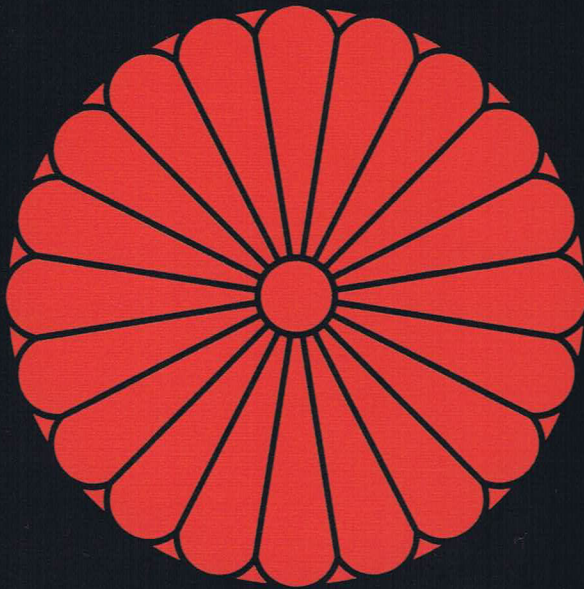


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Not Just Asleep, Dead or Muted: Images of Women in Murakami Haruki

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2018 marks the fortieth year since Japanese author Murakami Haruki first decided to write a novel while watching a game of baseball (or so the story goes). Coinciding with this anniversary, I have led an AHRC funded research project on Murakami that explores the gendering of characters, the process of translation and transmedial production and contemporary Japan. With the intention of bringing together scholars, translators, artists, film makers and general readers to shed light on Japan's most well-known contemporary author, I invited the international community to share their 'eyes' — that is their thoughts, ideas and expertise — on Murakami throughout a four-day project event series titled *Eyes on Murakami*. This resulted in highly interactive and diverse outputs, including, artworks, translation discussions, film screenings and academic papers. It was very interesting to learn how various academics and professionals found their way to the Murakami world.

As for my own path, while only a very short short-story, 'The little green monster' from 1991 is probably the single-most important piece that inspired me to develop a research project on Murakami. The housewife narrator in this story is rather different than Murakami's typical lonesome male narrators and protagonists, which I found intriguing given my interest in gender and the construction of female characters. This was inspiring to me, and I investigated further, reading his entire body of works (I can testify that he has seriously written too much!). What I discovered is that 'The little green monster' is not Murakami's only story with a female narrator. To be precise, there are four: in addition to 'The little green monster', we have 'Sleep' (1989), 'The ice man' (1991) and *Kano Crete* (1990; not translated).

This essay, which includes parts of my current and previous research on women in the world of Murakami, first provides a general introduction to the female characters we meet in his works and discusses how they have been received. Following that I then give my interpretation of 'Sleep' and the 'The little green monster'.¹

Shedding blood for male subjectivities

Think of women in the world of Murakami. You might immediately recall the nameless girl with four fingers from his 1979 debut novel *Hear the Wind Sing* or the equally nameless girlfriend with the so beautiful ears that people can't help but stare in *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1982). Most likely you will remember Naoko, who ends her own life in the breakthrough novel *Norwegian Wood* (1987), or one of Murakami's other female characters who commit suicide or are murdered. Just maybe you are thinking of the many mysterious female characters, who phone or appear from out of nowhere, disclosing vital information that influences the aimless male protagonist's direction in life. These mystery women often perform strangely intense sexual acts, with quite a few of them active as sex-industry professionals. An obvious example is of course the puzzling sister-pair, Malta and Crete, from *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1994-95), who supposedly guide the narrator in his search—first for his disappeared cat, then his disappeared wife. Beyond these major types of characters, you might also want to think about all the women who are voiceless, asleep or otherwise removed from the narrative level in Murakami's works—consider for example the mute granddaughter who dresses her fat body in pink in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985) or the beautiful sister Eri in *After Dark* (2004), who sleeps like sleeping beauty inside a TV.

While we can find an array of memorable female characters throughout Murakami's works, it seems that his women are often textually suppressed—reduced to objects, sexualised and removed from the narrative level. As just described, there are those who are bodily fragmented, such as the girl with the four fingers, the one with the beautiful ears or all the others whose main identity is tied to whether they have big or small breasts; and those that are missing, either because they are dead or dying, or because they have disappeared or are disappearing. Although some women seem to hold a critical key to some mysterious other-world, they too tend to have little narrative agency, their voices—typically absent due to mutism, sleep, or death.

