

Food, Self, And Expression: How Midori Uses Cooking To Shape Her Identity In *Norwegian Wood*

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This paper analyses the role of food as a medium of identity, self-expression, and emotional communication in Haruki Murakami's <i>Norwegian Wood</i>, with a specific focus on the character of Midori Kobayashi. Midori's culinary practices: self-taught, meticulous, and culturally informed: act as a lens through which her autonomy, resilience, and capacity for care are delineated. Drawing on food studies and identity theory, the analysis studies how cooking functions as both a life skill and a symbolic language that conveys emotion, cultural awareness, and relational intimacy. Through detailed textual analysis of key scenes, including her preparation of Kyoto-style meals and her habitual, rhythmic actions in the kitchen, the study shows that Midori's engagement with food is simultaneously practical, aesthetic, and emotional. It delineates how ordinary acts, such as cooking, can serve as tools for self-definition, which covers the gaps created by trauma, neglect, or emotional detachment. By situating Midori's culinary practices within the theoretical viewpoint of scholars such as Roland Barthes, Carole Counihan, Sidney Mintz, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, this paper illustrates that food operates as a site of agency and expression. At its heart, the study argues that Murakami positions cooking as a medium through which Midori asserts identity, nurtures intimacy, and transforms everyday life into a meaningful, embodied form of communication. Keywords: Food studies, culinary identity, Self-expression, Life skills, Emotional intimacy

INTRODUCTION

In literary studies, food has long transcended its literal role as sustenance to become a potent symbol of culture, emotion, and identity. Within the field of food studies, scholars such as Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss have explored how food operates as a language through which individuals and societies communicate meaning. Barthes notes that “food is a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviors”. It is not merely what one eats, but how one prepares and shares food that becomes a signifier of selfhood. In fiction, culinary acts often function as subtle expressions of emotion, social belonging, or resistance. In Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (1987), food occupies a deceptively quiet but powerful place in the unfolding of human intimacy and self-definition. Among the novel's central figures, Midori stands out as a character whose relationship with cooking reveals the intersection of care, autonomy, and self-expression. Her culinary practices, while seemingly domestic, acts as a language of self-making: a delineation of identity in a world often led by emotional silence and existential alienation. *Norwegian Wood* is set in 1960s and it follows Toru Watanabe, a young man who navigates love, loss, and loneliness amid Japan's changing social landscape. Through his relationships with two women: Naoko, introspective and fragile, and Midori, vibrant and emotionally transparent: Murakami explores the tension between repression and authenticity. The novel unfolds as a meditation on memory and the difficulty of forming genuine connections in a disoriented modern world. Within this emotional landscape, food becomes a quiet but recurring motif that reveals the emotional texture of everyday life. Midori's cooking scenes, though brief in number, show a sensorial and symbolic richness that contrasts sharply with Naoko's silence and Toru's passivity. The meals she prepares are acts of nourishment and acts of performative gestures that define her identity, assert self-reliance, and communicate affection. Murakami's deliberate detailing of these domestic scenes situates Midori as an individual capable of emotional fluency through food.

Murakami's fiction often depicts characters who struggle to articulate their inner worlds through conventional language. Food, therefore, becomes a form of silent communication: a medium that covers up the divide between the unsaid and the felt. Midori's cooking in *Norwegian Wood* exemplifies this phenomenon. Her approach to food is delineated by spontaneity, sensory engagement, and emotional clarity. In one scene, Toru describes her moving seamlessly between tasks: "Over here she tasted a boiled dish, and the next second she was at the cutting board, rat-tat-tatting... and before I knew it she had washed a pot she had finished using" (Murakami 121). The rhythm of her movements doesn't show domestic labor but a choreography of presence: an art of being fully alive in the moment. Unlike the mechanical or duty-bound associations often attached to women's cooking, Midori's culinary performance is a manifestation of her individuality and vitality. She does not cook to fulfil societal expectations or conform to gender norms but to express an inner sense of agency and creativity.

