Memories of a High School Rebel: Ryu Murakami’s Sixty-Nine

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Abstract

Ryu Murakami’s Sixty-Nine (1987) is a semi-autobiographical story about a highschool rebel’s path to personal growth in the late 1960s in the small town of Sasebo where Murakami spent the defining years of his youth. Besides being a humorous narrative about a student’s disillusion with his teachers and his subsequent revenge on them, Sixty-Nine shows Murakami’s consistent interest in the young generation and Japan’s education system. The novel deals with significant issues which this article identifies as the attitudes of young people in 1969 and Western influence on Japanese youth culture — especially the impact of foreign music, movies and philosophy, Japan during a modernization period and a process of redefining national identity after World War II, and an ideological gap between the generations. This article seeks to analyze these key issues and to put them in relation to the narrative of Sixty-Nine with the aim of providing an insight into Murakami’s artistic work.
The surest way to corrupt a youth is to instruct him to hold in higher esteem those who think alike than those who think differently.
Friedrich Nietzsche

The immense changes in the Japanese society since Ryu Murakami's (*1952) rebellious high school years in the 1960s as well as his awareness of the increasing difficulty for young people to find employment after college and to secure their livelihood led the Japanese author to address such problems in 2000. He reiterated his concerns for the state and future of the next generation as he registered the continuous rise of the youth unemployment rate and the dwindling chances for many young people to be successful in life. Murakami wrote:

Today, in a Japan fully conscious that modernization is over and that we have caught up with the West, we turn to our youth and ask them not for the devotion that served us so well in the past but for fully developed skills and immediately useful knowledge. I think that less than five percent of young people have actually registered this message from society and are actively seeking an education that will provide the necessary training. [...] Today, so many Japanese have lost confidence in themselves that the young have become contaminated with it. This is unfortunate. [...] From now on, Japanese youth will be divided between the few who succeed and the many who fail. For the large number who are bound to fail, the future is uncertain. To forget this uncertainty, they delude themselves with video games, music, fashion, Hollywood, sex, drugs or cults. If we leave them as they are, they will eventually seek revenge against a society which did not give them clear advice when it was needed. (The Unesco Courier 3-7)

He also called on politicians' and the elder generations' sense of obligation to help young people get ahead in life. He proved his longstanding interest in young people's development again in 2004 with his instructive book Ju-san-sai no Hello Work [13 Year Old Hello Work], the main intention of which was to drive home the message that the mechanics of the job market are forcing recent college graduates to know very early in life what they actually want to do professionally and that there was not time to be idle or indecisive. The book categorizes five-hundred professions according to different criteria that parents and young readers can easily understand. A main incentive for Murakami to write 13 Year Old Hello Work is also his experiences as a student, as Philip Brasor states:

In the introduction to the book, Murakami says that he was always getting into trouble at school, where teachers constantly accused him of destroying classroom harmony. He says his adolescent rebelliousness was
caused by adults who constantly squelched his curiosity. Children, he says, are naturally curious, but that curiosity tends to be stifled by the educational system. (Japan Times Online)

The above statements include some of Murakami's major concerns which he has explored over the years since his debut novel Almost Transparent Blue (1976): the situation of the Japanese youth, Western influence on Japan, the nation's modernization processes, social development, an individual's disillusionment and subsequent revenge on society, the impact of American music and film on Japanese culture, his dissatisfaction with Japan's education system, and his own rebellious high school years.

These are all key elements of his novel Sixty-Nine, first published in Japanese in 1987 and later translated into several languages. The English version by Ralph McCarthy, who has translated five Murakami novels to date, first appeared in 2005. With Sixty-Nine the author demonstrates his early interest in the minds and actions of young people, as well as his wide literary range as this is an optimistic coming-of-age story that stands in stark contrast to many of his other popular works, such as the gloomy Piercing (1994), In the Miso Soup (1997) and Audition (1999), which all explore the psychosis of violent adults, premeditated murder, and images of gore and repulsion. (See Klemm 2010 and 2011 for analyses of those novels.) Sixty-Nine, however, does without the shock value of chaos and carnage, as it humorously describes the world of high school teenagers, their problems, ambitions and rebellions. In his study of Sixty-Nine Zach Davison also concludes that it differs considerably from earlier Murakami novels as it advocates boundless freedom for the young mind and the right to take a stand against the establishment. Thus, he considers Sixty-Nine to be upbeat: "A far cry from the nihilistic fairytale of Coin Locker Babies [1980] or the dirty, self-destructive realism of Almost Transparent Blue [1976], this is a light-hearted, fast-paced trip through the lazy hazy days of the summer of 1969" (online).