Now, 40 years since Murakami first decided to write a novel, his problematic construction of women has lurked for a while with only little attention. The most recent example is the 2017 book length interview

in which Akutagawa prize winning novelist Kawakami Mieko interviews Murakami.² Although a proclaimed Murakami-fan, Kawakami, who refers to herself as a feminist, cuts through to the gender issue and critically points out that a feminist reading of his works suggests women exist as sexual elements and must, as she phrases it, 'shed blood' in sacrifice for male self-realisation. Kawakami's questions appear provoking for general readers, but they are nonetheless in line with previous literary analyses of Murakami's gender representations, which concludes that his fiction mirrors modern Japanese patriarchy, with female characters traditionally positioned as objects for male subjectivities. Certain types of feminist literary criticism seeking to expose misogynistic and stereotypical portrayal of how women are reduced to objects, sexual symbols and systematically removed from the narrative level certainly have a point; many of Murakami's fictional women are highly problematic. Readers fed up with misogynistic representations of women may strongly relate to the scene in *After Dark* when Koorogi, who works in a love hotel to hide from her abuser, wishes for abusive men to be 'beaten half to death' upon finding a raped and beaten Chinese sex-worker in one of the rooms. To readers' regret, Koorogi's wish doesn't come true; as the novel ends, the abusive male costumer is never held responsible for his actions.

More than objects for male subjectivities

At this point, you may be thinking, wait a minute, what about Aomame in *1Q84*? Not only does she occupy the position of main character (alongside the male character Tengo), as if in response to Koorogi's wish, she is also a professional assassin of abusive men. Unlike the previously discussed characters, Aomame is not the one dying, but indeed the one killing, and although we learn of her small unevenly sized breasts, these do not seem to be her main identifier and identity constructor. Her sexual desire is aimed at obtaining, rather than providing; and overall, she seems more like a sexual subject than a traditional pleasuring female object (admittedly her strong position weakens significantly in book III when pregnant and rather powerless, she herself goes into hiding).

But although Aomame may be a rather unusual Murakami protagonist, *1Q84* is not the first of Murakami's works that portrays a

female main character and questions issues regarding women. Beginning with the short story 'Do you like Burt Bacharach?' (1982; not translated) — later renamed 'Window' — where the male narrator remembers his encounter with a lonely housewife, Murakami has consistently authored a group of works that depicts the isolated, suppressed and sometimes violent lives many women in Japan and elsewhere face—examples include for instance 'Sleep' and 'The little green monster'. While many of the female characters in such works may be less known than Aomame, the female assassin of *1Q84* has evolved from this body of works too.

I first opened this discussion in a short article from 2010. In my current project, I am exploring these less-known characters in more detail. While previous criticisms of Murakami may have made a much-needed point concerning some of his works, my project aims to show that the Murakami world also portrays female main characters, protagonists and narrators who act as subjects in their own worlds. This is easiest to spot through Murakami's four female-narrated '*watashi*' stories ('I'-narrated stories). Published over a span of three years (1989-1991), this group of works is especially important to consider because the female characters we meet here are not participants in the male-narrated world as merely male constructs. Equipped with a voice of their own, these female narrators have the opportunity to act as subjects in their own worlds. Although they may not be feminist-empowered characters who stand up for themselves as feminist-readers might have hoped, they are representative of the realities many women face in Murakami's contemporary Japan. Realities that include feelings of isolation, violence and the pressure to navigate conflicting norms — or 'contradictive femininity' as I termed it in my book on femininity, self-harm and eating disorders in Japan from 2016.

In the next sections of this essay, I will analyse two of these female-narrated *watashi* stories, the first, and probably the best-known 'Sleep', from 1989, and my own favourite 'The little green monster', from 1991.

