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The Horrors of Contemporary Japan's Working Culture

Haruki Murakami is famous for his short stories about the aftermath of Japan's 1995 Kobe Earthquake. His short story, "Super-Frog Saves Tokyo," is a magical realism that contains the anthropomorphic frog and worm, which are the manifest contents of the dream. With Japan's multitude of social codes, every Japanese citizen is expected to obey every single one without question. In connections to Freud's concepts of the unconscious, dreamwork, wish-fulfillment, manifest content, and latent content from Lecture II, III, IV, and V and the existence of magical animals in "Super-Frog Saves Tokyo," Haruki Murakami, the author of the short story, exposes the effects of Japan's strict working culture where long working hours with underpayment and little free time contribute to a lack of purpose and cause mental health problems such as depression, which is the leading cause of suicide attempts in contemporary Japan.

Japan's deep-rooted values of correct behavior and good manners influenced how extreme the working culture is for the average working person. Katagiri, the protagonist of "Super-Frog Saves Tokyo," fits the description of a middle-aged male working prolonged hours for minimum wage. Because Katagiri spends more time at work than at home, he has "no wife, no kids, both parents dead, [and] a brother and sister he had put through college [who] married off" (Murakami). The man himself carries an overwhelming burden to fit into society. An example of this peer pressure to fit in is when Katagiri is expected to complete university and

transition to a nine-to-five job: “He [Katagiri] had weathered sixteen years of daily combat since the day he graduated from the university and joined the bank's staff” (Murakami). Katagiri, like the rest of Japan’s society, is born into a country full of responsibility to fulfill the traditional lifestyle of completing a college degree and immediately joining the workforce. Evidently, Frog points out to Katagiri that, “For sixteen long years, [he has] silently accepted the most dangerous, least glamorous assignments—the jobs that others have avoided—and [he has] carried them off beautifully” (Murakami). The implication is that the man himself has faithfully done whatever was asked of him without complaining. Even though Katagiri knows that delivering loans to gangs is morally wrong, he never raises his voice or confronts his superiors. What’s bad about this situation is he can’t speak up because society would either label him as a “criminal” and ostracize him for being a part of the scheme, or society would call his story a false accusation and the gangs in charge would possibly kill Katagiri for spoiling their scheme. Hence, the internal pressure to preserve one’s reputation costs the individual’s well-being.

The individual suffers from unhappiness because Japan’s working culture limits one’s time away from recreation. Freud would describe the working culture as “high standards of our civilization,” which make “reality unsatisfying quite generally” and thus inducing the “production of wish-fulfillments” upon the individual (Freud 2235). Where then, perhaps, does one produce wish-fulfillments? According to Freud, it is within the unconscious where the “dream-thoughts” fulfill a person’s wishes (2223). In Katagiri’s case, his unconscious creates a dream world where he is the superhero of the story. In order to understand what his wish-fulfillment is, one must review the manifest contents of the dream to reveal the hidden meaning behind the symbols. In the dream, Frog gives Katagiri a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to save his homeland, Tokyo, from an earthquake caused by an angry, gigantic worm; if Katagiri accepts

the mission, he will not be rewarded with fame or admiration no matter if he wins or loses (Murakami). This fraction of the protagonist's dream surprisingly reveals two things about Katagiri. Firstly, Katagiri's wish is to find a higher purpose in which he is the hero in his stage of life. At the age of 40, many people consider this the beginning of middle age characterized by physical and mental deterioration. Some may even call it the start of their mid-life crisis. Katagiri feels no different as he describes himself as "less than ordinary" with male pattern baldness, no wife, no kids, no friends, etc. (Murakami). No matter how one personally views him, there is no denying that at least some of these features are undesirable to Japanese society. Therefore, it is within the ego's best interest to allow Katagiri to fulfill his desire to be Japan's hero in the dream world, not the real world because people would call him delusional for making up talking animals and the earthquake. The second thing that the dream reveals is the main character does not desire praise or recognition for his actions but only the self-worth that he was brave enough to risk his life for society. Katagiri never felt any contempt against society, which takes strength. In other words, Katagiri is willing to take the moral high ground instead of behaving in pettiness ways. The exciting events that occurred during the dream were substitutes for the recreational activities that were missing in Katagiri's real life.

The long-term effects of Japan's working culture such as depression, anxiety, and suicide have become the norm in Japan's society because of the prevalent abuse and injustice in the work environment. Historically, depression has affected all societies around the world. However, Japan has a unique case where "death by overwork" even has its own name: *karoshi* (North 147). According to the article, "The Rebirth of Secrets," "In Japan, the neurobiologization of depression has not led to brain-centered, individual reductionism as North American critics have feared . . . in this case, a medicolegal understanding of depression as an illness rooted in both

biology and society and a misfortune lying beyond workers' individual responsibility (cf. Kleinman 1986; Ong 1987; Young 1995)" (Kitanaka S253). The study suggests that unlike the previous hypothesis where depression is linked to "individual reductionism," depression in Japan is linked to "both biology and society and a misfortune lying beyond workers' individual responsibility. Focusing on the society aspect of it, the unwritten social rules of Japan are demanding an excessive amount of obedience and flawless conduct. To understand how companies and superiors take advantage of the social rules, Kitanaka, a native from Japan, took first-hand accounts of Japanese workers in the early 2000s: "A 49-year-old banker discussed a time when he was working daily from 7:00 a.m. to 2:00 a.m. while his new boss repeatedly scolded him in front of his colleagues, one time throwing up in the air a document he had carefully prepared. A 50-year-old civil servant talked about being yelled at and criticized by union leaders, and despite his dislike of alcohol, making an effort to join them every night in drinking in order to smooth things out, until one day he could not face work anymore" (Kitanaka S254). What these interviews show is that Japan has a long history of abuse in the workplace. The employees are under scrutiny of their employers, union leaders, etc., and yet the workers are not shown appreciation when they do their job correctly. The longer these poor working conditions survive, the more difficult it is to get rid of them. Not only does the abuse affect the victim, it also affects the victim's family, too. Japan has seen a dramatic decline in birth rates, and the depression is one of the reasons for the decline. Many Japanese people do not feel prepared enough to raise a family because they have no free time and low wages. Is it not wrong to say that the treatment of the workforce affects the success of society since they are the backbone? Therefore, it is imperative that Japan renovates its working culture to reverse the damages in mental health and population decline before time runs out.

The eye-opening tale of “Super-Frog Saves Tokyo” by Haruki Murakami is one that will leave a lasting impression for many readers. The criticisms against Japan’s lack of mental health awareness and the strict working environment still apply today. One could say that Murakami was ahead of his time for writing openly about a character with mental health issues during a time where people were shamed for speaking out about the topic. The short story has provided a deeper insight in the minds of Japanese people who are known for their hard work and discipline.

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