

Existentialism in Asian Literature: Exploring Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* and  
*Norwegian Wood* through the Lens of Sartre and Camus

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A thesis submitted to the Department of  
English and Humanities in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Bachelor of Arts in English

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### **Declaration**

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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## Approval

The thesis/project titled “Existentialism in Asian Literature: Exploring Haruki Murakami's Kafka on the Shore and Norwegian Wood Through the Lens of Satre and Camus” submitted by Maher Afroz Auditi (ID: 20103073) of Summer 2024 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in English on 7 December 2024.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to myself, the person who persevered through countless doubts and uncertainties to accomplish this. This journey has undoubtedly been challenging and prolonged for someone as idle as me, yet I have kept faith in the Almighty and myself. I have embraced my limitations and remained resilient. May this always serve as a reminder of my strength and determination.

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## **Abstract**

World literature contains themes related to human existence that impact life experiences. In English literature, Asian literature's contribution to existentialism is often overlooked. Existentialism is apparent in the writings of Haruki Murakami. By examining existential themes in Kafka's *On the Shore* and Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*, this paper seeks to close this gap. In this case, existentialism is employed to analyze the lives of the two primary protagonists, Toru Watanabe and Kafka Tamura. This paper examines how Murakami's story reflects the existentialist ideas of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, including absurdity, alienation, and individual freedom. This paper will examine these characters' existential struggles to illuminate Murakami's unique blend of Eastern and Western existentialism and offer a more comprehensive view of the role of human identity in contemporary Japanese society.

**Keywords:** Japanese Literature, Haruki Murakami; Existentialism; Absurdism; Sartre; Camus.

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## **Introduction**

Literature is used as a historical mirror to express human experience at all levels in diverse forms. The possibilities for literary exploration are endless, readers can discover the complex and multifaceted aspects of human existence by analyzing the stories presented in literary works. World history and the circumstances people have encountered across civilization are conveyed in literature. Every aspect of human history is portrayed in literature, including conflict, triumph, defeat, grief, failure, hope, despair, and existential crisis. Humans seek to find their own lives through the characters, narratives, and themes found in literary works. Since the beginning of human civilization, people have been constantly wondering about the meaning and purpose of existence. A desire to understand the mystery of creation gives rise to this inquiry, which introduces man to existentialism. People frequently struggle with and seek answers to fundamental issues like birth, mortality, and the meaning of life. Existential crisis arises when a man confronts these questions about their life.

In Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries, existentialism became a popular movement in literature and philosophy. Existentialism prioritizes the existence and freedom of the individual, the need for people to create meaning and purpose in their lives despite living in a meaningless world. Existentialism emerged in France shortly after World War II and is considered one of the most important intellectual movements in the French context. In World War II, the death camp of the Nazis, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, left people in terrible conditions. An entire generation faces death and a desire for freedom, and a moment of meaninglessness arises in them.



Existentialism emphasizes individuality in a meaningless world where death is inevitable. Existentialist philosophers explore the meaning of life, death, and various aspects of life to understand the essence of human existence and try to find answers to the fundamental questions that arise from it. Individual freedom is limited by social structures and societal expectations based on human experience, leading to an existential crisis. Thinkers focus on all these issues and research the means of salvation. Accepts the inevitability of death in life, finds ways to move forward, and ponders its implications.

The fundamental concepts of existentialism were formed by influential people like Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. Every philosopher contributed to existentialism from their particular point of view. They introduced people to the concepts of personal freedom, spontaneity, and the innate meaninglessness of existence. As a philosophical movement influenced by several mainstream intellectuals, existentialism succeeded in getting traction. One of the founding figures of existentialism is Søren Kierkegaard. He placed a strong emphasis on people achieving their own decisions and pledges. Even though there is no intrinsic meaning in this world, he encourages people to give it purpose. Among the pioneers of this movement that challenged conventional moral principles was Friedrich Nietzsche. He exhorts people to live truly and to reject social pressures to conform, encouraging people to think existentially through this. Jean-Paul Sartre introduced the concept of existentialism, where he asserts that humans come into the world with no predetermined goals and subsequently create their essence in the world through their actions. Radical freedom is a fundamental human right, but it also carries an enormous obligation. People are responsible for their decisions and the results of their decisions because there is no inherent value to human life. In Existentialism, Albert Camus provides guidance on living a meaningful life and emphasising

the need for honesty and truth. He claims that there is no meaning to human life and that people naturally look for these things, but they are unsuccessful. He referred to the tension as unreasonable between people's lack of meaning in life and their desire to find it. In his books "The Stranger" and "The Myth of Sisyphus," Albert Camus examines how people go to the absurd for answers about what life is all about.