'Sleep'

In 'Sleep', after being roughly awoken in the middle of the night by a strange nightmarish experience, the first-person housewife-narrator, *watashi*, suddenly stops sleeping for seventeen days. Although she

at first is concerned by her awoken condition, she soon embraces her sleeplessness — she feels hyper-conscious, sensing everything as ‘unusually clear’ and has excessive physical energy, which she burns off exercising at the local pool. Soon, *watashi* starts enjoying her long nights awake by reading literature, drinking brandy and eating chocolate, and throughout her seventeen sleepless days, she literally opens her eyes to the fact that she is trapped in a rote life as selfless mother and wife. However, unlike a typical feminist tale, where the protagonist eventually manages to break free and juggle her positionings in both the domestic and the social world, allowing the story to conclude happily, *watashi*’s narration ends in an awoken nightmare. Aware of her own entrapment, *watashi* realises that she is unable to escape, and the story concludes abruptly with *watashi* locked inside her small car as two male shadows surround both doors. She knows she needs to get out, but the men shake the car violently, attempting to flip it over, at which point she drops the key, and with nothing left to do, gives up and cries.

As literary critic Katō Norihiro points out, although the title means ‘sleep’, the story is not about ‘sleeping’, but about ‘not sleeping’.³ Furthermore, while *watashi* recalls experiencing ‘something like insomnia’ as a university student, which she describes as ‘awakening’, she is certain that her lack of sleep throughout these seventeen days is not a state of ‘insomnia’. Consequently, as Katō makes clear, this story is not about ‘wanting to sleep, and not being able to’. ‘Sleep’ is instead about a female narrator who is not asleep, but is awake. As *watashi* points out towards the end, when her awareness is expanding, she becomes ‘the woman who does not sleep’ and accordingly ‘has no need for sleep’.

With such explicit use of ‘sleep’ and ‘awakening’ in a story about a female character who becomes aware of her confined, rote life as a mother and wife, it is not surprising that ‘Sleep’ already has been compared to feminist writings. According to scholar in contemporary Japanese literature and culture Rebecca Suter, by using the metaphor of sleep and awakening, Murakami’s text is a parody of Western feminist works such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The yellow wallpaper* from 1892 and in particular Kate Chopin’s *The awakening* from 1899, to which Suter exposes striking similarities.⁴ However, sleep and awakening are not only found in late 1800s American feminist texts. As illustrated in Yosano

Akiko's poem 'Rambling remarks', published in the inaugural issue of the feminist journal *Seitō* in 1911, such metaphors are also present in well-known Japanese feminist writings as a means to promote awareness of women's own entrapment:

The day the mountains move will come.
So I speak, but no one believes me.
Only for the moment are the mountains asleep,
Long ago they all moved alight with flames.
Disbelieve me; I care not,
But ah, my people! believe just this:
All the women who lay asleep
Will now awake and move.

Ever since Yosano wrote 'Rambling remarks', her words have inspired many concerned with the state of Japanese women. For example, as literary scholar Jan Bardsley points out, in 1993, the then leader of the Japan Socialist Party, Doi Takako said, 'You see, the mountain has moved' after being sworn in as the first woman to serve as Speaker of the House of Representatives.⁵ As a leading political figure participating in the professional and political world, Doi represents only a tiny minority of Japanese women at the time when 'Sleep' was first published. In fact, despite enlightening women and paving the way for the Equal Opportunity Law of 1986, the second-wave feminist movement never managed to bring Japanese women out of their housewife positionings and its members were accordingly criticised as 'housewife feminists' by later feminists. Through feminist discourses such as Yosano's early poem, contemporary women are in other words 'awoken'—made aware of their right to their own subjectivity—but due to housewife feminism many often feel unable to 'move' any mountains in their personal circumstances.

This conflict is expressed in 'Sleep'. After *watashi* suddenly wakes up from a strange experience, it is clear she lacks two crucial feminist tools—she cannot move or use her voice. Eyes open, all the narrator can do is to observe:

This is no dream, I thought. I had obviously awoken from the dream. I had not woken in a haze, but by having my eyes snapped open. So, this was no dream. *This is reality*. I tried to move. Should I wake up my husband, or turn on the light? But even if I summoned up all my strength, I couldn't do either; I couldn't move. Actually, I couldn't even move one finger. When it became clear to me that I was unable to move, I suddenly became scared. A fundamental fear, exactly like the chill that rises silently from memory's bottomless well. The chill soaked through to the root of my existence. I tried to scream. But I was also unable to bring out my voice. I couldn't even move my tongue effectively. All I was able to do; was simply to just stare at the old man.