Her self-taught relationship with food reinforces this autonomy. Midori tells Toru that she learned to cook from a "huge cookbook" because her parents never provided meals for her and her sister: "I spent all my allowance money on pots, pans, and knives, determined to have the best materials possible". This revelation is very important. Cooking, for Midori, is not inherited cultural practice but self-fashioned discipline: a learned language of care and survival. In the absence of familial nourishment, she transforms deprivation into creation. Her culinary knowledge, therefore, signifies a process of self-education and self-reliance. From a food studies perspective, this act embodies what anthropologist Carole Counihan calls the "politics of the body," wherein food preparation becomes a site of self-definition and empowerment. Midori's cooking, placed in the broader modernist malaise of Murakami's Japan, acts as a response to alienation: it becomes her way of reclaiming control and constructing a self in a world of emotional uncertainty.

Moreover, the food scenes in *Norwegian Wood* are embedded within Murakami's exploration of intimacy and emotional care. Midori's meals are presented as everyday enactments of affection. When she prepares Kyoto-style dishes for Toru, the story lingers on sensory detail: the smell, texture, and presentation: revealing the intimacy embedded in these acts: "She laid out the delicate Kyoto-style cooking... Toru hungrily began eating". The specificity of "Kyoto-style" cooking depicts more than culinary sophistication; it shows regional rootedness, aesthetic refinement, and emotional sincerity. Through such careful description, Murakami transforms Midori's meal into an edible story that communicates tenderness and attention. In a novel dominated by themes of loss and mental fragility, these culinary gestures are moments of affirmation. Midori's food is a language of life and it acts as a contrast to the silence and despair surrounding Naoko's world.

From an identity-theoretical standpoint, Midori's culinary agency also resists cultural homogenisation. Japan in the 1960s, as Murakami's fiction subtly indicates, was a society caught between tradition and Western modernity. Food, as Barthes reminds us, operates as a "sign of communication" shaped by these cultural tensions. Midori's cooking blends traditional Japanese sensibilities with self-taught improvisation: it reflects Murakami's own narrative technique, which synthesises Japanese realism and Western existentialism. Her approach to food, then, becomes a metaphor for hybrid identity: she negotiates the boundaries of convention and individual desire. Naoko's fragile subjectivity collapses under social and psychological pressure, but on the other hand, Midori performs a form of resistance through her everyday acts of creation. Cooking, in her hands, is a declaration of self-containment: a refusal to be consumed by grief or conformity.

It is significant that Toru's emotional growth is catalysed by these simple domestic interactions. Midori's meals bring him into contact with the materiality of life: the warmth of food, the sound of chopping, the rhythm of care. In a story which is filled with themes of death, these sensory details anchor both characters in the living present. Murakami's aesthetic of food here aligns with Roland Barthes's notion of "everyday mythologies," where ordinary acts gain symbolic depth through repetition and ritual. The scenes of cooking and eating create a counterpoint to the novel's existential melancholy which illustrates how food can delineate hope and continuity.

At a broader level, Murakami's use of food connects with what literary critic Anne Bower calls the "culinary narrative": stories where "food serves as both metaphor and material practice for articulating personal and cultural identity". Midori's meals operate very precisely. They tell the story of a woman who reconstructs herself through the sensual and material engagement of cooking. Each dish she prepares becomes a form of narrative agency: a way of telling her story without words. Toru, as the receiver of these meals, becomes both audience and participant in her self-expression. She invites him into a relationship based on shared experience through food rather than verbal confession.

What distinguishes Murakami's treatment of food from other literary traditions is his subtle detachment from gender essentialism. While women's cooking has often been read through the lens of domestic confinement, Murakami reconfigures it as an existential art. Midori's cooking, though coded as feminine by social convention, is not portrayed as an obligation but as a voluntary expression of her being. It is a life skill, not a gender role: a way of "making meaning out of the everyday," as Michel de Certeau suggests in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (xix). Murakami's narrative thus allows for a gender-neutral reading of cooking as a creative, ethical, and emotional act. The kitchen, often a symbol of restriction, becomes a space of creation and self-realization.

In this sense, *Norwegian Wood* participates in a broader conversation within contemporary food studies about the intersection of food, memory, and subjectivity. Scholars such as Deborah Lupton argue that "food is central

to our sense of self: what we eat, how we eat, and with whom we eat define our identities in powerful ways". Midori's culinary world encapsulates this idea vividly. Her cooking restores a sense of continuity and coherence in a fragmented world. Through taste, texture, and care, she reconstructs both her past and her emotional landscape. Each act of preparing food becomes an attempt to nourish herself and others in a culture of emotional scarcity.

