

Modernism, Capitalism, and the Everyday: A Study of Haruki Murakami's The Rat Series with Reference to Lefebvre's Critique of the Everyday

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Abstract

In his discussion on everydayness, Ben Highmore cited an example from the life of Sherlock Holmes, who is repulsed by the idea of everyday life but at the same time, the everyday becomes an intellectual space for him, and he seeks the truth within the everyday. Like Sherlock Holmes, everydayness that is contrasted with macro events of a time has become an intellectual space in literary theory and a voice of subversion in literature. This intellectual space, where the mundane becomes profound, is a fascinating area of study. Written against the macro events of his time in Japan, such as the economic bubble and the students' protests, Haruki Murakami's fiction tells stories of subversion through the everydayness of his characters who resist the coercion of capitalism into their ordinary sphere. Their subversion is shown through simple acts such as walking away from watching the news, refusing to go to a job or refusing money offered by capitalistic forces. In this paper, I have attempted to study how bourgeois capitalism coerces into the everyday and how the characters of Haruki Murakami's *The Rat Series* resist this coercion. This paper will take into account the observations of various theorists on everydayness with special reference to the works of Lefebvre.

Keywords: capitalism, consumerism, everyday, everydayness.

In his discussion on everydayness, Ben Highmore cited an example from the life of Sherlock Holmes, who is repulsed by the idea of everyday life but at the same time, the everyday becomes an intellectual space for him, and he seeks the truth within the everyday—"everyday is not what it seems" (2). In the post-Cartesian era, particularly within the modern context, the efforts of Lefebvre and his contemporaries catalysed a transformation wherein the everyday, once deemed a trivial segment of literary and intellectual discourse, began to command the esteemed intellectual and literary prominence it had long been denied. Over time, everydayness has

evolved into a significant field of literary study, attracting critics' attention to the quotidian lives of characters. What, then, is everydayness? Lefebvre is considered to be the one who foregrounded this concept and defined the term everyday as—"what is left over' after all distinct, superior, specialised, structured activities have been singled out by analysis" (vol. I 97). Maurice Blanchot in "Everyday Speech" has rather offered a comprehensive definition of everydayness. For him, everyday is the sum total of everything that we do in our daily life starting from home to work. "The everyday", defines Blanchot, "is ourselves ordinarily" (12). The common ground between Blanchot and Lefebvre is that they distinguish between the macro-events and the ordinary, and it is in the ordinary or the everyday, "every human being - a whole takes its shape and its form" (Lefebvre, vol. I 97).

The everyday or the ordinary life of an individual is his private domain. However, this private domain is vulnerable. Oblivious to the individuals, external forces use their vulnerability and exploit their individuality by creating for them a false notion of selfhood. The hairdresser problem stated by Lefebvre is apt in this context. "Nothing is more persuasive than a hairdresser who has made his mind up" (Lefebvre, vol. I 8) and through a wide range of supporting agents such as 'cover girls' and 'actresses' who change the nationality of how a woman should dress her hair. A woman might have desired to fashion her hair in a particular way but the pictures and designs on the hairdresser's wall change the woman's notion. The same goes for consumption and production. What we own or what we do is no longer based on the subjectivity of the functionality of everyday things but becomes what has been set for us. This was done, as Lefebvre stated in the essay "Everyday and Everydayness", "by means of advertising and by powerful economic and political lobbies" (8). In the studies on everyday, this domination of the private domain by the bourgeois capitalist forces is at the pivot. Haruki Murakami's novels, especially the Rat Series, centrally deal with this aspect of everyday life where external forces continually try to influence individuals. The central tension in his novels is the conflict between the individuals and capitalism and the latter's coercion into the individuals' private domain. The individuals negate and challenge this coercion by rejecting consumer-based idealism through their everyday lives. In this paper, I have attempted to study this aspect of domination upon the everyday life of the characters of Haruki Murakami by a system which is both economic and political at the same time and show how these characters resist the system and its imposition in their daily life. This paper primarily focuses on the ways through which the characters in Haruki

Murakami's Rat Series, which consists of four connected novels: *Hear the Wind Sing* (1979), *Pinball, 1973* (1980), *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1982), and *Dance Dance Dance* (1988), use their everyday experiences and ordinary lives as a form of resistance against the dominant ideologies and capitalistic forces of postwar Japan.