Eventually, *watashi* gains strength; she gets up, drinks a glass of brandy and begins to read a novel and from that point on she never sleeps again. Instead, her awakening gradually becomes more defined as she discovers that it is only out of obligation that she shops, cooks, cleans, has sex with her husband and looks after their son. While *watashi's* husband is not explicitly unreasonable or abusive, her suppression is only subtly suggested when she is staring out the window somewhat informing us of her longing to be on the other side—a typical feminist imagery.

Although *watashi* at first is concerned with her sleepless condition, her life without sleep soon finds its own rhythm. She devotes herself as a selfless wife and mother during the daytime, and at night, when her family is asleep, she satisfies her own desires by reading literature, drinking brandy and eating chocolate—activities she stopped after getting married because her husband does not read, drink alcohol or eat sweets. However, as *watashi's* days without sleep progress, her night-time habits of reading, brandy drinking and chocolate eating gradually creep into her daytime routine, implying that she has difficulty transforming back to her positioning as selfless wife and mother. Now that she is awoken, *watashi* realises that she cannot go back to being asleep and confinement; more than anything she wants freedom. Determined to embrace a new life where she does not submit to her family at the expense of her own subjectivity, she drives around in her small car in the middle of the night. At this point of the story, the narrator

appears strong and her narrative comes to echo the words of Hiratsuka Raichō in 'To the women of the world', published in *Seitō* in 1913, as a response to women's positioning as wives,

Though we don't intend to cry out against marriage itself, we will never submit to the current idea of marriage and the present marriage system [...] We would never marry nor be wives to yield to such an unreasonable system. Once we have been awakened, we cannot possibly fall asleep. We are now living. We are awake. Our lives will not become a reality without exhaling something which is burning within us. Whatever pressure we might be subjected to, our new lives will never cease finding the gateway. We are eagerly groping for the gate to the real life of women. We are at a loss, wondering how we should centralize our energies. [...] If our inner energy, in other words our life which has already awakened, doesn't find its real outlets through which it can possibly burst, it will do harm to both our bodies and our minds and we might have to ruin ourselves in just the same way as Hedda [Gabler] did. (As translated and quoted in Reich and Fukuda, 1976).⁶

Unlike the challenging words of feminist voices from the past and the present, Murakami's *watashi*, like most Japanese women who are not actively engaged in organised feminist movements, is submissive and keeps her rebellious acts to herself. She neither speaks her complains nor disturbs anyone. There are many things she does not tell her husband, and she erases all traces of her personal awakening: she brushes her teeth to rid them of chocolate and cautiously checks that her husband and son are asleep before indulging in her book and brandy. As the narrator repeatedly points out, her husband and son do not know that she is awake and remain unaware of the changes her body and mind undertake.

Watashi's silent and secret awakening means she never finds the right outlet through which her energy can burst, as Hiratsuka described. Although her intensive exercise at the local pool makes her body beautiful and strong, it seems the energy gained from her awakening has been wasted doing endless laps at the pool, getting her nowhere at all. In the end, when the male shadows surround her car, her apparent

lack of power to escape mirrors the body-conscious-fashion and fitness-boom around the time the short story was published, when determined women of the late 1980s built strong bodies only to position as beautiful objects in skin-tight mini-dresses.

Despite that *watashi* feels her face and body become separated, she cannot divide herself into two separate beings. Instead, she must singlehandedly manage the paradoxical dichotomy of being both self-less and subject. 'Sleep' ends sadly as *watashi* fails to navigate this process: doing it all by becoming 'the woman who does not sleep' results in an impossible and self-destructive situation for the narrator. In the words of sociologist Ueno Chizuko, with the greater possibilities, individual women have become less able to 'find an enemy outside themselves' and therefore look inward to solve their problems.⁷ Although *watashi* bears only little resemblance to the high achievers at Tōkyō University that Ueno refers to, the situation described in Murakami's short story—an inward-looking female protagonist who suffers an emotional breakdown after trying to extend her rote entrapped life—echoes the contemporary trend that more women than men experience depression and other minor mental health problems.