At the end, Midori's cooking acts as Murakami's quietest yet most profound critique of emotional detachment. It stands for a mode of being-in-the-world that privileges connection, creativity, and care. Where Toru and Naoko's relationship dissolves into silence and loss, Midori's relationship with food: and through it, with Toru: becomes an act of resistance against despair. Her culinary gestures show what words cannot: that the self can be shaped and expressed through everyday rituals of making, tasting, and sharing. In Midori's hands, cooking becomes a language of authenticity, a means of self-definition in a disenchanted world.

Thus, Norwegian Wood transforms food from background detail to central metaphor, revealing how the simple act of cooking can articulate complex human truths. Midori's meals signify her capacity for care and also her assertion of selfhood amid emotional and cultural dislocation. In a novel preoccupied with memory and mortality, her food stands as a sensuous affirmation of life: a reminder that self-expression can emerge from the ordinary and that identity, like cooking, is both a practice and a performance.

OBJECTIVES

- To examine how Midori's cooking in Norwegian Wood acts as a means of self-expression and identity formation.
- To interpret food as a medium of emotional communication and care in Murakami's narrative.
- To analyze how cooking, presented as a gender-neutral life skill, reflects autonomy and resilience.
- To explore how Murakami uses food symbolism to connect individuality, intimacy, and cultural identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Food studies have come out as a dynamic interdisciplinary field, which links cultural anthropology, sociology, and literary theory to explore the symbolic dimensions of eating and cooking. Foundational scholars such as Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss conceptualized food as a language and a social code. In *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*, Barthes proposes that "food is a system of communication" through which individuals and society's express identity, values, and relationships. Similarly, Lévi-Strauss's "culinary triangle" situates raw, cooked, and rotten food as symbols of culture's transformation of nature. These frameworks have shaped how literary scholars interpret the act of cooking as a semiotic process, allowing characters to "speak" through taste, texture, and ritual. Within fiction, food often functions as a narrative device that externalizes emotional states, social hierarchies, and the intimate politics of care.

In the context of literary food studies, several critics have studied how culinary practices operate as extensions of selfhood and creativity. Carole Counihan's *the Anthropology of Food and Body* depict food as a "central medium of self-definition and cultural reproduction," which emphasizes its role in constructing agency and belonging. Deborah Lupton, in *Food, the Body, and the Self*, similarly argues that food choices depict the negotiation between individual and collective identity, that acts as a symbolic mirror of the self. Anne Bower's *Recipes for Reading* expands this discourse by introducing the notion of "culinary narrative," where food preparation and consumption become narrative structures that shape meaning. These theoretical insights provide the groundwork for understanding how cooking scenes in literature function as performative acts of identity-making rather than domestic trivialities.

Japanese literary scholarship has also increasingly engaged with food as a motif that bridges modernity, memory, and emotion. As Japan transitioned through rapid industrialization in the postwar period, writers began using food to reflect social dislocation and the search for authenticity. Food in Japanese fiction often acts as an anchor to memory or a symbol of human connection amidst alienation. Scholars such as Katarzyna J. Cwiertka and Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney have noted that the modernization of food practices in Japan parallels transformations in subjectivity. Ohnuki-Tierney observes that food is "deeply implicated in the politics of identity," and it also functions as a site where cultural continuity and individuality intersect. Within this cultural framework, Murakami's representation of food aligns with Japan's late-twentieth-century preoccupation with global hybridity and the erosion of traditional communal structures.

Haruki Murakami's fiction, though often examined through postmodern, existential, and magical realist lenses, has recently become a rich subject for food-centered analysis. Critics have noted his frequent use of food imagery as a stabilizing presence in otherwise surreal or emotionally detached worlds. In novels such as *Kafka on the Shore* and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, cooking scenes punctuate moments of introspection, grounding characters in tactile, sensory experience. According to Yuko Chikada, Murakami's food scenes offer "a language of care and order in an otherwise fragmented universe". These acts of preparing and sharing meals become metaphors for emotional repair and human connection. Thus, Murakami's culinary symbolism often works against the alienation that defines his protagonists, and it indicates that food offers both physical and psychological nourishment.