These philosophers' collective ideas have had a significant impact on human life. They observed how people perceive their existence along with how they face their freedom, the way they face the emptiness of existence in finding the meaning of life, and influenced people's lives by providing their introspection. In a world that appears meaningless, their insight inspires people to find their meaning. Additionally, it prompts a re-examination of social standards that obstruct the exercise of human liberty and cause existential crises. Existentialism encourages individuals to confront their existence. Asian literature has extensively researched existentialist philosophy, which engrossed people in the quest for meaning and truth in an illogical world. Asian societies offer distinct opportunities for examining existentialist theory, alienation, and identity based on their diverse cultural and social contexts. Asian writers frequently get inspiration from both their cultural frameworks and Western existentialism.

In Asian literature, existentialism has surfaced in the works of numerous writers who employed their writing to express their perspectives on the human condition. Existentialism has been included in Asian literature by writers, like Haruki Murakami. He is one of the most celebrated writers of Japanese literature. The works of Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami incorporate several existentialist themes. The search for meaning in life, loneliness, identity crises, and the purpose of existence are some of them. In the books "Kafka on the Shore" and "Norwegian

Wood", Murakami depicts the struggle of human life through book characters, examining the true nature of life, loneliness, and the quest for identity of the human race. In his book, Murakami explores existentialism while fusing existentialist ideas with Japan's social, cultural, and historical background. Murakami blends elements of Japanese society with Western existentialist thought in his writings. The protagonist's fate, free will, and identity conflict are portrayed in *Kafka on the Shore*. Murakami discovers existentialist themes in the narrative by recognizing these crises. When Kafka, the narrative's protagonist, leaves home and travels to another city to discover himself, he has to face different circumstances. He suffers from an existential crisis. By incorporating several elements of Buddhism and Japanese mythology, Murakami gives the story a spiritual touch. At the same time, Murakami combines the existential crisis of the story's main character, Kafka, with themes of existentialism found in the works of Sartre and Camus. The struggle of Haruki Murakami's protagonists to define themselves in an odd and surreal world is a recurring theme in his works. They encounter an array of challenges in trying to figure out their identities, experience existential crises, and feel isolated. Through a combination of fiction and reality, existential themes surface in their journey. The intricacies of contemporary existence are presented in Haruki Murakami's literary works. His writing unites readers from all walks of life, bridging linguistic and cultural divides. His tales blend imagination, realism, and significant lessons for life. He blends regular life experiences with surrealism. Connect with readers who are struggling with the complexities of existence through writing. The main characters of his literary works face existential crisis, they experience the feeling of absurdity and loneliness. This aligns with the theories of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert

Camus. Sartre's views on freedom and Camus' notion of the "absurd hero" are both reflected in Murakami's work. There are many opportunities to examine existential themes in Murakami's stories.

## **Chapter 1: The Intersection of Western Existentialism and Japanese Literature**

The Meiji period marked the beginning of an exchange between Western philosophy and Japanese literature. After many years of isolation, Japan began to become familiar with Western philosophy and other ideas. Japan's modernization started in the late 19th century with the Meiji Restoration (1868). Inspired by Western influences, Japan began to modernize its economy, culture, and technology. "Society noted that Japan, having spent more than 150 years in isolation, was militarily and economically weak. Naturally, 'Westernization' or 'modernization' became a popular aspiration under the slogan 'Western technology, Japanese values'" (Moichi, 1999, p. 90). Western existentialism, romanticism, and realism significantly influenced Japanese literature at that time. The Meiji Period was followed by the Shoba Period which began in 1926. During this period, economic and social challenges came after the Second World War. Western influences spread during the Meiji period and further developed during the Showa period.

Western artistic, cultural, and technological influence increased in Japan during this period. European and American philosophies, ideologies, etc. gained popularity in Japan in the post-war years. This era saw notable changes in Japan's cultural ideas, values, and institutions. In particular, cultural aspects like art, literature, and philosophy, underwent unique development during this time (Rimer, 1990). Western philosophy entered Japanese literature through Japanese writers such as Kafu Nagai and Takeo Arshima. Through their exposure to Western culture, writers were able to combine Japanese traditions with modern Western thought in their writing.