In contrast to how a typical feminist awakening-story might take form, *watashi* only seems to become more suppressed throughout her seventeen days of being awake. As she becomes more and more aware of her own suppression, the spaces she frequents ironically become smaller and smaller. When the story begins, *watashi* moves around within the confines of her house. Then, as she awakens, she spends her new energy at the swimming pool, where she is restricted to doing laps back and forth. And on her seventeenth day without sleep, *watashi* becomes trapped in the tiny space of her small car, surrounded by the two male shadows. Sadly, after she loses the key and her attempted escape ends in tears, the car becomes a tool of entrapment instead of potential escape. As Katō argues, the male shadows—one big and one small—could symbolise the narrator's husband and son, both of whom *watashi* believes will never understand her feelings, and it is clear that her wish for freedom is being suppressed by her obligation to live life as mother and wife.

Thus, just like many real-world housewives, *watashi* faces a very

difficult paradox: she must both be awake (aware of her confined positioning) and at the same time be asleep (unaware of her confined positioning). As Sandra Buckley suggested in 1997,⁸ while housewives are 'attracted by the language of liberation' they are also 'devoted to preserving the conservative structures' that form the foundation of their lives as mothers and wives.

'The little green monster'

As with 'Sleep', the very brief short story 'The little green monster' from 1991 is told by a housewife-narrator, *watashi*. Home alone with nothing to do after her husband has gone to work, the story begins with *watashi* looking out through a crack between the curtains, when she hears a faint strange sound that at first seems to emanate from inside her body. Then, the ground outside bulges upwards as if 'some heavy water was rising to the surface', the earth breaks apart and out crawls a green monster. Making its way to *watashi's* front entrance, the green monster unlocks the door and enters her house. *Watashi* is frightened, worrying the monster will eat her, but cannot escape. She soon realises, however, that the green monster has no evil intentions and instead it declares its love. Despite this revelation, *watashi* proceeds to torture the monster using various machines and tools to stab, cut and burn it, and the story concludes without the green monster getting to convey its ancient message. It simply shrinks, disappears into thin air, at which point 'the shadows of the night have filled the room'.

While the monster acknowledges *watashi's* positioning as housewife and accordingly addresses her politely as *okusan* ('wife' or 'Madam'), *watashi* addresses the monster rudely, using *koitsu* ('that bastard'), *soitsu* ('that fellow') and *omae* (rude form of 'you'), words rarely used by women unless spoken in private, to oneself. In fact, *watashi* does not 'talk' or 'speak' to the green monster but communicates in an unvoiced manner since the monster can read her mind. In addition, since the strange sound preceding the monster's appearance feels like it emanates from inside *watashi's* body combined with the fact that the monster comes out of a 'deep, deep place', suggest that the encounter between *watashi* and the green monster takes place in the protagonist's inner world. Based on this as well as *watashi's* description of the monster's

human-like emotion-filled eyes 'like your eyes or mine', the monster can be considered the protagonist's other self.

The protagonist in 'The little green monster' is thus fragmented into two selves—the *watashi*-self and the monster-self. The fact that *watashi* experiences her own other self in the shape of a monster suggests that it represents a side of her that she finds unacceptable, and it is clear that the conflict between the two selves revolves around gender, evident when *watashi* says 'well, monster, you don't know what a woman is' while torturing it into non-existence. Besides this, readers are left with few other clues as to what the monster-self represents. Examining Murakami's authorship beyond the textual boundary of 'The little green monster' may help shed light on the green monster and *watashi*'s motivation to destroy it.

The monster is described as *midori iro* ('green coloured'), which is written 緑 and pronounced identically to one of two female characters—Midori and Naoko—in Murakami's breakthrough novel *Norwegian wood* (1987), in which the male narrator Watanabe Toru nostalgically recalls his student-life in the late 1960s. One way of interpreting the monster could therefore be to understand it as 'coloured' with the persona of Midori from *Norwegian wood*. Exploring this further indeed reveals that the midori-coloured monster and the Midori-character are linked in several intriguing ways. First, in *Norwegian wood*, Midori warns she may turn into a monster: 'Regardless of the place, I will cry like a monster. It is true.' Second, similar to how the monster does not behave like a typical monster but is cute, has good intentions and emotive human-like eyes, Watanabe in *Norwegian wood*, says: 'It is the first time I meet a girl thinking like you.' to Midori, whose eyes he describes as staring at him, 'just like a rare animal in a cage'.