Haruki Murakami is often undermined for being an apolitical writer and for dealing with pop cultureⁱ. In fact, his characters are often isolated youths who do not conform to the student idealists of 1970s Japan who were fighting against certain policies of the state, such as its participation in the Vietnam War or its educational policies. They do not even conform to the mainstream system. Self-sufficiently busy in themselves, they represent a universe in which they are apolitically political and quiet rebels. Their political disgust and outright rebellion are delineated through their everyday resistance to the encroaching ideology of the System.ⁱⁱ That is why, when reading Murakami, it is very important to focus on the everyday life of the characters. To comprehensively grasp the quotidian experiences of the characters, it is essential to briefly examine the socio-political landscape of post-war Japan, with a particular focus on the era around the 1970s.

The postwar period, especially the 1970s in Japan, was a tumultuous period. While Japan was trying to re-establish itself from the wreckage of war memory under the pretext of economic growth, protests all across the nation started sprouting against the System, which is often termed using the umbrella term 'Students' Uprising'. As much as the students' uprising was a politically charged product, so was the narrative of growth and progress through which the system tried to reassert its domination over the public conscience after its debacle in the Second World War. Japan was one of the aggressors and perpetrators of the War whose notorious invasion of China, massacres in Nanking (1937), biological weapons testing by Unit 731, and making Korean young girls comfort women drew scathing international criticism. However, to overcome the guilt of perpetration, Japan, during the postwar period, due to the nuclear bombing, played the victim card and imposed an alternative narrative of growth and development to wipe away its guilty consciousness from the public memory. However, in so doing, the system exercised the hyper-masculine force it once had exerted during its colonial expeditions. The students or the postwar youths, who were already aware of the destructive nature of the hyper-masculine force, started protesting against various issues, but the protests met with violent opposition from the state. During the protests, many were imprisoned, and several died, leading to the end of the

protests towards the end of the decade. Those students, who had once violently protested against the System, gradually became a part of the System. Against these narratives, Haruki Murakami writes his stories of resistance—resistance from coercive consumerism and the System's dominance in an individual's private domain. His characters do not conform to the rampant elite-class mass protests during the time, nor do they succumb to the group narrative. Still, they continue resisting the System and its influence in everyday life—not noticeable to others but significant in itself. The characters' daily lives consist of cooking, not doing any job if they have savings, sitting in bars, doing laundry, hanging out with friends, etc. Their daily lives can be summed up as very 'ordinary'; in other words, they live within a “linear time scale”ⁱⁱⁱ (Lefebvre, vol. II 49)—rational and natural. According to Lefebvre, this is the lowest or ordinary sphere of everyday life where people satisfy their “basic needs and basic tasks” (49). On the other hand, the typical everyday life of an average Japanese person of the early postwar era was to follow the white-collar dream of becoming rich and living a luxurious life with nine to six jobs, commuting back home in a crammed bullet train, rest and repeat. Murakami's characterisation is, in a sense, a defamiliarisation of the contemporary through which an alternative set of perspectives is presented to the readers.

Set in this background, the Rat series tells the story of the first-person narrator, Boku, 'I' for Japanese (henceforth used as Boku), the central character of the Rat series, and his friend, the Rat, and J. and their isolation from the ongoing students' protest. It was a politically tumultuous period with the students' uprising, the bubble economy, and the suicide of the right-wing political public figure and author Yukio Mishima. However, these characters do not participate in any of these macro events or take interest in them. There is a serious tone of detachment from the contemporary events. In such a time, in the novel *A Wild Sheep Chase*, Boku and the Rat spend the whole summer in J.'s bar, idly living their life without participating in any of the events that are going on in the outside world. Another defining moment of the period was the suicide by Seppuku of Yukio Mishima, an ultra-nationalist and an advocate of restoring Imperialism in Japan by overthrowing the constitution of 1947, which screened on television. When his death is screened on television, these characters find no interest in it despite the event getting national significance. Boku says,

It was two in the afternoon, and Yukio Mishima's picture kept flashing on the lounge TV.