In *Norwegian Wood*, Murakami departs from his typical surrealism to present a realist, emotionally intimate plot. Scholars such as Matthew Strecher and Jay Rubin have examined the novel's exploration of loss, sexuality, and the alienated postwar self. However, relatively few studies have addressed the significance of food and domestic life within this work. Midori's cooking, while seemingly peripheral, represents a radical site of self-expression within Murakami's minimalist aesthetic. As an independent and emotionally direct woman, Midori uses cooking as an assertion of autonomy which is opposite to using it as a means of domestic confinement. Her culinary practices are self-taught and self-motivated, and it comes from neglect transformed into care. This aligns with Carole Counihan's notion that food labor can "delineate both survival and self-creation," and it places Midori's kitchen as a space of empowerment.

More than that, food in *Norwegian Wood* functions as a gender-neutral medium of communication, and it resists the essentialist readings that associate cooking solely with femininity. Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* provides a useful theoretical lens here: he conceptualizes everyday acts: such as cooking: as "tactics" of creativity through which individuals reclaim agency in structured social systems. Midori's self-directed cooking exemplifies such tactical creativity. Her spontaneous, rhythmic movements in the kitchen shows presence, vitality, and emotional intelligence. This interpretation contrasts sharply with Naoko's withdrawal and silence, which suggests that food operates as a form of embodied expression that restores connection in a world defined by loss.

The intersection of food and identity in Murakami's work has also been discussed by scholars like Tomiko Yoda, who emphasizes the role of affect and the body in contemporary Japanese literature. Yoda argues that Murakami's characters often seek meaning through sensual, everyday experiences rather than through ideology or social engagement. Midori's culinary self-expression fits this pattern: through her tactile engagement with food, she constructs an identity based on immediacy and sensory presence. Her meals for Toru communicate intimacy through the act of care, which reverbs Barthes's assertion that food is "a signifier of love and attention" within a shared cultural code.

Another relevant body of research connects food with memory and affect. In works such as Lisa Heldke's *Exotic Appetites* and Susan Leonardi's *Recipes for Reading*, scholars highlight how food operates as a metaphor for emotional experience, particularly in moments of grief or transformation. Midori's cooking in *Norwegian Wood* can be understood through this framework as an attempt to repair emotional discontinuity: both her own and Toru's: through material gestures of nourishment. Each meal becomes an act of emotional translation, where unspoken feelings find form through taste and texture.

In spite of growing interest in food in global literature, Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* remains under-explored in this regard. Most critical attention has focused on its themes of mental illness, sexuality, and modern alienation, leaving its domestic imagery overlooked. This paper addresses that gap by reading Midori's cooking as a form of narrative selfhood: a food-based discourse of autonomy, intimacy, and identity. By situating Murakami within the larger theoretical currents of food studies and cultural semiotics, the analysis reframes *Norwegian Wood* as a novel where culinary gestures challenge alienation and restore meaning to human connection.

METHODOLOGY

This paper uses a qualitative, interpretive methodology which is based on a close textual analysis of Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*. It focuses on scenes in which Midori engages with food and uses cooking as an expression of identity and care. Based on theoretical perspectives on food studies and cultural semiotics: particularly Roland Barthes's notion of food as a system of communication and Carole Counihan's view of food as a site of self-construction: the study examines how culinary practices function as a language of selfhood within the novel. Rather than relying on quantitative or historical data, this research prioritizes a hermeneutic reading of narrative detail, symbolism, and characterization. The analysis integrates secondary scholarly perspectives on food, gender-neutral domesticity, and emotional labor to locate Midori's culinary self-expression within the broader discourse of modern Japanese individualism. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the paper aims to demonstrate how acts of cooking transcend mere domestic function, becoming aesthetic and existential affirmations of self in Murakami's literary world.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (1987) is often celebrated for its exploration of loss, sexuality, and emotional alienation. Yet, below its melancholic surface, the novel reveals another layer of meaning through its sensory attention to food and domestic acts. Among its cast of introspective and wounded characters, Midori Kobayashi emerges as one of the most dynamic: her relationship with cooking becomes a window into her emotional world and her process of constructing identity. Through her culinary actions, Midori nurtures aspects of care, independence, and resilience that words often fail to capture. Within the framework of food studies and identity theory, her cooking operates as a form of self-expression, emotional labor, and existential resistance as a language of its own.