By exploring the literary works of these authors, one can find the fusion of Japanese literature with Western philosophy. Western existentialism began to enter Japanese literary circles as Western philosophies blended with Japanese literature. These ideas also conflict in some ways with Japan's long-standing traditional values and beliefs. In the middle of the 20th century, existentialists saw the possibility of finding answers to the social problems of the time in a new way, which greatly influenced Japanese writers. They were also considering the post-war social conditions, their psychological anxieties, and their identity crisis, in addition to the rapid changes brought about by modernization. To address these complexities, the authors have attempted to enrich both literatures by creating a Japanese literary analysis. Haruki Murakami's writing combines Japanese culture and Western existentialism. His characters often suffer existential crises and reflect various themes of existentialism. Murakami's work not only echoes Western existentialism but also quietly embodies Japanese historical and cultural reflections. In addition to experiencing loneliness as a result of an existential crisis, characters in Kafka's *On the Shore* and *The Norwegian Wood* also embrace loneliness as a response to social pressures. Western existentialism has influenced Murakami's reasoning and led him to illustrate in his writings how solitude can lead to self-discovery.

Western existentialism puts a significant value on Camus' absurdity, and it shares a few parallels with Buddhist and Shinto philosophy in Japan. Japanese literature reflects the ideas of Shinto Buddhism and absurdism. Uncertainty, nothingness, and impermanence are all considered innate aspects of life in Japanese philosophy. Buddhism thus encourages acceptance of various ideas without discounting them. Through the characters in their literary works, Japanese authors demonstrate that they find some sort of comfort in life despite its absurdity. The absurdity of the

West is captured in Japanese literature, which reforms it and rebels against it as insurmountable. In contrast to Western existentialism, Japanese literature seeks some sort of consolation by embracing and accepting it.

Japanese writers were influenced by Sartre's existential concept of "essence before existence" to learn about the nature of self-identity. In Japanese culture, certain social roles were valued and people felt a kind of social pressure to fulfill and conform to those roles. Western existentialism freed Japanese writers from this prescriptive pressure and opened up new avenues. The authors realized that identity can also be shaped by experience and choice. Japanese authors attempted to demonstrate in a variety of ways in their literary works that human identity is fluid and ever-evolving. Murakami's stories demonstrate how Western existentialism alters Japanese historical expectations, and his characters mirror this philosophy. In the same way that existentialism emphasizes finding significance in the ordinary, Japanese literature also cherishes the ordinary moments of life for individuals. Existentialism in the West occasionally sees daily life as ineffective, yet Japanese literature emphasizes how daily activities can bring inner calm. Japanese writers are inspired by Western living to find beauty in ordinary things.

Western existentialism frequently views relationships and love from an isolated perspective. In this sense, Sartre's "hell is Another Man" gives Japanese authors the possibility to explore loneliness and connection in everyday life. Characters in Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* suffer from existential distress as a result of loneliness, separation, and related loss. Yet, Murakami doesn't consider it as the only cause of existential conflict, but rather as a fleeting yet significant component. Japanese authors who were influenced by Western existentialism found resonance in examining the existential intricacies of interpersonal relationships. In contrast to Sartre's strict

seclusion, relationships are viewed as a rewarding aspect of life in later Japanese writing with humanistic warmth. The introduction of Western ideas into Japanese literature changed its composition. Japanese authors were capable of incorporating ideas of their own culture by learning those of other nations. The consequent combination provides a chance to reconsider existentialism's principles. It provides remedies for all inquiries concerning existence, sense of self, and the meaning of human existence. Japanese writers were also able to convey a distinct post-war experience through existentialism. It provided them with a means of exploring the collision between tradition and modernity. Japanese literature is enhanced by the incorporation of occidental concepts and existentialism.