The volume control was broken so we could hardly make out what was being said, but it

did not matter to us one way or the other. A student got up on a chair and tried fooling with the volume but eventually gave up and wandered off. (8)

Boku, too, along with his girlfriend, slowly walks away to their apartment from there. The important fact to note here is that for him and his girlfriend, the event was not as important as their everyday life. Lefebvre's notion of the everyday emphasises the significance of routine, daily activities and experiences as fundamental aspects of human existence. He argues that everyday life, though often overlooked and considered mundane, is crucial for understanding the broader social and cultural structures. In *Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre said, "In everyday life, each individual is a sum of three irreducible elements: the human being, the individual and the person. In everyday life, individuals and groups carry on their daily existence with varying degrees of freedom, alienation, and constraint" (97). The alienation that Boku and his girlfriend show here is a form statement, a refusal to get carried away by the politics of the time.

In *Dance Dance Dance*, as well, Boku carries the same attitude towards the politics of the time. Once, while reading the newspaper over coffee, he came across events such as the "Opening ceremonies for Tokyo Disneyland, fighting between Vietnam and Cambodia, Tokyo mayoral election, violence in the schools" (212). All these events have a great national significance, and he tries to think about them but fails to concentrate. So, he starts thinking about "practical matters" (212). His practical matters include taking shirts to the cleaners and picking them up, withdrawing some cash from the ATM, paying phone bills and room rent, putting on new shoes, getting batteries for the alarm clock, cleaning up his room while listening to music, and so on. He details every little event of his everyday life with utmost sincerity and precision, as if those things were valued more than the social turmoil that was going on between the student idealists and the system. The reason for this distance is that there is a sense of hatred for capitalism and its tie to the system. The Rat in *Hear the Wind Sing* says, "Leeches (capitalists)! The bastards can't do a damn thing for themselves. Looking at their faces makes me want to puke" (11). The Rat's father was also one of those capitalistic forces who reaped a huge profit from the Japanese war on the Chinese mainland. Before the war, he used to be poor, but when the war broke out, he acquired a chemical plant and sold insect-repelling ointment and sold them in the Chinese mainland to the Japanese soldiers as a mosquito repellent. He later started selling dubious vitamin powder too. These ventures eventually helped him reap a huge profit from the war, which he continued during the postwar period as well. Because of these connections, the

Rat tries to distance himself from him and rejects his father's wealth. When Boku asks him about his father, he replies, “Someone a whole lot older than me—also male” (100). His disgust towards his father is the sum total of his hatred against the System and the capitalistic venture that his father represents. Being the son of a capitalist, the Rat is aware of the deeper reality of the consumer society, “the manufacturer of consumers by those who hold the means of production and who produces profit” (Lefebvre, vol. II 27). His father and the Boss is a representation of that bourgeois class. The Boss is the one who “utilising the fortune he brought back from China, he’d laid claim to the whole underside of postwar politics, economics, information etc., etc.” (190). He controls media and advertisement and creates consumerist demand for society. He is a typical bourgeois capitalist. It is important to note that a huge number of youths during that time had come out in protest against the System. Organised by Zengakuren, the students’ movement had shaken the Japanese System at that time. However, the characters of the trilogy and its sequel do not take part in that either. They find it purposeless and withdrawn in their ordinary everyday lives.

Their ordinary life is set within J’s bar, and their private life is set within a closed circle between Boku, the Rat, and J. These three characters live a very ordinary life free from any political or capitalistic invasion. Though both the political entities and capitalistic forces try to exert their influence on them, they resist through their nonconformity. In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the Rat runs away, refusing to accept inheritance from his father. He also kills himself when the Sheep that represents power had him possessed just to refuse any political or capitalistic coercion and control in his life. Boku gives away the money that he earns from his quest to find the sheep to J. as reparation, and in *Dance Dance Dance*, Boku resists all sorts of job offers that could gain him money and goes out in search of all those whom he had lost. Their actions are more of a journey within—soul searching. In a brutally materialistic society, soul searching is an act of defiance, a form of resistance—resistance through nonconformity. Both the Boss and Sheep were trying to rob others of their individuality and assimilate them into the collective. “The values of one lone individual cannot bear up before the presence of that sheep” (59), says the Sheep Professor. It benefits capitalism. The ordinary life of the individuals is thus meaningful in their own right. The observation of Liesl Olson in *Modernism and the Ordinary* (2009) is important here. He said, “Ordinary experience, similarly, can be understood as the things we do every day, meaningful in their usefulness” (4). The meaningfulness of their ordinariness stems from their

