

Tsukuru and His Colours – Colouring the Identity in *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*

Aroma Delight Samson¹, D. Nalina Palin^{2*}

¹Research scholar (Reg. no.: 20221274012014), Department of English, St John's College, Palayamkottai, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli-627002, Tamil Nadu, India.

^{2*}Associate Professor of English, Department of English, St John's College, Palayamkottai, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli-627002, Tamil Nadu, India.

***Corresponding Author:** D. Nalina Palin

*Associate Professor of English, Department of English, St John's College, Palayamkottai, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli-627002, Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT

The novel mainly throws light on the titular character, Tsukuru Tazaki, who thinks that he has no colours, i.e., nothing remarkable about himself. He was a part of a group of high school friends and always feared that they would cut him off because he does not have anything special about himself to contribute to the group. After he moves to college, they cut him off without any explanations and that makes Tsukuru very depressed. He is affected by this incident, even after years, and so, his girlfriend Sara, makes him revisit the past so he could make peace and live in the present. When he revisits his old friends years later, he realises how oblivious he has been regarding his identity, the people around him, and that there are indeed colours to him. They throw light on how vital he had been to the group and also tell him why he had to be cut off. Tsukuru is gradually able to find the colourless in himself. This paper analyses the identity crisis of Tsukuru and he is able to resolve them to the better.

Keywords: identity, names, self-discovery, past, human relationships

The novel *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and his Years of Pilgrimage* throws light on human vulnerability. Murakami presents to the readers, characters who are relatable and human, through their quest for love, their helplessness, and insecurity, and that makes him significant in the postmodern world. Postmodern literature highlights the forlornness in the world around us and Murakami presents characters who are not very optimistic. Some of his characters are desolate but just accept the flow of life, without doing much to change their condition. Tsukuru Tazaki is one such character.

In his novel, *After Dark*, Murakami says "But consciousness or its absence is of no concern as long as the functions for sustaining life are maintained" (31). After experiencing a distressing abandonment from his group of high school friends who used to be very close to him, sixteen years ago, Tsukuru Tazaki just accepted the horrible fate and continued living his life, barely being able to make friends anymore. The separation initially hurt him very much that he wished he would die. He did not kill himself because he was indecisive on how to do it. "Perhaps he didn't commit suicide then because he couldn't conceive of a method that fit the pure and intense feeling he had toward death...If there had been a door within reach that led straight to death, he wouldn't have hesitated to push it open, without a second thought, as if it were just a part of ordinary life" (*Colorless* 1).

Tsukuru used to go to a high school in Nagoya where he had met his other four friends, Aka, Ao, Shiro and Kuro. These friends had last names that meant different colours. Aka's name was Akamatsu

which meant 'red pine', Ao's name was Oumi, which meant 'blue sea', Shiro's was Shirane, which meant 'white root' and Kuro's was Kurono, which meant 'black field.' These friends made their names a part of their identity and Tsukuru, not having any colour in his name, felt 'colourless' or as if he lacked an integral part of his identity.

Peer groups offer members of the group the opportunity to develop social skills such as empathy, sharing, and leadership. Peer groups can have positive influences on an individual, such as academic motivation and performance; however, they can also have negative influences...Susceptibility to peer pressure increases during early adolescence, and while peers may facilitate positive social development for one another, they may also hinder it. (Libretexs)

In the friend group, Tsukuru heavily felt the peer pressure. He always felt that he had nothing exceptional to contribute. Aka studied well, Ao was good in sports, Kuro was smart and witty, Shiro was so beautiful that every guy had a crush on her, and Tsukuru was average in everything. He felt he had no exceptional quality that would make the group stick with him. He was afraid that they would leave him. He even wondered if they relaxed when he was not around and did not throw him out of the group only because they wanted to be nice to him. Despite that fear, he felt comfortable when he was together along with them. When they got together, the group had an excellent harmony and everyone felt like they belonged there. "Tsukuru could see that they genuinely loved it when all five of them got together as a group. Like an equilateral pentagon, where all sides are the same length, their group's formation had to be composed of five people exactly – any more or any less wouldn't do" (*Colorless* 12).