### **Existentialism in Post-War Japanese Literature: The Influence of Sartre and Camus on Murakami**

Japan had significant social and psychological transformations following World War II. Long-term damage and doubtful emotions were left in people's lives by war. As a result, authors of the era turned to existentialism in search of answers to those questions in Western philosophy. Japanese people suffered from the crises, disillusionment, and existential dread brought on by World War II. The writers discovered parallels with European philosophers' existentialist theories at the time. After World War II, Japanese literature began to become more known around the world. Japanese writing after World War II began to focus on the existentialist ideas of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Through their literary works, Japanese authors attempt to address several issues that people have on the absurdity of human life, personal freedom, the meaning of life, and existence. The existentialist ideas of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre frequently appear in Haruki Murakami's books. World War II was crucial for the advancement of the field of Japanese literature. Economic concerns began to gain more importance as a result of

rapid social change after the war. Most people suffer from an identity crisis. Murakami's concern was the identity crisis in Japan, whose citizens are growing up in a consumerist life that has no meaning. For Murakami, a lack of identity leads people to violence and suicide. "Since the post-war (after 1970), there has been an inexorable shift toward a social ideology devoted solely (or nearly so) to economic concerns, in which identity formation, such as it exists at all, is grounded mainly in the extent and nature of one's participation in contemporary Japanese consumerism" (Strecher & M. C., 2002).

In post-war Japan, the people of Japan faced deep loneliness and several crises, which made existentialism an important topic. Existentialist elements are reflected in Murakami's literary works, particularly *Norwegian Wood* and *Kafka on the Shore*. Haruki Murakami's writing shows the influence of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. These French existentialist philosophers expressed ideas about existence, personal freedom, and the absurdity of life.

Murakami's writing style and character development exemplify these issues. The philosophies of Sartre and Camus focused on the loneliness and isolation of human existence. Murakami also portrays the sense of isolation of the protagonists in his works. In *Norwegian Wood*, the protagonists experience frustrating personal interactions and social isolation. In his stories, Murakami tries to reflect Camus' concept of the absurd, especially in "The Myth of Sisyphus". Here it is shown that life is fundamentally meaningless but each person is encouraged to find their purpose in it. The protagonists of *Kafka on Shore* encounter several absurd events as they search for meaning in the face of life's uncertainty. Camus's philosophy of accepting the uncertainty of life is reflected in this. Murakami's story reflects Camus' idea of the absurd over magical realism. The novel "The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle" combines fiction and reality.



Murakami's writings also clearly show Sartre's influence. In Sartre's ideas, people are criticized in society for asserting their independence, and they are solely responsible for their own decisions. This is further demonstrated by Murakami's depiction of the protagonists' autonomy and accountability in the narrative. This thought of Sartre is echoed in *The Norwegian Wood*, where a character struggles with existential liberty and self-choice. Sartrean existential alienation is reflected in the interpersonal connections of Toru Watanabe, the main character in *The Norwegian Wood*. Sartre believes that interpersonal interactions are a common source of conflict for people. People suffer a sense of loneliness when autonomy and dependency combine. In the same way, Toru Watanabe encounters this conflict and handles it through being introverted. A certain skepticism to fully commit to another person's works in Toru's mind, similar to Sartre's "bad faith", where in the pursuit of freedom the people try to avoid all the burdens. His relationship with Naoko and the other characters and his fear of losing himself at the same time depicts a struggle within him, here Sartre's philosophy is comparable. Similar to this, Kafka Tamura, the main character in *Kafka on the Shore*, chooses to flee his home to emphasize his independence. This embodies existential freedom as defined by Sartre. Kafka accepts responsibility for every choice he makes and attempts to find meaning for himself through action in a meaningless world. Japanese authors identified connections between the post-war existentialist atmosphere and the topics of Western existentialism. Japanese literature was able to examine the consequences of industrialization by using existentialism. Japan's traditional values and modern society conflicted due to the country's fast post-war industrialization. Murakami's stories explore how characters struggle with loneliness in today's world. His work clearly shows the influence of existentialism. By blending Western existentialist ideas with Japanese literature, he creates a mix that looks at how these ideas fit with Japanese culture and life after World War.

### **Murakami's Unique Narrative Style:**

Haruki Murakami's works can be comprehended by recognizing how his writing attempts to create a distinct fusion of Japanese cultural themes with Western existentialism. The travels of self-identification, loneliness, and the pursuit of purpose in the life of Murakami's characters distinctly mirror this blend. Murakami's writings appeal to readers all across the world because of their surrealist, magical realism, storytelling style, and diversity. The way that Murakami's writing blends Western existentialism with aspects of Japanese culture is another indication of how Western existentialist philosophers like Sartre and Camus influenced him.