nonconformity—nonconformity to the student idealists and the Boss’s coercive capitalism. Another example of capitalistic invasion of the everyday is when Boku in *A Wild Sheep Chase* is prevented from throwing the beer bottle into a piece of reclaimed land that used to be a part of the sea. The river and the sea, he says, are the reasons the town could have been created. This place was his personal favourite because of its isolated nature. For the last twelve years, he has sat there whenever he liked and thrown away used things without complaints. But that night, when J’s bar was getting crowded, he came back to his favourite place and threw a can of beer into that place. It is at that moment a security guard comes and warns him not to throw things there because he says, “This is a city property now, and it’s against the law to discard rubbish on the city property” (92). The place that used to be a safe spot for Boku, his own comfort zone, has now become a “property” of the city. This sea created the town, and now, ironically, a part of the sea is a property of the city. This is, in other words, a clear violation of Boku’s “right to the city,” which Lefebvre argued should not be dominated by the market forces but should be a space for the citizens who inhabit it. Through this, Murakami shows that the capitalistic force has engulfed both the extraordinary, such as the sea and the ordinary, such as the twelve-year-old comfort zone of Boku. However, Boku does not engage with the security guard. He says, “Ten years ago, I would have come on tougher” (93). So, what changed is the knowledge of the futility of all the protests that took place in between.

However, their alienation and refusal to conform do not mean isolation from their loved ones. The novel *Dance Dance Dance* delineates the importance of human connection in a society that is being engulfed by the advancing capitalism. Boku is rather detached and alienated from society, an aspect for which Haruki Murakami is often criticised until the end of the third novel of the *Rat Series*. In the novel *A Wild Sheep Chase*, Boku felt no remorse when one of his girlfriends died. He did not even remember her name. His reaction when he divorced his wife was also the same. After four years of relationship, when they got divorced, his reaction was, “What’s done is done, that sort of thing. How we got on the last four years was of no consequence. Any more than the photos peeled out of the albums” (21). It is of no consequence to him that his wife was engaging in an affair with one of his friends. Towards the end, however, when Boku returns from his quest to find the Rat, the mood of the novel changes. Upon giving away the money he earned from his quest, he sits by the beach and starts crying. He is the same man who did not even remember the name of his girlfriend with whom he had stayed for years

and felt no pain when she died. His last thought in the novel is, “I brushed the sand from my trousers and got up as if I had somewhere to go” (299), and he starts walking away. In the fourth novel, *Dance Dance Dance*, Murakami carries forward the tone of attachment and reconciliation that the narrator suggested in *A Wild Sheep Chase* when he was offered all the money that he had earned in his quest to find the sheep to his only Chinese friend J. In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, the tone of reconciliation is rather suggestive and symbolic in the sense that he gives the money to J. without saying anything and breaks out in tears without expressing anything. In *Dance Dance Dance*, on the other hand, the tone is overt and expressive. The narrator is now obsessed with finding those he had lost along the way and finally realises where he had to go. He finally realises that in a capitalistic society, human values are always demeaned, costing a part of one’s soul. So, he abandons his booming business and starts the quest. It is essential to mention that Boku is not yet committed to society and the consumer-based onrush that the 80’s Japan was offering. Boku was living in a time when Japan was in an economic bubble and was changing tremendously towards a consumer-based society. Rather than committing to society or participating in the rat race, he coops himself up in a world of his own, away from the salarymen culture of that time. He rejects jobs, works according to his own volition and cares less for financial growth even though he could have his own business booming. He leaves his business and does freelancing. Besides, he devotes his time to finding people whom he lost. This becomes his everyday life through which he evades ‘signification’ and “all distinct, superior, specialised, and structured activities” (Lefebvre, vol. I 9) of political and corporate life. Lefebvre, in *Critique of Everyday Life Vol I* (1991), stated that the political and corporate life of an individual creates a “technical vacuum” which is “filled up by everyday life”, he further added that “it is in everyday life that the sum total of relations which make the human—every other human being—a whole takes its shape and form” (ibid.). The four novels, especially *Dance Dance Dance*, evoke this “technical vacuum” through various characters such as Boku, J., Yuki, Yumiyoshi, Gotanda, and the Rat.

