Exemplar student response

How does Haruki Murakami present his characters in 1Q84 and how does a feminist reading of the text open up potential meanings?

Haruki Murakami’s *1Q84* is perhaps a unique novel in that while the author subverts feminine stereotypes, he also reinforces them, particularly in the latter stages of the novel. Murakami tends to portray women as mere objects of men’s desires in his earlier novels, such as *Norwegian Wood*, where they are viewed merely as the ‘other’. In these works women deviate from the male ‘norm’ and complete a man, while always remaining incomplete themselves. Murakami’s women have been described as coming in ‘one of two shallow flavours: fragile and emotionally damaged or quirky and aloof’ (Nguyen, 2011). In *1Q84* however he adopts a far more progressive and interesting view of women by creating Aomame, a strong albeit at times murderous young woman, as one of the two main characters; a character who both embraces and shuns traditional feminine traits in a distinctly patriarchal world.

Murakami’s description of his protagonist illustrates the concept of the ‘male gaze’ (TV Tropes, 2012), recognised by feminist criticism and originally described by Mulvey, where the author focuses on female appearance, despite assuming the role of an impartial narrator; ‘while tastes differ, few would object to calling her a beautiful woman’. If the assertion that ‘many texts clearly assume that their readers are male’ (Bertens, 2011) is accepted then this focus on Aomame’s appearance, rather than her qualities as a character, could be seen as typical of phallocentric literature. Examining the text through the lens of feminist criticism it could be argued that Murakami writes for an implied male audience, with female readers being maneuvered to subconsciously adopt a male reading position without them realising it. Without careful analysis it is difficult to resist the dominant reading the text itself offers. This claim is further strengthened...
when Murakami’s explicit description, celebration even, of the male Tengo’s sexual exploits is compared to the uncomfortable description of Aomame’s ‘sex feasts’ which are likened to a ‘porno movie’ by another of the characters. As a male writer Murakami is, some critics claim, ‘uncomfortable writing from the perspective of a woman’, something many feminist critics assert is true of male writers in general.

Murakami initially presents Aomame as adhering to the traditional female stereotype of being fashion obsessed, with particular emphasis placed on her branded clothing and ‘Charles Jourdan heels’. It could be argued however that she is demonstrating a modern, western interest and as such is breaking away from the traditional concepts of how a modest woman should behave in Japanese culture. What to a western reader may seem a frivolous quality could, in a Japanese character, be seen as an act of strength and rebellion. This interpretation of her character is reinforced by her actions within the text, most notably her violence towards abusive men. As an assassin she has ultimate power over the men who are her victims. Murakami also presents Aomame as physically strong and adept, being a self-defence instructor and ‘a key member of the company’s women’s softball team’. Sport and fighting can be seen as traditional male pursuits and Aomame excels at both. However the fact that we view this as unusual, not the norm, highlights how we are conditioned to expect certain things of male and female characters within literature. In addition to this many of the decisions the female character makes, the need to learn self-defence for example, stem from male influence or potential male influence on her life. Even though Murakami seems to have created a strong female protagonist she is inextricably bound up in a male-dominated world.

In many ways Aomame can only succeed if she adopts male traits and characteristics. Before committing a murder she removes her stereotypically feminine clothing, suggesting that to succeed in her chosen field she requires some semblance of masculinity. Her friend Ayumi is presented as rebelling against the patriarchal society by joining the police force, a typically male domain. However Murakami presents her as struggling in her career and ultimately she is murdered; a punishment perhaps for her presumption and her sexual promiscuity. The description of her murder, where her controlling male partner handcuffs then strangles her, highlights her weaker victim status. Despite appearing to create a strong, independent female character in Ayumi Murakumi’s text ultimately reinforces the message, consciously or not, that breaking the boundaries of gender restrictions is futile and destructive.