Tsukuru's major fear came true one day. After he had gone to his college in Tokyo, he visited his friends in Nagoya often. But one day his friends abruptly cut him off. After Tsukuru's repeated calls, Ao called him and simply told him never to contact them again. The novel begins from the part where Tsukuru lives a monotonous routine, filled with depression. He lives the same friendless life until one day a junior in college named Haida takes a liking for him. Tsukuru soon finds a new friend in Haida and discovers that though he is not the exact replacement for the group of friends he lost, he still appreciated Haida being around. Haida stayed in Tsukuru's home, talked with him and sometimes cooked for him. He introduced him to his favourite music and shared with Tsukuru his philosophical ideas. But their relationship remained stagnant. Losing his best friends restricted Tsukuru from making efforts on anybody and Haida became aware that Tsukuru will not reciprocate his efforts. Haida was not a person who liked being tied to one place. He had told Tsukuru, "But I don't like to be tied down in one place. I want to be free- to go where I want, when I want, and be able to think whatever I want" (54). Finding Tsukuru to be not as free-spirited he was, Haida abandons him.

After getting over the depression that the abandonment by his group of friends had given him, Tsukuru represses any thought related to it and never consciously lets them out, believing in time to heal the wounds. "Freud held that the prime reason for neurosis is traumatic experiences, memories of which have been repressed but which nevertheless continue to affect behavior" (Howard 80). What Tsukuru did not realise was that this repression was affecting his other relationships. His first close relationship was with the group where each contributed something naturally to keep the group. After Tsukuru was out of the group, he did not try to find any alternatives to them or learn how to express emotions and hold someone onto him. His repressed trauma restrained him from becoming too close to somebody. Even later when he found women for sexual release, there was no emotional bonding. After Haida leaves him, Tsukuru does not have a memorable relationship with anyone until he meets Sara. Sara sees that he is emotionally restrained. She understands that in order to have a fulfilling relationship with Tsukuru, he needed to face his past first and make peace with it. While Tsukuru believed he had no unique identity to offer, Sara understood that his repressed emotions were repressing his identity. She becomes the one who helps Tsukuru start to see the 'colours' in his self-assumed 'colourless' identity. Charles says, "She can see ways in which Tsukuru's emotions are utterly blocked and suggests that the unresolved questions from the past are keeping him from being present in his current life" (142).

Sara makes Tsukuru revisit his past by tracing his friends. It is interesting to note that Tsukuru had taken no efforts to contact his friends or even find out why they brutally abandoned him sixteen years before. He is a kind of person who accepts things that come his way and lets them off when they leave. He lives with a pre-assigned notion about others and even himself, that he is not able to view things from

another perspective. Both Haida and Sara understand this to be his biggest fault. When Haida leaves him, he again makes no effort to trace him though he misses his presence in his life.

With Sara's persuasion, Tsukuru visits his old friends and that relieves him of his biggest doubt regarding why he was abandoned by them. He visits Ao first, who informs him that Shiro had accused him of raping her when she stayed at his place in Tokyo. He tells Ao that such a thing never happened. Ao confesses that though she was convincing at the beginning, her behaviours raised questions as time passed and he started doubting her accusation. This relieves a heavy burden off Tsukuru's mind. He visits Aka next who tells him that Shiro might have framed him because she would have had feelings for him. "Maybe Shiro secretly liked you. So, she was disappointed and angry with you for going off to Tokyo by yourself" (*Colorless* 158). He knew that Tsukuru was too simple-minded to recognize someone's feelings for him. He strengthens Tsukuru's identity by saying that he was the thread holding the group together, and after his exit, the group fell apart. "...you had your feet solidly planted on the ground, and that gave us a sense of security. ...after you left, we all sort of went our separate ways" (137). This gives a whole new dimension to Tsukuru's character. Tsukuru never thought of himself as having anything special to contribute to the group, let alone make their bond stronger. He is too surprised by the revelation of his character that he refuses to accept it.