The ‘technical vacuum’ is better explained at the beginning of *Dance Dance Dance* when Boku says, “After wasting so much pulp and ink myself, who was I to complain about waste? We live in an advanced capitalist society, after all. Waste is the name of the game, its great virtue. Politicians call it “refinements in domestic consumption. I call it meaningless waste” (12). He calls his work “waste” because he is not fond of it. He calls it “shovelling snow... cultural

snow” (7). The word ‘cultural snow’ has deeper connotations. It represents a social “reality” (Lefebvre I: 169) created by capitalism. Shovelling snow here means meaningless financial pursuit, whereas the addition of ‘cultural snow’ indicates that the meaningless financial pursuit is a cultural necessity. This cultural necessity motivated him to start a business with a friend, which had been running smoothly. However, stranger things start happening around him when he gets deeply involved in the business. “Overwhelmed by a stillness” (8), he quits the business and forces himself to stay holed indoors for six months. This is the ‘technical vacuum’ in Lefebvre’s definition of the term. It is during these few months he realises what he has lost—he has been divorced, one of his friends has died, and a woman has run away from him, and his life is empty. The realisation of these that he was indifferent to earlier changes him altogether. This differentiates him from “the individual and the social man” (Lefebvre, vol. I 168). He does not go back to his previous business again and starts part-time freelancing. For him, work became ‘shovelling snow,’ and meeting people became an act that he ironically called “social rehabilitation” (13). Even when he starts freelancing, he is overwhelmed with job requests. After years, he realises that he is back to where he was, and this is when he decides to leave it all and go out to find whom he had left long back, starting with Yukio, a receptionist at Dolphin Hotel. In a consumerist society, leaving a job is a huge deal, but he motivates and guides his everyday life by his own rules. This realisation helps him to “strive to control nature and create his world, man conjures himself up a new nature” (Lefebvre, vol. I 269). He is no longer a child of capitalism but becomes “secretly impious” (Blanchot 20) in relation to the collective. “(Lord) give us our daily bread, give us to live according to daily existence that leaves no place for a relation between the creator and creature” (ibid), becomes his motto in life. He says, “Money wasn’t a problem. I had saved plenty enough to live on, and I wasn’t thinking about what came later. Winter was past” (9). This is a journey within, as Lefebvre said, “Everyday life (is) the region where man appropriates not so much his external nature but his own nature” (Lefebvre II: 46).

However, Boku's attitude towards life is the binary opposite of the consumerist society he was living in. In a consumerist society, leisure and work are two different entities. Leisure threatens capitalism. Boku’s lifestyle is, in a sense, a threat to capitalism, a rebellion against it because he rejects collectivism, refuses to do jobs, and refrains from doing any business. He, in other words, prefers to be a NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) a term that was

used negatively and the NEETs were considered as a matter of concern for the society. Whereas every individual was busy off to work with little time to waste, Boku, with his thirteen-year-old friend, leisurely spends all his time sitting and watching people go to work. He observes,

Occasionally, a salesman-type or rather salary-man would stop and take a breather on a bench near us. Dark suit, plastic briefcase, glassy stares. Ten minutes later, he'd be off beating the pavement again. By most standards, a normal adult should be working at this hour and a normal kid should be in school. (305)

Boku has no such inclination towards snow shovelling or money. That is why when he is offered a huge amount of money by Yuki's father to look after her, he rejects the offer. He builds up a value system on his own that thwarts the established one. Makimura, Yuki's father, is opposed to this system. So, he says, "Your system may be beside the point these days. It went out with handmade vacuum tube amplifiers... Get stuck on your system and you will be left behind. You can't cut tight turns and you get in everybody's way" (204). Makimura also represents Lefebvre's observation of bourgeois economists for whom money is everything. He said, "Money reigns; everyone serves it in their particular way, according to the position they hold in 'human nature': the bourgeois worship it in a refined, even artistic, way, while the workers' homage is humble and austere" (Lefebvre, vol. II 162). Makimura also says the same when Boku refuses to accept the money. He said, "Nowadays money talks. It's whatever money will buy" (204). The over-reliance on money is because of the "fictitious, artificial, imaginary needs" (Lefebvre, vol. II 161). Boku could free himself from this trap of 'need' and 'money' but Gotanda, the actor could not though he is aware that need is "manufactured" (289). He further says, "Take that place where I live. A roof over your head is the point, not what fancy part of town it's in. But the idiots at the agency say—Itabashi or Kameido or Nakano Toritsukasei? No status. You big star, you live Azabu" (290). The agency basically creates the "need" for a place in Azabu. His condition is the same that Lefebvre said, "Every being becomes reduced to this abstraction: market value; man himself becomes reduced to this abstraction" (161). Inversely, Boku and the Rat refuse to work. For Lefebvre, it is in everyday life "man perceives and becomes conscious of his own self" (vol. I 163) which is not a production of the bourgeois capitalism. The consciousness of their own self is realised through the "senses, vital needs, instincts and feelings" (163) which are shaped by our social life. This is a form of humanisation that is achieved through the everyday, and through this everyday life, the artificial creation of