The name Midori is often used in Japanese literature to suggest a controversial female character and with Midori clearly very critical of norms concerning women of her time, *Norwegian wood* is no exception in this regard. In particular, Midori despises sit-at-home housewives who read magazines aimed at them while waiting for their husbands and she metaphorically describes how waiting alone inside the house all day slowly suppresses and destroys her:

When I am all alone, I feel like my body rots little by little. Step by step it rots, and then dissolves, and, in the end, all that is left is a thick green liquid that gets sucked into the bowels of the earth.

Since Midori feels she turns into thick *midori iro* ('green coloured') liquid that is sucked into the earth when she is made to wait at home all day, it is remarkable that the green monster enters the world of a wait-at-home housewife (*watashi*) by 'crawling up from a hole in the ground that breaks apart as if some heavy water were rising to the surface'. While *Norwegian wood* abruptly ends in 1972, and readers therefore remain uninformed about Midori's later whereabouts as the monster evolves from the ground in the early 1990s (when the short story was published), this intriguing similarity suggests that Midori and the monster are somehow connected. As the feminist movement concurrent to the historical setting of *Norwegian wood* has been termed 'housewife feminists' for its failure to bring Japanese women out of their domestic positionings, a majority of women, who like Midori had held feminist views in the 1960s, found themselves positioned as housewives by the 1990s. In fact, Midori's conformance to this domestic 'destiny' is hinted at in the novel when she says, 'You know, although my name is Midori, green doesn't suit me at all. Strange, right?' in tandem with her decision to adopt a feminine hairstyle towards the end of the story—an important step considering how the media strongly ridiculed the hairstyles of feminists during the 1960s and 1970s, as Ehara Yumiko has showed.⁹

As the protagonist's other self, the green monster is thus coloured with Midori's fragile feminism and the gendered conflict between the two selves thereby represents 'contradictive femininity' where the *watashi*-self occupies a housewife positioning that the monster-self seeks to escape. Although it declares its love and means no harm, the monster and its message evoke fear in *watashi* because they pose a threat to her established positioning of housewife, and must therefore be kept under control, hidden from the outer world. After *watashi* harshly rejects the monster's love, it reacts by shrinking and changing colour, from green to purple, a colour we are told is 'the colour of sadness'. This indicates the monster self is weakened and that it mourns the diminishing link

to Midori. At this point in the story, *watashi* realises she can use the monster's own mind reading powers against it, and she loses all fear:

Coming here to seek my love, a completely shameless monster, I thought. Aren't you a disgraceful monster? Well, monster, you don't know what a woman is. [...] You can't say a thing, you can't do anything. Your entire existence is over!

Upon seeing how thinking intentionally abusive thoughts disempowers the monster, *watashi* expands her thoughts to include physical acts of torture and *watashi's* suppression of the monster relies on typical self-harming acts of stabbing, cutting and burning:

I tied the monster down to a big heavy chair with a wire, and, among other things, plucked out its green scales one by one with a pointy pair of tweezers, heated the tip of a sharp knife until it became red and inserted it several times into the deep muscles of its plump peach-coloured soft-looking calves, and stabbed a hot soldering iron hard into those swollen fig-like eyes.

By tying down the monster, *watashi* ultimately deprives it of freedom, and by plucking its green scales she attempts to rid it of its 'Midori' and feminist views. But more than this, by stabbing and branding its skin with 'red' (green's complement in the colour scale), we see how *watashi* 'converts' the monster into its opposite—the normative and tradition. That her knife is from the kitchen, a tool from women's domestic domain, reinforces the image of the monster being converted or schooled in domestic values. When the monster starts to 'shed coloured tears like a pasty liquid that trickles down in thick drops onto the floor' as result of *watashi's* brutality, we are reminded of Midori's metaphorical image of suppression (turning into thick green liquid and sucked into the ground). The ultimate suppression of the monster occurs with the loss of its mouth and, with it, its voice—its most important communication tool. *Watashi* acknowledges the significance of this moment by saying: 'Whatever you see, it will be of no use. You can't say a thing, you can't do anything. Your entire existence is over!'