Murakami's writings are influenced by Western philosophy. As a result, his literature explores themes such as the absurdity of existence, individual freedom, and the search for meaning in meaningless reality. The characters in his novels experience an existential crisis and often feel displaced, which is one of the most common problems in Western literature. "His writing style is unorthodox to Japanese literature, and he is heavily influenced by Western culture. The core issues he addresses pertain specifically to Japan, which indicates that his works do have a Japanese cultural identity. Essentially, Murakami is an individual; he is taking the same existential journeys that his protagonists are taking by daring to write in a style that he desires and focus on the issues that he believes are crucial to Japanese society" (Garguilo, 2012, p.8).

Murakami has emphasized several Japanese cultural aspects in his works alongside the occidental influences. Murakami's works reflect traditional aspects such as Japanese folklore and culture, the beauty of mortality (*wabi-sabi*), and the beauty of life's uncertainty (*mono no hour*). Cats are an important theme in Japanese culture, which can also be seen in Murakami's stories. Cats are associated with the supernatural in Japanese culture. Murakami's stories of using

cats as messengers became more mysterious. Cats are often seen as symbols of good luck and faithful companions in Japanese culture, and Murakami's literature reflects this cultural perception.

Readers are attracted to Murakami because of his distinctive storytelling style. The line between truth and fantasy is blurred in Murakami's works due to the surrealist aspects. Mysterious surreal scenes that frequently cast doubt on reality are a common aspect of his stories. The talking cat in

*Kafka on the Shore* depicts an environment of fictional reality and raises doubts about reality.

Additionally, the use of magical realism in Murakami's story depicts the absurdity of human existence. Many of the characters in Murakami's stories are centered around the city of Tokyo.

This city represents Japan's fastest-growing workplace. The city depicts a life of work pressure, yet its characters try to escape the pressures of mundane life by immersing themselves in a surreal, dreamlike world. Through this portrayal, Murakami balances the goal of life and the desire to be alone.

Because of his hybrid narrative style, Murakami's writing is more approachable and enticing to readers. Through his writings, he has been able to establish a connection with readers from a wide range of backgrounds by fusing his traditions with the philosophy of the outside world.

“Murakami's prose is easy to read, comparatively easy to translate, and rarely hides behind much of the ambiguity, the mystery for which Japanese literature has traditionally been so renowned”

(Streicher & M. C., 2002). Through the use of straightforward, interesting language, he has tried to make the complicated ideas of life simpler. Readers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds can relate to Murakami's characters as they depict commonplace themes like emotions, contemplation, and hardships. By transcending geographical and cultural barriers, Murakami

builds a special link between his readers. Haruki Murakami's narrative skills mark him as a significant contemporary literary figure. Deborah Treisman interviewed Murakami for *The New Yorker*, and later he states that, "His narratives are almost inquisitive, exploratory. His heroes, hapless or directed, set off on missions of discovery. Where they end up is sometimes familiar, sometimes profoundly, fundamentally strange. A subtle stylist and a self-willed Everyman, Murakami is a master of both suspense and sociology, his language a deceptively simple screen with a mystery hidden behind it. In his fiction, he has written about phantom sheep, about spirits meeting up in a netherworld, about little people who emerge from a painting, but, beneath the evocative, often dreamlike imagery, his work is most often a study of missed connections, of both the comedy and the tragedy triggered by our failures" (Treisman, 2019).

## **Chapter 2: Research Question, Rationale for Research, Theories and Methods,**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Research Question:**

How does Haruki Murakami's literature explore existential themes, and in what ways do his narratives reflect the existentialist ideas of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre?

