



# Postmodern Perspectives of Alienation in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*

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## ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

Haruki Murakami's uncanny narratives generally acknowledge the immeasurable. They are concerned with the desolate situation experienced by the individuals. Murakami makes the reader grasp into a pristine world of loneliness and existential crisis by infusing the idea of mystery, magic and Japanese mythology. Worth saying, *Norwegian Wood* is a burning example bearing the testimony of postmodern alienation. In this context, this paper attempts at critically analysing the novel not only as a nostalgic story of loss and burgeoning sexuality, but also as a reflection on the theme of loneliness in destitute psychology of the characters which leads to identity crisis. The portrayal of loneliness is depicted through the life of Toru Watanabe and Naoko. The experience of isolation due to the death of close ones leads to hopelessness and craving for solitude. As a result, the different facets of loneliness i.e. Toru's intimate loneliness; Midori's relational loneliness; and collective loneliness are reflected in Naoko's character. The backdrop of all these characters may differ, but every time, they wind-up alone denoting to the resentful veracity of life that everyone is lonely at the end of the day. The account of youth's passionate love of Toru and Naoko leads to loneliness and depression which affects the development of their mental health. Murakami takes hold of an unconnected path and vocalize individual perspective of loneliness and loss fabricating an exceptional world stimulated by his own distinctive form of magic realism. In order to obtain a comprehensive outlook of loneliness, Lars Sevensen's *A Philosophy of Loneliness* has been taken as a reference.

**Key Words:** loneliness, existential crisis, psychology, resentful veracity, magic realism

## 1. Introduction

As one of the most celebrated writers of our times, Haruki Murakami (1949- ) always comes up with exclusive ideas of surrealist stories. Born in 1949 in Japan, he suffered several tragedies like the World Wars, gas attack, earthquakes and the atomic bomb disasters in Nagasaki and Hiroshima. His writings disclose the individualistic perspectives along with the uncanny ideas about the darkest side of human being by employing magic realism which is deeply encrypted with psychological notes of many facets. According to Holmes (2017), "What stands out in Murakami's field is the staggering loneliness of his men. He understands a world of deep feeling among people who can't find words and images to match it." (*Post and Courier*, 3). His first novel *Hear the Wind Sing* (1979) won the Gunzon Literature prize. This is followed by his other best novels like *Norwegian Wood* (1987), *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1994), *Kafka on the Shore* (2002) and *1Q84* (2009). Commenting on Murakami, Ōe (1994) states, "...the role of literature, insofar as man is obviously a historical being, is to create a model of a contemporary age which encompasses past and future, a model of the people living in that age as well." [*The Essence of Japanese Mind* 9 (Murakami) (Murakami) (Murakami)]. As his only realistic novel, *Norwegian Wood* (2000), is a sensation. Translated from the original version entitled *Noruei no Mori* (1987), the novel reveals a tangled love story which is embedded from the demise of the precious one. The novel is an unspoken expression of the psychological complication of modern civilization which portrays the loss of the loved one which is heartily connected to the burgeoning sexuality and alienation. The main characters are seen to be captivated in everyday life, experiencing the issues such as depression, alienation, insomnia and many other disorders. It is a true depiction of Murakami's 'normal' characters i.e. the

misanthrope who detaches themselves from the humankind. *Dil* (2007) is of the opinion that Murakami's writings often relate to the theme of journey to find self-identity and meaning of life which is used to liberate oneself from alienation. The idea of alienation is one of the most important aspects of Murakami's novel. In Murakami's time, humankind has moved into postmodernism- human disarray is an indispensable for a series of deconstructive missions. Thus, Murakami's characters have a serene but negative attitude towards death when they find their life unworthy of living.

## 2. Postmodern Alienation

Svendsen (2017) says regarding this that:

...almost all I thought I knew about loneliness proved false. I thought more men than women were lonely, and that lonely people were more isolated than others. I assumed that the significant increase in the number of single dwellers would notably impact the number of lonely individuals. I also believed that loneliness, despite being a subjective phenomenon could be better understood in the context of social surroundings than individual disposition. (Svendsen *A Philosophy of Loneliness* 17).