In 2004 Sixty-Nine was adapted for the screen by the Korean director Sang-il Lee, based on a screenplay by Kankuro Kudo. The film has the same title and was shown at the 2005 Rotterdam International Film Festival to generally positive responses by critics and audiences. Since the cinematic adaptation stays true to the novel but is a text in its own right, I will focus on the novel here exclusively. For discussions of the film, refer to publications by Edwards, Schilling and Young. In what follows I will explore abovementioned themes, putting the focus on the reasons for and results of the main character’s rebellion.
Sixty-Nine is set in Japan in 1969 near the city of Sasebo, Kyushu. This is the town where Murakami grew up and came in contact with American culture due to the presence of a U.S. naval base which was a strategically important location for the U.S. military forces during the Vietnam War. The story follows a group of male students at Sasebo’s Northern High School. They are led by the rebellious and juvenile Ken Yasaki, who is also the implied author and the narrator of a story that puts him at the center. Ken is the drummer of a rock band and a member of the newspaper club. He gets into trouble when he tries to publish articles without the prior approval by the school’s principal. While Ken and a circle of close friends defy the hierarchical structures imposed on them by their school, they do not intend to harm others. Inspired by the counter-culture movement in Tokyo and the atmosphere of social clashes that has reached the country from the U.S. and Europe, the high school students explore their creative potential and the growing interest in the opposite sex by becoming openly rebellious against the established institutions and forces, i.e. their school and teachers. Thus, barricading the school, making an avant-garde movie à la Luis Buñuel’s surrealist short film Un Chien Andalou, putting on a stage play and organizing a rock music festival – consistent with their teenage ingenuity appropriately titled “Morning Erection Festival” – are their ways of making strong statements, as it was a time when many people sought to make their voices heard.

The transitional years between the 1960s and 1970s call for numerous associations, in particular the struggles for equality and the social unrests particularly in Western societies, which gave rise to the Summer of Love and the Flower Power hippie movement, as well as protests against the Vietnam War, racial segregation, and the inequality in traditional gender roles. Murakami instills his novel with the spirit of this era of change as he describes a past in which Japanese youths demonstrate an ability to live a moment to its fullest, to seize the opportunities presented to them, to break out of the microcosm of their hometown and to dream up a world of a more liberal future.

All events are told by the student Ken as he remembers them fifteen years later, i.e. when he is already thirty-two years old. The fact that Murakami is about the same age as Ken when the latter reminisces the past supports the notion that Ken is actually a personification of the young Murakami, and that the memories described in the novel are autobiographical, albeit fictionalized to some extent. Moreover, the novel’s afterword makes reference to Ken’s former peers and the lives they embarked on as adults, which indicates that the minor characters are also based on actual high school friends of Murakami.
The novel begins as follows:

Nineteen sixty-nine was the year student uprisings shut down Tokyo University. The Beatles put out The White Album, Yellow Submarine, and Abbey Road, the Rolling Stones released their greatest single, “Honkey Tonk Women,” and people known as hippies wore their hair long and called for love and peace. In Paris, De Gaulle resigned. The war in Vietnam continued. High school girls used sanitary napkins, not tampons.

That's the sort of year 1969 was, when I began my third and final year of high school. [...] My name is Kensuke Yazaki. People called me Kensuke, or Ken-san, or Ken-chan, or Ken-yan, or Ken-bo, or Ken-ken, but I asked my friends just to call me Ken. This was because I was a fan of the comic-book serial “Ken the Wolfboy.” (Sixty-Nine 7-8)

Thus, Ken is hero of his own story, which he tells in a humorous and sometimes exaggerated manner. He is not a wolf in sheep's clothing, but the reader soon understands he tends to distort the facts in order to embellish the truth about his rebellious high school days. Murakami gives emphasis to Ken's eccentric character by putting selected words in bold print. Already the first two chapters include a great number of these words and expressions, e.g.: Ken the Wolfboy, capitalist lackeys, Rimbaud's poetry, fox radio, college entrance, banned and confiscated, festivals, cherries, sensitive child. Hey, where's the toilet, the thinner girl, and Don't aim too high. Singing out these words may strike the reader as odd, yet they give insight into Ken's values and preferences and his need to stand out from the crowd. He is anti-authoritarian and needs outlets for his emotions, which he discovers in western music, film, literature and stage plays. Sports or organized school activities are subversive to him. However, in radical art and music he sees a chance for adequate expression. He puts more energy into his extracurricular projects than in studying for school, cons his way through life, acts as a great pretender, but usually gets his way because of his boundless determination and the tolerance of his peers. The reader wonders whether this teenager will continue his non-conformist and sometimes selfish attitude in adult life.