#### **Rationale:**

This research addresses the significant gap in examining the intersection between Western existentialist philosophy and Japanese literature. Multiple academic research has already been done on existentialist themes in Western literature. There is a vast lack of research on how themes of Western existentialism resonate in Japanese literature. This paper aims to fill this gap

by looking at the work of Haruki Murakami, an influential writer in modern Japanese literature, whose work deeply reflects existentialist concerns. By analyzing *Kafka on the Shore* and *Norwegian Wood*, two of Murakami's most popular and widely accepted novels, this study explores existentialist themes of alienation, identity, and existential anxiety. Although some studies have examined Murakami's surrealism, there is a lack of research linking Murakami's narrative similarities and characters' existential struggles to the existentialist concepts of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Theories of Existentialism and Absurdism provide a critical framework for exploring human existence in an uncertain world. This study aims to add a unique dimension to the study of Murakami's writing by putting it between existentialist and absurdist ideas. To comprehend the global literary canon, this paper explores Murakami's methods of bridging cultural gaps. This analysis demonstrates the significance of studying Murakami's literary works to find solutions to universal philosophical queries. And concurrently demonstrates the resonance of his narratives in both Eastern and Western contexts.

### **Theories and Methods:**

The paper uses some secondary resources, mainly peer-reviewed journals and articles. These resources addressed a gap in the literature while also helping in the paper's structure and argumentation. A close reading of *Norwegian Wood* and *Kafka on the Shore* looks into existential issues in Murakami's writing. This approach helps to answer the research question.

To analyze the primary texts, this paper uses a few philosophical ideas and literary theories. Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism and Albert Camus's philosophy of the absurd are central to understanding the existential struggles of Murakami's characters. These philosophies explain how Murakami's narratives reflect existentialist concepts, such as the search for meaning, the

isolation of the self, and the confrontation with the absurdity of life. Comparative analysis is also employed to reveal the ways Murakami's portrayal of existential crises resonates with, yet diverges from, Western existentialist thought, bridging Eastern and Western perspectives on universal human experiences.

### **Literature Review:**

Haruki Murakami's classics cover topics such as existentialism, loneliness, isolation, and identity crisis. In the article titled "Existential issues in the fictional writing of Haruki Murakami", author David Potik mentions, "Isolation is a dominant theme in Murakami's fictional writing. Murakami's protagonists are remote, lonely, detached, estranged from society, and often lack a close or significant relationship with either family members or friends throughout their lives. It seems that the protagonists were simply thrown into the world and were destined to cope with the fact of their being" (Potik, 2023, p. 2). This echoes existentialist ideas. Where individuals must face existence independently. They go through conflicts about life purpose, identity, and connection. Murakami's characters experience emotional isolation and loneliness. As they try to find the purpose of life in an absurd world, they suffer deep loneliness and thus fall into an existential crisis.

In *Kafka on the Shore*, the character Crow echoes Kafka's internal conflict when existential fear comes up. "Sometimes fate is like a small sandstorm that keeps changing directions. You change direction but the sandstorm chases you. You turn again, but the storm adjusts. Over and over you play this out, like some ominous dance with death just before dawn. Why? Because this storm isn't something that blew in from far away, something that has nothing to do with you. This storm is you. Something inside of you (Murakami, 2005, p.5)". This quote captures Kafka's

internal conflict over identity, luck, and life's meaning. Through his introspective journey, Kafka experienced an existential crisis, which is reflected in this phrase. It demonstrates how humans struggle with consciousness to comprehend their fate.

Murakami's novels mainly reflect human relationships, feelings of isolation, and identity crises. In *Kafka on the Shore*, Kafka Tamura seeks refuge in various places to escape the Oedipal curse. In search of a sense of self, he takes refuge in a house in the mountains. On the other hand, the novel's character Hoshina is shown as part of Nakata's journey, to portray the meaninglessness of life. "The more he talked, the more Hoshino realized, how pointless his life has been" (Murakami, 2005, p. 564). The quote evokes self-reflection for Hoshino. After meeting Nakata, he begins to realize that his life has no purpose and lacks fulfillment. Hearing Nakata's words, Hoshino realizes that he is drifting aimlessly.

In the article titled "Murakami's Storytelling World", the author Patricia Welch explores the theme of identity and reflection of existentialism in the characters from his novels. His characters are seemingly escapist and hesitant to face reality. Often the characters are presented as ordinary people who can think in exceptional ways. They deal with "self-imposed isolation" despite having the ability to think and act in exceptional ways. Welch speaks of the conflict and connection between the external and internal worlds of Murakami's characters, which fail to fully reflect their consciousness. Characters in various Murakami novels such as *Kafka Tamura*, *Toru Okada*, and *Naoko* suffer from confusing situations with paths 'predestined' for them (Welch & P., 2005).