The idea of alienation discovers a specific kind of psychology which involves an intricate detachment between a self and other that is in fact inseparable. It criticizes the incomprehensible human existence, particularly in the modern world, where the literature also depicts their misery and affliction of separation. Commonly related to the contemporary urban life style, alienation becomes a recurring theme in today's literature, especially in Haruki Murakami's works such as *A Wild Sheep Chase*, *Dance Dance Dance*, *Norwegian Wood* and *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki*. Alienation is a major theme of human condition in the contemporary epoch. According to Kaufman (1970), "To claim that a person is alienated is to claim that his relation to something else has certain features which result in avoidable discontent or loss of satisfaction." (Kufman 3)

## 3. Literature Review

Miah's (2020) opinion is found relevant in this regard as it discusses Durkheim's egoistic suicidal drive associated with Naoko's psychological trauma that drives her towards committing suicide who is an impeccable embodiment of psycho-social dystopia in Japanese youth. Similarly, Priya (2019) explores the subjectivity of main characters. Murakami's characters are to be free from the structures that bound them which do not always come true. Murakami can group the troubles of a vast world and still mind a few precious details. Kurniawan(2018) explores individual's mental health when he/she leaved die by people's closest. Senses of loneliness, frustration, displacement have been depicted within *Norwegian Wood* Novel by Haruki Murakami. It is noticed that the researchers have so far focused on the psychological trauma, subjectivity and individual psychological perspectives. However, the present paper forces on one of the major themes of the novel that is the alienation effect due to the loss of dear ones.

## 4. Alienation in Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*

The theme which slices across the novel of Haruki Murakami is alienation. Murakami's protagonist is a study of psychic alienation due to loss of closed ones. Alienation may make man indifference to social values or morale, thus it creates social discrepancies. It also leads to estrangement and loss or lack of sympathy towards others. The experience of isolation due to the death of close ones leads to hopelessness and craving for solitude. *Norwegian Wood* exhibits the belief of dependence and independence among characters. Doi Takeo, a Japanese psychologist, refers to this sort of dependence as *amae* (Dil, 2016). *Amae* is firmly connected to the novel's three major aspects: suicide, sexuality, and alienation. In that case, suicide is a form of reaching the real; alienation is a form of escape from the reality, while sexuality is a form of exploitation, growing up, and healing. As alienation is a form to escape from the reality the protagonist Toru Watanabe struggles to deal with the death of his close friend Kizuki. Toru's sense of alienation emanates directly from a negative sequence of events that the novel opens with. While Toru is similar to some of the Murakami's other characters, his depressed and melancholy attitude appears more severe:

The night Kizuki died, however, I lost the ability to see death (and life) in such simple terms. Death was not the opposite of life. It was already here, within my being, it had always been here, and no struggle would permit me to forget that. When it took the seventeen-year old Kizuki that night in May, death took me as well. (*Norwegian Wood* 25).

This forlornness that Toru feels is brought on by the fact that he is alienated from his friends. The death of Kizuki became a central part of his life forever and the worldview which he formed by the desire, is to maintain a distance from other people so as not to get hurt again. His isolation feels numb and sad when he encounters a dying man in a hospital; he is able to connect with him. As a result, Toru is never fully committed to anything:

in his relationships with Naoko and Midori, he struggles with guilt and indecision as he's torn between his love for both of them. Kizuki's death opens an empty hole in Watanabe's mind, causing him to be stunned and lost in the world: "In the ten months between Kizuki's death and my exams, I was unable to find a place for myself in the world around me." (*Norwegian Wood* 30).

Naoko's character can be described as excessive individualistic or introverted, where Toru says about Naoko in the initial speculations of the novel:

I wonder if she was trying to convey something to me, something she could not put into words – something prior to words that she could not grasp within herself and which therefore had no hope of ever turning into words. (*Norwegian Wood* 162).

She cannot identify herself with the society as she has lost her beloved Kizuki and lovely elder sister and gets cynical about life and society. Naoko is an indicator of the youth and death to Watanabe, her psychological vulnerability is a reminder of the suicide of his best friend and therefore, he can only associate her with his past. The individual psychological and emotional connection between Naoko and Kizuki and her existence becomes a mere living without Kizuki. This traumatic experience impacts her so much that she develops a psychological constrains known as post-traumatic stress disorder saying, "I'm scared I will never get back again. I will always stay twisted like this and grow old and waste away here. I get so chilled it's like I'm all frozen inside." (*Norwegian Wood* 171).

Naoko knew her condition that won't be recovered again and she is alienated to the modern society. To have her life away from the outside world she chooses the Sanatorium which is an ideal place for her living. She accepted her fate and adverse social values and integrations over her. She tried to come back to her normal life in the society but she cannot do that only because of her memory of some bizarre suicides in this dystopian society. There is too much dearth as well as the uncertainty of life. "The dead will always be dead, but we have to go on living." (*Norwegian Wood* 111).