FOOD AS LANGUAGE AND EMBODIED EXPRESSION

Roland Barthes famously suggested that food functions as “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages”. In *Norwegian Wood*, this theory takes life in Midori’s kitchen. Murakami’s description of her cooking: “Over here she tasted a boiled dish, and the next second she was at the cutting board, rat-tat-tatting, then she took something out of the fridge and piled it in a bowl, and before I knew it she had washed a pot she had finished using:” presents food as a semiotic performance. The rhythmic sound of “rat-tat-tatting” transforms the act of cooking into a visual and auditory spectacle: a kind of choreography that conveys her vitality.

Midori’s body language while cooking communicates her confidence, spontaneity, and affection far more eloquently than dialogue could. Her food preparation becomes what Michel de Certeau might call a “tactic of everyday life,” in which the ordinary act of cooking turns into an assertion of selfhood. The kitchen becomes Midori’s stage: a site of creation and freedom. Every gesture of tasting, chopping, and washing is a word in her culinary language which expresses the harmony between her inner emotions and outer actions.

CULINARY SELF-RELIANCE AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Midori’s approach to cooking is not inherited but self-taught which is born out of necessity and emotional deprivation. She confides in Toru: “I bought a huge cookbook and taught myself how to make everything in it. I spent all my allowance money on pots, pans, and knives, determined to have the best materials possible.” This confession reveals that cooking is not a skill passed down through familial tradition but an act of personal determination. Her parents’ emotional absence forced her into early self-reliance, and through cooking she reclaims both control and dignity.

Carole Counihan’s insight that “food is a vehicle of self-expression, an arena for creativity and performance, and a medium through which individuals assert control over their lives” perfectly delineates Midori’s case. Her culinary competence represents not domestic servitude but autonomy. The tools she buys: the pots, pans, and knives: symbolize her decision to craft her own sense of stability. Her food-making, therefore, signifies not just nourishment but the creation of identity from emotional scarcity.

This act of self-taught mastery subtly disrupts gender expectations. Cooking, often socially assigned to women as domestic duty, becomes for Midori a gender-neutral life skill, a practical art of survival and self-definition. Her self-training reflects modern individualism rather than conformity. In a rapidly urbanizing Japan, where emotional detachment and cultural transition were shaping youth identity, Midori’s kitchen becomes a metaphorical space for building meaning amidst fragmentation.

FOOD, MEMORY, AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY

Food in Murakami’s fiction often carries traces of nostalgia and longing. In *Norwegian Wood*, Midori’s culinary moments are touched with both personal and cultural memory. When Murakami writes, “She laid out the delicate Kyoto-style cooking. Toru hungrily began eating,” the description shows sensory pleasure and also the symbolic weight of Japanese culinary heritage. Kyoto-style cuisine, known for its refinement and restraint, evokes a sense of aesthetic mindfulness: an awareness of harmony and impermanence central to Japanese identity.

This choice is significant. Even though Midori is self-taught, her decision to prepare Kyoto-style dishes links her to a deeper cultural consciousness. As Sidney Mintz observes, “Food choices and eating habits reveal distinctions of age, sex, status, culture, and even occupation”. Midori’s cuisine thus covers up her individual expression with national identity. The refined simplicity of Kyoto-style cooking mirrors her emotional precision and intuitive balance between independence and care. Her food becomes a cultural language through which she reconnects to roots that her chaotic upbringing denied her.

FOOD AS EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION AND INTIMACY

Midori’s cooking also functions as a medium of love and emotional communication. Her willingness to cook for Toru, even when she is busy, shows her genuine affection. Food becomes her most authentic form of dialogue. Through meals, she extends comfort, warmth, and understanding: elements often missing from Toru’s relationships with other characters.

This emotional communication through food aligns with Lisa Heldke’s idea of cooking as “a reflective practice, a way of knowing the world and one’s place within it”. Midori’s cooking allows her to know both herself and Toru. When she cooks for him, she is not merely feeding him but reaching across emotional distance to connect. The act of sharing a meal becomes an intimate gesture that replaces the language of confession or romantic declaration.