Tsukuru's conversation with Aka throws light on how oblivious Tsukuru has been regarding the people around him. He was too stuck in his own perceptions and did not realise that it might not be entirely true. He failed to notice what others felt about him or even themselves. Aka's revelation that he is attracted to men and not women comes as a shock to Tsukuru. Despite being close with Aka once, Tsukuru was too blinded by his own perceptions to see the reality around him. If it was true that Shiro liked him like Ao said, he would not have been able to accept that because of his unpretentious perception of himself. Charles says, "Because his view of himself is so different than the view of those who know him well, neither he nor they are able to encounter the mismatch and remark on it until he meets Sara who invites him to break open the hard surface of his misunderstanding and dive more deeply into the facts of his life as they happened" (147).

After meeting Aka, Tsukuru leaves to Finland to meet Kuro. Sara has told him that Kuro will be able to provide him a better clarity on why Shiro framed him, being Shiro's female best friend. And indeed, she does. She tells Tsukuru that Shiro was too psychologically affected that it was impossible for her to keep both Tsukuru and Shiro in one place. She knew that Shiro's rape accusations were not true, but knowing she could save only Shiro or Tsukuru, she chose to save Shiro. She knew that Tsukuru was strong enough to take the mental toll that the abandonment would bring, and she was right.

I felt really bad for you, and believe me, I knew how cruelly I was treating you...But I had to help Yuzu recover. That had to be my highest priority. She had life-threatening issues she was dealing with, and she needed my help. So the only thing I could do was make you swim alone through the cold night sea. I knew you could do it. You were strong enough to make it. (240)

This conversation with Tsukuru solidifies the 'colour' in Tsukuru's self-assumed 'colourless' identity. Kuro, or Eri as she prefers to be called then, presents to Tsukuru a view that breaks all the notions he had about himself. Viewing himself as a person who was stable and level-headed had never occurred to him, but his other friends immensely believed that he was. Eri further reveals that she had a crush on him and that made it more difficult to part with him. Nevertheless, she did it. With this revelation, Tsukuru sees a side of himself he had never seen. Like *The Daily Observer* states, "This sense of emptiness and lack is reminiscent of Lacan's concept of the Real, which refers to the underlying, un-representable dimension of the psyche that lies beyond the realm of language and symbols" (Shahed). It was impossible for Tsukuru to form into a language, how much people around him valued him. He could not comprehend it when they tried to convey him that. His psyche was not aware of that reality. He barely imagined in high school that a person with nothing special in him could be an object of someone's crush. But Eri stresses that his identity was not a void. She attempts to make him view himself from her perspective. "You need to have courage and be confident in yourself. I mean- I used to love you, right? At one time I would have given myself to you. I would have done whatever you wanted me to do. An actual, hot-blooded woman felt that strongly about you. That's how valuable you are. You're not empty – not at all" (260).

Out of the people who knew Tsukuru, Sara is the only one who actively does something to change him. She attempts to remove what is blocking his flow of emotions. Eri understands this and advises

Tsukuru to hold on to her. She knows he needs Sara. Sara's actions are in contrast to Haida who leaves him after figuring out his emotional blockage. He understands that their relationship would lead them nowhere. Nevertheless, Haida metaphorically guides him. Talking about freedom of thought, he says, "Giving a natural life to logic. That's the core of free thought" (55). He further says, 'You shouldn't fear boundaries, but you also should not be afraid of destroying them. That's what is more important if you want to be free' (56). These lines are set in contrast to Tsukuru setting severe boundaries for himself. The boundaries restricted him from having a free flow of thoughts and unleashing his full potential. After Haida leaves, Sara is the one who makes him break his boundaries.