Another character who in some ways subverts traditional feminine traits is ‘the Dowager’. Aomame’s killings are her brain child, having lost a daughter to suicide following domestic abuse. The Dowager is also a skilled financier, with ‘an outstanding talent for the stock market’, a field of work almost entirely dominated by men. Murakami describes how she ‘knew no fear, trusted her instincts’, qualities often associated with men, as opposed to the more caring, passive roles traditionally assigned to women. However the Dowager is not entirely a self-made woman, relying as she does on her husband’s inheritance.
Just as Aomame needs the male Tamaru to provide her with supplies, the Dowager needs the financial support gained through her husband. Murakami seems incapable of creating females who do not rely on males to some extent. Joanna Ross claims that in order to achieve true equality women must give up their dependence on men. Considered in this light it is clear that Murakami has not managed to create independent female characters but instead has placed his females within an inherently androcentric world which ultimately shapes them and what they do.

When the character of Aomame becomes pregnant she loses her capacity for violence. The ‘pure intense anger’ that Aomame claims has ‘driven’ her is replaced by love for her baby, which she considers to be the physical antithesis of the hate she experienced. The strength that defines her personality early in the novel is therefore seen to be merely a by-product of her anger towards abusive men, rather than a quality inherent in her own personality. In the end Aomame, who struggles to love men for much of the novel, realises her latent love for Tengo and finds herself shedding her cold exterior, crying for ‘no reason’ and wishing she could escape a world of killing in order to build a family life. To some feminist critics this ultimate adherence to stereotypical feminine values and behaviours may be disappointing but may others argue that that very judgement is flawed. Why should traditional female qualities be seen as ‘lesser’? Why should a woman have to behave like a man to be seen as strong? Surely the things that the character of Aomame wants are ultimately the things many males would want also?

A feminist approach to literature emphasises the importance of ‘the socio-historical circumstances as a determining factor in the production of literature’ (Barry, 2002) and so the social context that underpins 1Q84 needs to be considered. While in the West ‘feminist’ readers may be keen to see Aomame dominating her husband, in order to reverse the gender roles that have become established as traditional throughout western literature, a Japanese reading is likely to be very different. Aomame’s emotional behaviour and equal relationship with Tengo are almost the opposite of traditional Japanese cultural views of women, which posit that a woman should be reserved, quiet and obsequious to her dominant husband. Arguably it is Tengo’s behaviour that more closely mirrors that of a Japanese woman, as he only has a part-time job and is proficient at cooking and housework. While the characters’ long-term relationship is not explored in detail there is a clear indication in the text that theirs is an equal partnership, not one that follows a traditional Japanese patriarchal model. Murakami could, after all, be seen to be championing a different type of role and experience for women and men via the fate he gives to his leading characters.

Many interesting ideas and issues are unearthed when 1Q84 is examined from a feminist perspective but there is also much ambivalence. The treatment, and often abuse, of women in a patriarchal world is the catalyst of much of the action of the novel. Many of the female characters are victims of domestic abuse but Tengo, the male protagonist, also suffered abuse as a child. Some
female characters are presented as weak or naïve, notably the Dowager’s daughter, but others are strong and refuse to be mere objects for the use of men. Aomame, most notably, despises men and uses them as disposable sources of sexual gratification, as well as killing them. Although Aomame ends the novel in the more conventional role of a mother she finds herself in a relationship that offers her more freedom and equality than might be expected given her cultural context.

Murakami seems ambivalent about his female characters and the issues that surround them. Ultimately however he is bound by an inherently androcentric way of thinking, despite a comparatively strong ‘feminist’ slant to some of his characters. In the end Murakami, like so many others, cannot escape the omnipresent influence of a patriarchal culture shaping his work.

Bibliography

AQA Critical Anthology
Rodd, J (1975) The Female Man, Bantam Books
TV Tropes (2012) www.tvtropes.org

Moderator’s commentary

This is a well written response which shows evidence of independent thought and investigation on the part of the student. The student has engaged with a range of critical ideas and has tried to be tentative in teasing out different readings depending on different aspects of feminist literary criticism. It is evident this response is shaped by reading the text through the lens of feminist literary criticism and there are clear connections to critical ideas. A range of contextual factors are considered, including how meanings can be affected by cultural background. The student knows the text well and writer’s methods are engaged with in terms of how characters are presented and how the plot is shaped. Different interpretations are considered throughout, there is a shape and structure to the argument and a conclusion is reached. There is a sense that the student has been on a genuine journey of investigation and has come to their own conclusions. One possible consideration could be whether AO2 is sufficiently addressed but overall this is a sophisticated response that is operating at the top end of the mark scheme.