Her care, however, is not self-effacing. Unlike traditional depictions of women’s culinary labor, Midori’s acts of feeding are chosen and not imposed. Her cooking is neither performative domesticity nor servitude it is voluntary, expressive, and free from gendered obligation. Cooking, in her hands, becomes a human art a life skill that transcends gender boundaries. Through food, Midori practices a form of equality; her nurturing of Toru is balanced by her insistence on emotional reciprocity.

COOKING AS EXISTENTIAL RESISTANCE

Murakami's fictional universe often depicts characters who retreat from the world into silence or death. Naoko, for instance, portrays the tragic paralysis of trauma. In contrast, Midori's relationship to food represents an act of existential defiance. Her immersion in the tangible, sensory world chopping vegetables, tasting broth, washing pots: anchors her to life. While others in the novel drift toward nihilism, Midori resists despair through the material act of creation.

Claude Lévi-Strauss's "culinary triangle" (raw, cooked, rotted) offers a useful metaphor here. Midori's progression from emotional chaos to self-composure mirrors the movement from raw to cooked a transformation of disorder into culture, of instinct into expression. Her cooking becomes an act of ordering the self, turning emotional pain into harmony. Each meal symbolizes an attempt to bring coherence to life's fragmentation which makes the kitchen a sacred space of renewal.

In this sense, food embodies Murakami's broader theme of finding meaning in the mundane. Midori's meals are small rituals of survival, everyday affirmations that resist the novel's pervasive melancholy. Her ability to engage fully with physical experience: taste, smell, texture: suggests her capacity to remain alive to the world when others retreat from it.

CULINARY PERFORMANCE AS EMOTIONAL DEPTH

Midori's character is a mixture of spontaneity and sincerity, and Murakami often uses her culinary acts to reveal this complexity. When Toru observes her in the kitchen, the narrative pace slows and it allows the readers to ponder over sensory detail the clatter of utensils, the aroma of food, the rhythm of her movement. These scenes of cooking become spaces where emotion is depicted and enacted.

Food functions here as a performance of feeling. Her meticulous handling of ingredients, her insistence on good tools, and her care in presentation all signify emotional depth and attentiveness. Her actions tell a story of self-respect and generosity. Cooking, for Midori, is both communication and confession: a way to articulate what remains unspoken between her and Toru.

In this context, food becomes a story. Each meal she prepares is a micro-story: a tangible expression of her struggle to balance care for others with care for herself. Her determination to cook well reverberates her desire for authentic relationships built on sincerity and warmth. In contrast to Toru's emotional uncertainty, Midori's gestures are clear and grounded, which provides structure to the emotional chaos around her.

GENDER-NEUTRAL CARE AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Murakami's depiction of Midori breaks from earlier Japanese literary traditions where cooking symbolized feminine servitude. As scholar Nancy Stalker notes, postwar Japanese media often idealized women as "guardians of the household through cooking and domestic order". Midori's kitchen, however, is a space of self-expression, not duty. Her culinary practice is neither traditional nor modern: it is personal and adaptive.

More importantly, Murakami frames cooking as a gender-neutral act of care. Toru's reaction to Midori's food is not one of patriarchal expectation but of quiet gratitude and wonder. Their shared meals signify emotional reciprocity rather than hierarchy. Cooking, therefore, emerges as a universal human gesture one that symbolises the ethical act of feeding and being fed, giving and receiving.

This framing also aligns with contemporary understandings of food as a life skill rather than a gendered role. Midori's confidence in the kitchen, and her refusal to treat cooking as servitude, redefines nourishment as an act of autonomy. Through her, Murakami challenges inherited stereotypes and portrays care as a form of mutual emotional literacy.

FOOD AS CONNECTION BETWEEN BODY AND SOUL

Throughout *Norwegian Wood*, Murakami juxtaposes the body's appetites with the soul's longing. Midori's food covers up this divide. Her cooking unites sensory pleasure with emotional authenticity, and it restores wholeness to a fractured self. In a novel marked by emotional detachment, food becomes the most grounded form of intimacy.