The manner in which Ken tells the story of his schemes reflects back on his character. He likes to quote classic authors of English and French literature, yet it soon becomes apparent that he reads them only superficially because he is more fascinated by slogans and actions that oppose the mainstream than by the depth of the Western thinkers' ideas. Youthful restlessness, impatience, eagerness and confusion are his key character traits; his active mind is fueled by the wish to challenge the authority of the establishment and to set his mark in the world.
Ken's closest friends are his classmates Iwase, Masugaki and Yamada, nicknamed Adama. Infused by the writings of Western thinkers and poets, they follow him in his ideological crusade to bring liberation from their supposedly oppressive teachers. He is not a born leader, but he believes in the legitimacy of his actions and instinctively inspires enthusiasm in his friends for his quirky ideas. The students are against the Vietnam War and oppose the Japanese support of American troops. However, since they cannot take direct action against the conflict or the presence of American soldiers in Sasebo, their institution and the people who show responsible for their education, not respected as authority figures but considered as the roots of a conservative and inherently unjust society, become their targets instead. To Ken, his teachers are narrow-minded, dangerous, their social status is undeserved, and they brainwash the students into becoming obedient citizens. In particular, the apparent dislike between Ken and the physical education instructor Aihara leads the youth to experience the school as an institution of subversion.

Most importantly, Ken intends to gain the attention of the school's prettiest females. Impress girls in hopes for their adoration leads the boys to come up with daring ideas; when Ken becomes infatuated with Kazuko Matsui, the loveliest girl at Northern High School, he does not hesitate to make a fool of himself and of others to win her heart. Ken has strong romantic feelings for Kazuko and affectionately nicknames her Lady Jane. Being his personal teenage dream and the object of his desires, he wants to cast her as the leading actress in his underground movie of which he is the director, and in a stage play penned by him. These projects, along with barricading the school, are his way of trying to impress Lady Jane.

On 19 July 1969, the day before summer vacation, Ken and a group of students – ominously called Vajra, which is a Sanskrit word for “thunderbolt” – put their plan into action. Late at night they barricade the school, put up a huge banner that proclaims “Power to the Imagination” (80), spray graffiti slogans such as “Smash the National Athletic Meet” (71) and “Fight the Good Fight” (72) on pillars, and to reinforce their statement of dissatisfaction one of the culprits defecates on the principal's desk. Their operation receives the intended public attention; however, on his way home one of the students is stopped by a police officer, becomes nervous and tells him about the vandalism. Consequently, Ken and others are investigated and temporarily expelled from school – which to them is a reward rather than a punishment.

In many respects Sixty-Nine attempts to catch the spirit of the Japanese youth in 1969 and the sense of rebellion that infused a whole generation. The
post World War II youth culture was influenced by Western cultures. This influence is a consistent theme in the novel; e.g., Ken and his friends refer to Arthur Rimbaud, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Claudia Cardinale, Alain Delon, Lyndon Johnson, Wes Montgomery, Led Zeppelin, Velvet Underground, Bob Dylan, Simon and Garfunkel, and many other western writers and artists.

Ken and Adama are much engaged with their influences:

[...] I found myself thinking about the power of culture.
"Hey, Adama, culture's sort of an awesome thing, don't you think?"
"Why?"
"Look at Iwase. If all this foreign culture had never come to Japan, he'd be a plain old button seller all his life — he wouldn't know about Led Zep or Verlaine or tomato juice or anything. It's sort of scary, isn't it?"
"Well, hell, you could say the same about me and you. You're just the son of a plain old schoolteacher, right?"
"Wrong. I'm the son of an artist." (155)

Although the students are inspired by foreign icons and ideals, the novel ultimately suggests that they must find their own identity, regardless of their imported role-models.

The students are well aware of the international anti-war movements, demonstrations, protests and street violence. While they are fascinated by the political movements and want to be part of them, they must fight their own battles because the epicenters of the upheavals are too far away to truly affect their small community. Since in their adolescent yearnings the students are unsure of their causes, they do not become radical enough to hurt anyone physically or to destroy property. Nevertheless, Ken's pranks, artistic performances to him, verge on being criminal acts.