needs by the bourgeois is challenged. Boku and the Rat's decision to not work is the rejection of that abstraction. Whereas the Rat seeks a revolutionary measure to challenge the abstraction, Boku seeks to connect with his friends or look after Yuki without any monetary benefit.

Timothy Mitchel's statement on the influence of power on the everyday in "Everyday Metaphors of Power" is worth mentioning here. He said, "Power may operate at the level of ideas, persuading the mind of its legitimacy, or it may work as a material force directly coercing the body" (545). Makimura here tries to persuade Boku to legitimise the power of the state. Mitchel, further in his study on *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985), says that the peasants' wilful acts of corruption (tricks), such as adding stones and straw in the tax collector's share, are a form of rebellion nevertheless ineffective. The thought process of Gotanda resembles the peasants' tempering with the taxed items. His repressed frustration with the advanced capitalistic society is revealed when he asks Boku in a manner of joking about whether he had dumped his Maserati into the sea. When he replies in the negative, Gotanda says, "I bet it would feel great, though. Plowing it into the sea" (297). The car actually belonged to Gotanda. He found it a burden to own such a classy car. So, he had it exchanged with Boku's low-budget Saburo. That a premium vehicle owned by an insurance company felt a burden to him is in itself a challenge to the advanced capitalistic society because such a lavish lifestyle creates a desire and demand among others to follow the same lifestyle. A refusal to follow is thus a challenge. When Boku says that if he dumps the Maserati, he will get a Ferrari, Gotanda again replies, "I'd ditch that too" (ibid.). Finally, when the discussion leads to insurance companies, Boku says,

Insurance company? Who gives a damn about your insurance company? You got to think big. Go for a grand sweep. This is your fantasy, not one of your low-budgets, so why be middle-class about it? Go wild! Lamborghini, Porsche, Jaguar! The sky's the limit! And the ocean's big enough to swallow cars by the thousands. (297)

Though Boku or Gotanda does not do any such things, their acts of defiance stem from such individualistic rebellion, be it defying the amount offered by Makimura or rejecting highly paid job offers. Here, however, the narrative takes a turn from Lefebvre's notion of "passive consumers" to Michel De Certeau's "active consumers" who use 'tactics.' Certeau, in *The Practices of Everyday*, described the characteristics of consumer society in which he argued that consumers are participants of the consumption process as presented to them in the market. They

are not merely pessimists. Though the market was trying to manipulate the desire of Gotanda and make it a commodity, Gotanda exchanging his vehicle with Boku or Boku throwing the car into the river is a refusal to be passive consumers.

One of the important features of the critique of everyday life is that it “studies the persistence of rhythmic time scales within the linear time of modern industrial society” (II: 49); it studies the natural cycle^{iv} time of an individual as against the linear time and “examines the defects and disquiet...this interaction produces” (Lefebvre, vol. II 49) and to what level it changes every day. The life of Gotanda and Yumiyoshi is a case study of these defects and disquiet in the interaction between cyclical time and the linear time of modern industrial society. Both Gotanda and Yumiyoshi show the coercion of capitalism into individual life, and what has already been stated earlier is that it creates a false notion of individuality among individuals. Gotanda acts in the movies chosen for him that are not his own choice or that he wants to be a part of. The same goes for his lifestyle. His room, location, and car are all chosen by his agency. He finally says, “I’m fed up with this life they have me living. I’m their life-size dress-up doll. Sewed together with loans and mortgages” (290). What he wants is rather “...love. And tranquillity. And a healthy family. And a simple life” (ibid.). But he is entangled in the system from which he cannot escape. He is frustrated despite having everything and envies the life of Boku, who does not have any job and drives a low-budget Subaru. To fill the void and live a life that another would not customise, he borrows the Subaru of Boku and starts driving instead of his premium car. His life is basically a reiteration of Lefebvre’s statement “industrially produced” (vol. II 49).