In the article titled "Magical Realism and the Search for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki", the author explains, "Most Murakami characters are passive, and thus they are

frustratingly devoid of real identity. Yet all of them seek that identity by rooting about in their internal minds, recognizing that the inner mind is the ultimate source of Self and identity" (Stretcher & M.C, 1999, p. 24). Murakami's characters lack a clear identity. They are passive observers of their own lives, thereby creating a sense of detachment. But they actively seek their identity and explore themselves through it. Murakami's characters do not seek validation of identity from external or social spheres, but instead seek to find identity through introspection and exploration of their minds. This inner journey depicts the existential quest to find oneself. A lot is lost in the journey of self-discovery in life. "Every one of us is losing something precious to us. Lost opportunities, lost possibilities, feelings we can never get back again. That's part of what it means to be alive" (Murakami, 2005, p. 387). It is inevitable for people to experience loss and drift from time to time in life. As humans, dreams are broken, moments are lost and there are certain feelings that we never get back. Human life is impermanent and changeable, to survive this momentary instability and constant change must be accepted. Acquaintance with this transitory nature of life creates a kind of existential melancholy in the human mind. Jean-Paul Sartre's argument about the freedom of human life and personal choice is that for every choice a person loses an alternative option. Later, people feel a sense of loss due to not taking the alternative path. This leads to regret in people, what Sartre called "existential angst". Life is shaped by our own choices, and the feeling of loss is an inevitable part of human life. Albert Camus in his book *The Myth of Sisyphus* suggests accepting the limitations of life. It is possible to take a stand against the absurd by trying to find purpose in life despite limitations.

The main existential crisis Murakami's protagonists suffer from is isolation from society. When society's overwhelmingly homogenous "system" pushes them to an unbearable level, they search for their core identity to escape. These issues can be seen as one of the themes of Murakami's



writing as people of Murakami's generation suffer from these issues. To survive the dystopia of the 20th century, it is necessary to have individualism in people, which will make people moral. Morality in a realist corrupt society rests on the individual. The goal of Murakami's literature is to look at the consequences of individual identity in a society in which a person's identity is created to fit into society (Strecher, 2002, p.45). Murakami's protagonists have this individualism in them. Strecher explains Murakami's hero this way: "He is intelligent, but not intellectual; educated, but not pedantic; introverted, but not neurotic" (Strecher, 2002, p.45). There is nothing very special about Murakami's characters, yet they refuse to be part of socially set norms. They try to find their identity outside the system of a dystopian society.

"People need to cling to something. They have to. It's what keeps them from getting lost in life" (Murakami, 2005, p. 96). After seeing Kafka's confusion and loneliness in *Kafka on the Shore*, Oshima advises Kafka that people must cling to something in life. It prevents people from feeling lost and provides them with steadiness. He encourages Kafka to discover a life goal that will prevent him from becoming distracted. Advises Kafka on self-discovery. Here, Murakami illustrates the importance of having a purpose or refuge in life to help people get over the emotions of loneliness. One facet of Sartre's "bad faith" is somewhat mirrored here. To escape the responsibility of freedom, Sartre refers to relying on other forces. According to Sartre, absolute freedom should be confronted. But people naturally want to seek safety instead, to escape. According to Albert Camus, people seek various ways to avoid facing the absurdity of life. What he refers to as philosophical suicide, where people in an uncertain world refuse to accept the absurd by holding on to something stable.

The station's packed with people streaming in and out, all of them dressed in their favorite clothes, bags, or briefcases in hand, each one dashing off to take care of some pressing business...In a hundred years everybody here...will have disappeared from the face of the earth and turned into ashes or dust. A weird thought, but everything in front of me starts to seem unreal, like a gust of wind could blow it all away (Murakami, 2005, p. 56).

This passage reflects how detached Kafka feels from society. A society consisting of people living in a narrow world is busy with their own business. He marvels at how people can move forward in the present despite knowing the impermanence of life. This passage expresses the anxious moment of existence. Kafka observes the people of a bustling station, each busy with their daily lives. Within the next hundred years, everyone present here will cease to exist, everyone will become "ashes or dust". This thought evoked in him a feeling of intense isolation. Here Albert Camus' concept of the "absurd" of existence is reflected. Life is inherently meaningless, people often suffer existential crises and face an indifferent, unfamiliar world while searching for meaning in this meaningless world. In this moment in *Kafka on the Shore*, Kafka experiences the impermanence of life, and a sense of absurdity emerges in him.