She cannot move back to the normal norms which are established by the society because there is a separation between her unconscious alienation for sympathy and societal values. As a human being in the society Naoko does not find the meaning of life where anyone can commit suicide even without any valid reasons. Naoko's is being alienated from the society lost the existential meaning of life. While in the Sanatorium she continuously looks for an escape to the utopian world from this dystopian society:

That song can make me feel so sad," said Naoko. "I don't know; I guess I imagine myself wandering in a deep wood. I'm all alone and it's cold and dark, and nobody comes to save me. That's why Reiko never plays it unless I request it. (*Norwegian Wood* 145).

Naoko's alienation leads her to visualize and hear the voices of her elder sister and her love Kizuki. She cannot get away from the thoughts of her deceased boyfriend and her sister's suicide. According to Naoko, her sister is more talented than she is. So, her sister's suicide escalates her own sense of meaninglessness about her entity as a human being. It shows the hallucinations she faced during her time in the sanatorium which ultimately leads her to suicide saying, "I felt like Kizuki is reaching out for me from the darkness." (*Norwegian Wood* 171). The suicide of Kizuki induced a fierce psychological uncertainty in both Naoko and Toru. But, Naoko suffers the most as she and Kizuki were there together from their childhood. Naoko unable to accept the incident suffers from schizophrenia that leads her to suicide. Alienation is another part of schizophrenia which might be caused for many reasons as Gleitman (1991), writes, "One possibility is that it is a defence against the overstimulation to which they are exposed because of their inability to filter out the irrelevant." (Gleitman 755) According to Chinese concept of Dualism, Yin and Yang are considered to have conceived the indissoluble psychological bonding between male and the female. In this novel two major figures like Naoko and Toru are like Yin and Yang where one cannot live a moment without another. Toru and Naoko finds themselves alienated from life and choose to move away from Kobe to Tokyo. They want to be away in order to be somewhere where they do not know anyone. However, their attempted escape from the fact of death only leads them back to each other and the eventual realization those personal tragedies as the one they experienced happen to everyone and make up the very experience of living. Naoko can barely get past the thought of her deceased boyfriend because much of her past memories were occupied by his presence. The sudden demise of Kizuki ignites an intense psychological perplexity in both of them. But, it is Naoko who suffers the most as she and Kizuki were there together from their childhood, and the emotional intensity can be assumed through her words:

As with most couples who have been together since childhood, there was a casual openness about the relationship between Naoko and Kizuki and little sense that they wanted to be alone together. They were always visiting each other's homes and eating or playing mah-jong with each other's families. (*Norwegian Wood* 27).

Reiko and Midori experienced alienation in the modern world. Reiko explains her journey from self-denial to acceptance as a sufferer from sexuality which leads her to alienate herself from her family and leads her

alienated life in the Sanatorium. Naoko's suicide and Toru's wandering makes her realise about the universal and existential condition which is repressed in the general society:

As long as we are here, we can get by without hurting others or being hurt by them because we know that we are "deformed." That's what distinguishes us from the outside world: most people go about their lives there unconscious of their deformities, while in this little world of ours the deformities themselves are a precondition" (*Norwegian Wood* 87).

On the other hand, Midori is like a grey part between the white (Naoko) and black (Reiko) slate with her melancholic life. Midori in the novel is a bit odd and aggressive as she has alienated herself from the world in the search of true love as it is mentioned: "I was always hungry for love. Just once, I wanted to know what it was like to get my fill of it—to be fed so much love I couldn't take it anymore. Just once." (*Norwegian Wood* 76).

## 5. Conclusion

The suffering of alienation and the severe identity crisis one faces due to the loss of loved one expressed best by the writers of the modern age. Through *Norwegian Wood*, Murakami allows one to experience the alienation effectively by giving it a steady, hopeless rhythm. Toru and Naoko can be understood as a testament of alienation as explained by Sevensen. According to the theory of alienation by Sevensen Toru and Naoko's journey is described through the importance of love and friendship in their lives and the impact of loneliness upon their life, physical and mental health. It also explains the significance of the meaning of life as an individual. The idea of individualism is more vulnerable to alienation in the postmodern world. It depicts the Japanese culture which believes in individual perspective. In *Norwegian Wood*, Murakami explores the theme of modern alienation and loss by creating a special world which lives representing his unique focus on perception of life.

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