Another important character in the novel is Yumiyoshi, Boku's girlfriend and a receptionist at Hotel Dolphin. Through this character, too, Murakami shows the coercion of advanced capitalism into private life, just like Gotanda, whose life was rather ‘industrially produced’. Her job at the hotel is so formal and hectic that she is not allowed to have personal affairs or talk to her friends or close ones. When Boku tries to approach her at the hotel, she says,

I’m just a plain run-of-the-mill person... The only difference between me and anyone else is my name. Otherwise, I’m the same. I’m just working behind the counter of a hotel day after day, pointlessly wearing down my life. Don’t call me anymore. I’m not worth the phone charges. (301)

She further says, “I think the hotel’s going to eat me up” (301). This is a precarious position for her when she can neither leave her job nor can she work there. Her willpower has been coerced to the extent that she feels numb both emotionally and physically. Makimura tries coercion into the life of Boku, but he refuses. He chose human relationships over financial interests. When Yuki asks why he did not take the money, he says, “If you want to hang out with me every day, Yuki, I’m all for it. Who needs to work? It is just pointless shovelling anyway. But we have to have one thing clear: I’m not going to accept money for doing things with you” (306). What he says just after meeting with Yumiyoshi perhaps made him realise that snow shovelling and paid services eat one up just like it has eaten up Yumiyoshi. What is significant about all these characters is that they are always in conflict between social reality and individual reality. However, this conflict “give way to an authentic human reality, stripped of its facade, and liberated” (170).

In all these novels, Murakami shows how the external forces try to control and manipulate the central characters through various means of control, especially political and economic. The Boss tries to engage Boku with money to find the Rat, and Makimura offers money to Boku to befriend Yuki; attempts were made by the political forces to control the Rat, whereas the capitalistic pressures and his fame were controlling Gotanda, Yumiyoshi, on the other hand, had already succumbed to the capitalistic forces. Initially, all these characters feel helpless, but their helplessness and frustration are shown through their ordinary life. As mentioned earlier, their frustration is represented through defamiliarisation, in the words of Lefebvre, “Alienation” (vol. I 169), which differentiates their individual identity from their social reality. In their ordinary life, they do things that are not typical of the postwar Japanese youths—the salarymen class who are lost in the rat race. Boku’s refusal to work, Gotanda’s frustrated speech on the insurance company, the Rat running away into Hokkaido and killing the sheep, and Yumiyoshi’s cry represent their frustration. Whereas those who were frustrated during the postwar period were joined in the students’ uprising, these characters fight on an individual level. It’s important to note that the students’ uprising ultimately failed, eventually leading many idealistic revolutionaries to join the capitalist forces. Here, Murakami’s representation of the everyday and the ordinary shows that sometimes it’s better to fight bigger forces on an individual level as well. Thus, what appears ordinary in Murakami is not necessarily

ordinary. To quote Olson again, “Art’s heightened attention to the everyday, therefore, may ultimately sanctify the ordinary rather than cause a rupture with it” (5).

Ultimately, the Rat Series presents a nuanced critique of postwar Japanese society, highlighting the tension between individual autonomy and systemic control. Through their ordinary lives, Murakami’s characters offer a powerful commentary on the human condition, illustrating how the everyday can become a site of resistance and self-discovery. The series invites readers to reflect on their own lives, encouraging a conscious engagement with the ordinary to assert personal freedom and resist modern capitalism's homogenising forces.

Notes

1. Masao Miyoshi, one of the renowned critics of Haruki Murakami and a scholar at the University of California, criticised Murakami for writing "what the foreign [book] buyers like to see in it". Kenzaburo Oe was of the opinion that “Murakami writes in Japanese, but his writing isn't really Japanese ... it can be read very naturally in New York” (qtd. in Chozick).
2. Haruki Murakami used the term “System” in the novel *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* to mean the government or the authoritarian force. In Haruki Murakami's fiction, the System is a conglomerate of capitalist forces and the government itself. The term has been used with the same connotation in this paper.
3. Linear time is “acquired, rational, and in a sense abstract and antinatural” (49). In other words, linear time is the manufactured time.
4. Natural cycle or natural time, according to Lefebvre, is natural, irrational and concrete time. It is basically the raw and natural self of an individual.

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Bionote

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