Sixty-Nine appears to be autobiographic to some extent, but it is unclear as to how faithfully Murakami portrays the heydays of his high school years. Some of the escapades may have happened as they are told; others may be great embellishments or complete fabrications. While the story works on this intentional overlapping of fact and fiction, its forthright and emphatic language makes the novel a remarkably timeless text. Sixty-Nine also indicates that high school days come to an end for everyone, and that many of the friendships and ideals one establishes there are bond not to last. For a while Ken and Kazuko, now his girlfriend, go out together, but when he takes her to watch the movie In Cold Blood before they have a supposedly romantic picnic, their time together comes to an end, as does Ken's recount of his high school days. After the movie, the sensitive Kazuko indirectly questions Ken's attraction to the artistic and violent:
"I know there's cruelty in the world ... Vietnam, and things like, well, the Nazi concentration camps, but I don't see why they have to make movies about them. What's the point?"

I had no answer for that, though I understood what she was saying. What answer could you possibly have for a pair of fawn-like eyes asking you why people had to go out of their way to see something ugly or depraved? Kazuko Matsui was a gentle and beautiful girl raised in a loving environment. Maybe the world depicted in Capote's story was right next door, maybe it was necessary to take a good look at these things, but, in the end, what really mattered to her was, as she herself put it, "living life like the sound of Brian Jones's harpsichord."

We left the winter sea behind. We hadn't even eaten most of the sandwiches — let alone thought about having a kiss.

That's how 1969 ended for me. (186-187)

Ken realizes that despite Kazuko's great looks and gentle nature, they are not meant to be together, partly because of their different upbringing and interests, and because his youthful self-centeredness is obstructing the path to true love.

In his analysis of Sixty-Nine, Robert Ketcherside (1995) points to Ryu Murakami as a good example of a writer who was affected by American culture since his childhood, thus, while still being a distinct Japanese author, the themes and characters in Murakami's novels are evidence of American influence on Japan. Ketcherside sees the presence of jazz clubs and Ken's music festival modeled after Woodstock as two obvious examples of this cultural influence. Asked by Tokyo Journal about America's influence on Japan and on him personally as a writer, Murakami responded that the question is not whether this impact was negative or positive, but it is about his attraction to American culture, film, music and books. He also states that Japan is a "hysterical country" where it is rather easy to embrace American values or to be swayed to the extreme right of the political spectrum. Ketcherside believes that these social divisions are apparent today because some groups want to reinstate the emperor as a powerful figure, others welcome Western inspiration and presence, while yet another group advocates reforms of societal institutions according to American models. Thus, Ketcherside concludes:

Japan, with the clear sense of direction a century ago, took on Westernization in bottoms-up fashion; today, with the path less clear, Japanese society seems to be advancing randomly in the same toss-your-head-back, all-in-one-gulp fashion. Contemporary Japanese writers, such as Ryu Murakami with his attacks on social institutions and misguided social trends, are
attempting to remind the Japanese where they've been and point out to them where they should go in the future. (online)

Indeed, in Sixty-Nine and elsewhere Murakami shows his concerns for the Japanese youth. The novel suggests that social development is necessary and that change must come from within. In this sense, this is a timeless story that promotes universal social necessities: development of and advancement in all spheres of society, the right for the young generation to fight for its place in society, the need for mutual respect and sense of responsibility among all generations, and the understanding that foreign influence may be embraced while one's own culture is still to be understood and cherished.

In conclusion: Without ever becoming nostalgic, Sixty-Nine is a humorous and amusing account of a provincial Japanese town in the late 1960s and of the non-conformist spirit of the young generation that tries to break out. The article has shown that the novel idealizes adolescent actions to some extent, as Murakami gives the students the right to follow their emotions, impulses and recklessness since they are not punished for their misdeeds. The novel suggests that the nation's struggle to redefine its identity in the post World War II era led to conflicts between the generations, and that Western commercial and ideological imports considerably influenced the Japanese youth culture during a time of transition and unrest. Thus, Sixty-Nine does not romanticize an era that has long passed; it rather serves as a semi-fictional document to understand the events of 1969 from the point-of-view of a restless Japanese teenager who would later become one of Japan's most recognized writers and social critics.

Bibliography