By the time the monster loses its voice, it has come to reflect the housewife protagonist described in the beginning of the story—sitting inside on a chair, voicelessly speaking in her heart to a tree and staring out through a crack between the curtains. The monster is now tied down to a chair inside the house, made voiceless and only able to interact with the world through its eyes. *Watashi's* violence has in other words carved her feminist-self into normativity. Paradoxically then, *watashi* uses her own subjectivity to de-subjectify herself. When the monster's eyes finally vanish, the monster self has once again become completely suppressed from the inner world and its feminist voice silenced.

But although *watashi's* acts of cutting, stabbing and burning lead to victory over the invading green monster, its defeat and final disappearance are depicted as depressing: as the story ends, readers sense the narrator writhes in pain alongside the monster, the shadows of the night have filled the room and *watashi's* abuses 'echo in my heart'. Although the element of fear has dissolved into the air and the monster has disappeared, the depressed dark mood from the beginning of the story becomes more pronounced, leaving the impression that *watashi* has committed a crime rather than won a heroic battle. And the monster's stuttering words after *watashi* considers chopping off its nose, 'This is s-s-something like a lizard's tail. No matter how much you cut it, afterwards, afterwards, it will boom, boom, grow back. And every time you cut it, it will become s-stronger and longer.', foreshadow a future conflict between the two selves.

Conclusion

Images of women within Murakami's works are often problematic. Their voices are frequently absent due to mutism, sleep or death. As a result, Murakami is criticised for his female characters who have little narrative agency. However, an important aim of my project is to show how his works also include stories in which narrators, protagonists and main characters are females who act as subjects in their own worlds.

In this essay, I discussed two of Murakami's *watashi*-stories, 'Sleep' and 'The little green monster'. Two of Murakami's very few female-narrated works, the main characters in these stories are not feminist-empowered, yet precisely because of that their narrated worlds depict

well-known female realities in their contemporary Japan. In 'Sleep', although *watashi* is 'awake', she is unable to exercise her rights to move beyond a self-sacrificing positioning as mother and wife, just like the majority of housewives in the contemporary time of the short story. And while 'The little green monster' appears to be the story of an ordinary housewife and her victory over an intruding strange green monster, the female narrator here reminds us of the increasing number of women whose lives include acts of self-harm.

What sets these stories apart from typical Murakami works is that the narrator is not male, but female — 'she' is thus not removed from the narrative level. Ironically, because these narrators' words do not reach anyone else except us — the reader — it could be argued that they too are muted — not on the narrative level, but on the level of the story itself. By ending 'Sleep' with *watashi* leaning back with nothing left to do but cry, readers are, however, invited to mourn the unvoiced hardships of women's struggle as they attempt to divide themselves between contradictory positionings. Likewise, by filling the room 'with the darkness of night' rather than joy and light following *watashi's* triumph over the monster in 'The little green monster', readers are invited not to celebrate the narrator's victory, but instead to mourn women's silent self-suppression and acts of self-harm.

Notes

- 1 This essay is partly based on my book: *Femininity, Self-harm and Eating Disorders in Japan: Navigating contradiction in narrative and visual culture* (London: Routledge, 2016) and my current research project on Murakami Haruki <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/murakami/>. Although I use the original Japanese texts in my research, all titles are listed in English translation to make the text reader-friendly. Except where otherwise indicated, all textual translations are my own and may not correspond to official translations.
- 2 Kawakami Mieko, *Mimizuku wa kōkon ni tobitatsu* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 2017).

- 3 Katō Norihiro, *Yuruyakana sokudo* (Tokyo: Chūō kōron-sha, 1990), p. 199.
- 4 Rebecca Suter, *The Japanization of modernity: Murakami Haruki between Japan and the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 141-162.
- 5 Jan Bardsley, *The bluestockings of Japan: new woman essays and fiction from Seitō, 1911-16* (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2007), p. 246.
- 6 Pauline C. Reich and Fukuda Atsuko, 'Japan's literary feminists: the "Seito" group', *Signs*, 2/1 (1976), p. 291.
- 7 Lecture at University of Chicago titled 'Forty years of Japanese Feminism: what it has achieved and what it has not', 22 April 2013 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SErdVYGTxVI>, accessed 11 April 2018).
- 8 Sandra Buckley, *Broken silence: voices of Japanese feminism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), p. 46.
- 9 Ehara Yumiko, 'The politics of teasing', in F. Richard Calichman (ed.), *Contemporary Japanese thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 52-53.