When Toru eats Midori's food: described in "delicate Kyoto-style cooking": the act transcends nourishment; it becomes communion. The meal replaces the verbal with the visceral. This is where Murakami's existential philosophy finds its gentlest articulation: meaning is found not in grand ideals but in small, mindful acts of care.

David Sutton's idea that cooking connects "the self with others across time and space" connects deeply here. Midori's meals link her past deprivation, her present affection, and her imagined continuity of love and belonging. Her cooking mediates between memory and hope. In feeding Toru, she reclaims her capacity to give and to feel: a small but profound act of self-healing.

SYNTHESIS: MIDORI'S CULINARY IDENTITY AS SELFHOOD

Across *Norwegian Wood*, Midori's relationship with food delineates three crocheted areas of focus: autonomy, connection, and resilience. Cooking becomes a way of narrating her life story: each recipe acts as a statement of identity, each meal serves as an act of meaning-making. Through food, she negotiates the tension between emotional need and self-sufficiency.

Her culinary practice delineates the broader concerns of food studies: how eating, cooking, and sharing construct identity in social and psychological terms. Midori's food is simultaneously material and symbolic, practical and poetic. It is her language of being: a language through which she shapes her own narrative in contrast to Murakami's more passive or self-destructive figures.

Therefore, Midori's cooking embodies what might be called culinary consciousness: the awareness that care, creation, and identity are interconnected. Her meals transform emotional scarcity into abundance. Through the textures of food, she reclaims her agency, restores intimacy, and grounds her humanity in the tangible acts of everyday life. In a world where so much is obscure, her kitchen remains a sanctuary of meaning: a place where the self, through food, learns to endure.

CONCLUSION

In *Norwegian Wood*, Haruki Murakami knits themes of love, loss, and identity with the seemingly mundane act of cooking, and it shows how food functions as a grave medium of self-expression and emotional communication. Midori Kobayashi, through her culinary practices, exemplifies how ordinary acts can carry extraordinary significance, and that acts as a point of view to understand both personal identity and relational dynamics. Her cooking is not merely a functional task but a deliberate, expressive act that communicates care, affection, and autonomy, and it places her as an agent of her own life within the emotionally complex world of the novel.

Midori's self-taught mastery of cooking delineates the role of agency and resilience in shaping identity. Her confession that she purchased cookbooks and kitchen tools to teach herself demonstrates her determination to create a sense of self-sufficiency in response to parental neglect. This self-reliance transforms cooking into a practice of empowerment, aligning with Carole Counihan's observation that food can be "a medium through which individuals assert control over their lives". Cooking thus emerges as a site of personal authorship: a space where Midori negotiates her independence while she nurtures her capacity to care for others.

Food also functions as a medium for emotional intimacy. Murakami's attention to detail: such as the description of Kyoto-style dishes: links culinary practice to cultural memory and personal expression. Sharing meals with Toru Watanabe allows Midori to communicate feelings that words alone cannot capture, and that creates relational bonds grounded in care, attentiveness, and presence. Her culinary gestures operate as acts of emotional labor, yet they remain voluntary and gender-neutral, which emphasises that nourishment is a human skill and an avenue for authentic connection rather than a prescriptive duty.

More than that, Midori's cooking can be interpreted as a form of existential resistance. In a story that depicts grief, detachment, and mortality, her engagement with food affirms life and restores coherence to fragmented experience. Each meal she prepares transforms emotional and material rawness into order, and that reverbs Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of the "culinary triangle" and symbolises her negotiation between chaos and self-definition. Cooking becomes both an aesthetic and ethical act, and it asserts that care, creativity, and presence can counteract despair and alienation.

By and large, Midori's culinary practices delineate the intersection of identity, culture, and emotional expression. Through the point of view of food studies and identity theory, her cooking comes out as a deliberate articulation of selfhood: an interplay of autonomy, emotional intelligence, and cultural awareness. Murakami uses Midori's engagement with food to show that ordinary human acts, when performed with attention and care, can communicate profound truths about individuality and relationality. The study of Midori's culinary identity reinforces the broader understanding that food is sustenance for the body and also nourishment for the self and the soul, which delineates how literature can reveal the intricate ways in which life, love, and identity are enacted through the everyday.

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