Talking with his old friends makes Tsukuru figure out how valuable he really is. It colours his colourless identity. The trauma of his past is solved and he gets a new clarity. This clarity makes him realise that he really needs Sara. So far, he had let people choose him and made no attempt to make them stay in his life, or even reconcile after they left him. He had blamed himself for the abandonment, but had done nothing to rectify it. His visit to the past breaks open his rigid self and he finally takes an effort to save a relationship; his relationship with Sara. He had seen her holding hands and laughing with another man and that makes him worry that she will leave him. The new emotional freedom he has gained makes him realise that Sara has her own freedom too, just like other people who left him did. He realises that there is no single perspective for everything, and that other people around him had always used their freedom according to their individual perspectives. Shiro had taken the freedom to accuse him of rape and break their group, Kuro had taken the freedom to cut him off from the group and let him survive by himself, Ao and Aka had taken the freedom to be silently swept away by Kuro's decisions and Haida had taken the freedom to leave him altogether. It was Sara's turn to take the freedom of accepting him or rejecting him. Tsukuru realises that all these freedoms were justifiable because of several individual perspectives. Something that barely makes sense to one person can make complete sense to another one. According to Charles,

This ability, to reflect on oneself from another perspective that is outside of oneself, is crucial to the ability to consider alternate meanings... That is the end point to which we come with Tsukuru Tazaki, the point at which he encounters his own choice and recognizes that Sara, too, will have to choose. Recognition of her freedom leaves him free to wait for her answer without feeling impossibly pressured by not knowing. That freedom, to accept the limits of what one can and cannot do, leaves one more free to live in the present moment rather than losing that moment under the weight of an impossible desire or regret. (147)

After his visit to the past, many things that were not clear to Tsukuru become clearer. After being parted from his friends, he had been having sexual dreams regarding Kuro and Shiro. This makes Tsukuru wonder if he had actually raped Shiro in some form. He understands that the repressed feelings stored in the unconscious had the capacity of giving his character a negative colour. He wonders, maybe the negative shade Shiro had thrown at his colourless identity were not totally false, as Murakami quotes Yeats in *Kafka on the Shore*, "In dreams begin responsibility" (141). In the end, he discovers the different colours in his self-assumed, colourless identity.

Tsukuru's friends make him realise how he was an indispensable part of the group that after his departure, the group shattered. They call him calm, level-headed, and composed who handled challenging things coming his way well. This paints a bright colour to his character and relieves him out of the burden of being colourless. Aka's assumption that Shiro might have been in love with her and Kuro's confession that she loved him solidifies his colours. The New York Times states, "there are moments of epiphany gracefully expressed, especially in regard to how people affect one another" (Smith). Tsukuru feels this epiphany. Aka also reminds him of how boldly he left Nagoya for Tokyo while the other friends decided to not leave the comfort of Nagoya. His mind being clear after visiting his friends, he runs various metaphors in his head and realises that as much as their group was holding them close, it was also restricting them. It was a kind of a bondage they would have not been able to carry forever. He theorises that Shiro decided to break the group because she realised this and it was too much for her to bear. His new knowledge about his past makes him want a better future for himself. He fears that Sara might leave him for a man she seemed happier with. Only this time, he tries to stop her from leaving by expressing how desperate he is for her. Though the novelist does not reveal if Sara consented to be with him in the end, the changed Tsukuru provides a hope

to the readers that he has become a person who will work better in enriching his future relationships, and will not dwell in the self-pity of being colourless.

Works Cited:

- Murakami, Haruki, *After Dark*. Trans. by Jay Rubin, New York:Vintage International, 2008
---. *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*. Trans. by Philip Gabriel, Vintage International, Vintage Books, a Division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2015.
- Charles, Marilyn. "Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage." *American Psychological Association*, 2016, psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/pap0000038. Accessed 02 Aug. 2020.
www.observerbd.com/news.php?id=417139 . Accessed 03 Oct. 2021.
- Howard, Robert W. *Learning and Memory: Major Ideas, Principles, Issues, and Applications*. Praeger, 1995.
- Libretexts. "Cultural and Societal Influences on Adolescent Development." *Social Sci LibreTexts*, Department of Education Open Textbook Pilot Project, the UC Davis Office of the Provost, the UC Davis Library, the California State University, 24 Sept. 2020.
- Smith, Patti. "Deep Chords: Haruki Murakami's 'Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage.'" *The New York Times*, 5 Aug. 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/08/10/books/review/haruki-murakamis-colorless-tsukuru-tazaki-and-his-years-of-pilgrimage.html . Accessed 02 Oct. 2021.