs from following the conventional patterns of daily life. Opting for nocturnal hours as opposed to diurnal ones also serves as a symbolic representation of a sense of displacement and a desire to attain an alternative outlook on existence. The scenario serves as a direct challenge to conservative societal norms that perceive women as inferior and incapable of making autonomous decisions. Kimberle emphasises the importance of considering how different oppressive systems interact and influence women's experiences and resistance tactics in the context of women's struggle against traditional norms (23). When Takahashi communicated to Mari about his conversations with her sister Eri, who had exuded her wish to be closer to her sister, Mari could not believe it. Takashi takes a moment to think how best to say this. "For example, she said she wishes to be closer to you." "Closer to me?" "She felt that you had deliberately put a kind of distance between the two of you. Ever since you reached a certain age…" "Yeah," Mari says. "But it is possible for people to draw closer to each other even while they keep a reasonable distance between them." "Of course it is possible," Takahashi says. "But what seems like a reasonable distance to one person might feel too far to somebody else…" "So that's the personal problem that was bothering Eri?" Mari asks, "That she can't get close enough to her little sister?" "That was one of her personal problems. There were others." Mari stays silent. Takahashi goes on, "While she was talking to me, Eri was popping every kind of pill you can imagine. Her Prada bag was stuffed with drugs, and while she was drinking her Bloody Mary she was munching them like nuts. I'm pretty sure they were legal drugs, but the amount was not normal." "She's a total pill freak. Always has been. But she's been getting worse." "Somebody should stop her." Mari shakes her head. "Pills and fortune telling and dieting: nobody can stop her when it comes to any of those things." "I kind of hinted to her she maybe ought to see a specialist-a therapist or psychiatrist or something. But she had absolutely no intention of doing that as far as I could tell. I mean, she didn't

even seem to realise she had anything going on inside her. I really started getting worried about her. I am sitting there thinking, what could have happened to Eri Asai (12). Eri's emotional state arises from a combination of apprehension and a longing for interpersonal attachment. The desire for a strong emotional connection with her sister, Mari, is evident in Eri's longstanding feelings of alienation. To obtain validation, solace, and a sense of being valued, Eri has expressed her longing for companionship with her sister to her friend, Takahashi. Eri, who is currently experiencing a profound disconnection from her immediate environment and emotional detachment from her family, and she experiences a sense of alienation as she grapples with the challenges of establishing meaningful connections with others. Takahashi's perception of Eri's psychological state and his belief in the necessity of professional intervention suggest the presence of an unresolved trauma that potentially influences her current condition. Additionally, it denotes her state of disorientation from objective reality and her incapacity to actively participate in matters pertaining to the physical world. An existential crisis is characterised by internal tensions and anxiety that accompany major human issues like commitment, freedom, independence, purpose, and responsibility (24). Murakami demonstrates an inclination towards the specific aim of unravelling the enigmatic nature of existence and human predicament. Eri Asai is still sleeping. The Man with No Face, however, who was sitting beside her and watching her so intently, is gone. So is his chair. Without them, the room is darker, more deserted than before…We are observing the scene from our side…through the TV screen…The position and angle of the camera change at regular intervals, drawing slightly nearer or drawing slightly further back each time (12). Eri's protracted period of slumber and her passive observation of others (such as the man without a face) reveal her incapacity to deal with the outside world. She resists the freedom and responsibility that come with being alive by retreating into a state of inactivity. Murakami contrasts two different strategies for dealing with existential solitude in this juxtaposition: active participation and quiet withdrawal. The man with no face symbolizes the daily social scrutiny and gaze that Eri once effortlessly commanded and grew accustomed to.

However, since detaching herself from external attention, she finds herself navigating a complex internal struggle between what she perceives as right and wrong. Despite her deliberate withdrawal, she remains haunted by a profound sense of isolation and abandonment, emblematic of her conflicting emotions. In her solitude, the television in her room becomes a source of solace, offering a fleeting sense of satisfaction as it serves as a conduit to the outside world. It reinforces her lingering belief that she still occupies a central place in the public consciousness, even as she grapples with the consequences of her detachment. Eri and Mari, who are battling deep doubts and uncertainties in their life, serve as metaphors for the tremendous depths of human existence that are explored in *After Dark*. The novel is characterised by the presence of a conceptual framework centred on the notions of self-awareness and self-identity. One of the fundamental concerns revolves around asserting the autonomy and capability of women to independently navigate their path towards self-fulfilment. *After Dark* is infused with the absurdity of existence, particularly in its fragmented, dreamy episodes that conflate the real and the fantastical. Eri's profound slumber, from which she is unable to emerge, reflects the existential immobility that follows when one is overcome by the ridiculous. Her apathy represents the propensity of people to withdraw when faced with life's meaninglessness. On the other hand, Mari seems to be engaging with the absurd based on her observations about time, the busy street scenes, and the aimless wanderers. In her reflection, she comes to the realisation that, despite life's lack of definitive answers, the pursuit of meaning is a fundamental aspect of being human. Mari, who embodies Camus' concept of the "absurd hero" who persists in the face of absurdity, validates life by choosing to continue living (25).

Conclusion

The journey for women to transcend societal constraints and achieve true empowerment is both a collective and individual endeavour. We concede that narratives can alter attitudes and subvert expectations, providing women with opportunities to claim their agency and reshape their positions. This study provides a forum for criticising patriarchal systems and imagining different worlds in which women are not constrained by conventional norms. Women may influence social

change and open doors for future generations by taking back control of their stories and elevating the voices of underrepresented groups within themselves. Murakami asserts that through introspection, women can effectively manage the challenges of identity development and overcome internalised biases and fears by understanding the importance of self-awareness and self-assurance. It's also crucial that they develop an inner sense of empowerment that transcends external validation and embraces both their abilities and flaws. This research serves as a mirror and a guide for women as they continue to negotiate the intricacies of cultural expectations and standards. It shows us the way to emancipation and self-actualization, challenging our beliefs, and representing our realities. Through the utilisation of narrative and analytical skills, women can overcome social limitations, realise their complete potential, and create a future characterised by parity.

Abbreviation
Nil.

Author Contributions
Midhat Tasneem oversees the concept, the study's design, data coordination and collecting, and manuscript production. Laxmi Dhar Dwivedi, he discussed the subject at every level of its conception and development and offered thoughts, inputs, and guidance during the manuscript's drafting.

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

Ethics Approval
Nil.

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