In their paper, Ecem Yucel recognizes existential crisis as the primary theme of *Kafka on the Shore* by Murakami. In this, each character experiences an identity crisis. In the paper titled "The Fantastic Path Toward Self: Magical Realism and Identity in Haruki Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase* and *Kafka on the Shore*", the author states that Murakami's protagonists often feel alienated from their society and culture. This sense of alienation is associated with the struggle for existential crisis. "Protagonists feel detached and out of place within the frame of their culture and country. This detachment symbolizes the beginning of the identity problems of

Murakami's characters; none of them has any sense of belonging, neither toward their culture nor toward their identity. By creating unusual, unreal situations using magical realist elements, Murakami forces his protagonists to set off on a journey in search of their identity, believing one's core identity is centered on one's subconscious. Therefore, the protagonists go on a physical, long journey to reach what they have been carrying in their very own depths (Yucel, 2018, p. 6)."

This article also discusses Western influences on Murakami's writing. "In Murakami's stories and novels, one comes across Western-influenced elements more than the elements of Japanese culture. His protagonists listen to jazz or classical music records by Miles Davis, Sidney Bechet, Beethoven, and Mozart; drink foreign whiskeys, like Cutty Sark or Johnnie Walker; read books of world literature, like *Anna Karenina*, *Macbeth* or *Metamorphosis*; and watch movies by François Truffaut or Steven Spielberg (Yucel, 2018, p. 6).

In an interview with the New York Times, Murakami explained his upbringing and his journey. The article titled "The Fierce Imagination of Haruki Murakami", it is said that, "Murakami grew up, mostly, in the suburbs surrounding Kobe, an international port defined by the din of many languages. As a teenager, he immersed himself in American culture, especially hard-boiled detective novels and jazz. He internalized their attitude of cool rebellion, and in his early 20s, instead of joining the ranks of a large corporation, Murakami grew out his hair and his beard, took out a loan, and opened a jazz club in Tokyo called Peter Cat. He spent nearly 10 years absorbed in the day-to-day operations of the club: sweeping up, listening to music, making sandwiches, and mixing drinks deep into the night (Anderson, 2011).

In the article titled "De-Exoticizing Haruki Murakami's Reception", the author Matthew Richard Chozick explains how Murakami combined Western and Japanese elements and created a unique cross-cultural narrative. "The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle's central character, Toru, discusses jazz, munches cookies, hears of Allen Ginsberg and Keith Richards, drinks coffee, listens to Michael Jackson, writes with a Mont Blanc pen, and meets Japanese with non-Japanese names such as Cinnamon, Nutmeg, and Malta" (Chozick & M. R., 2008, p. 63). Therefore, Murakami tends to combine Japanese and Western culture and to blur the lines between them. This fusion of cultures creates a unique literary world that transcends national boundaries.

Murakami's characters are mostly solitary, psychologically and physically confined to their worlds. In the article titled "No place I was meant to be: Contemporary Japan in the short fiction of Haruki", the author Loughman discussed this topic. "To a considerable degree, Murakami's characters are universal stock figures of contemporary literature, almost a cliché of the existential condition. Lonely, fragmented, and unable to communicate, they live a mechanical, purposeless existence ... Vaguely they sense that something is missing in their lives. Some are shallow with little interior life; others have a deep need for meaning and self-fulfillment. Mostly they are simply bewildered by their sense of disconnection and loss" (Loughman & C, 19977, p. 88). Loneliness and alienation are two existential issues that Murakami's characters represent in the modern world. Murakami's work strikes a chord with many readers, who are encouraged to consider the purpose of life and their position in the world.

"In Sartrean existentialism, alienation primarily revolves around the idea of 'bad faith'. Satre talks about two ways of bad faith: one is playing a masked role and another one is treating oneself as a material thing" (Kishore, 2024, p.59). In *Kafka on the Shore*, Kafka Tamura treated

himself like a material thing. It occurs when a person sees himself in an object or role while ignoring his freedom. Kafka Tamura often sees himself as a vessel for fate or destiny because he is under a curse, a prophecy in his life. He feels that he is not completely in control of himself and that everything is predetermined. So he feels like a bit of an object. Sartre's concept of "bad faith" is reflected in this.

In the article titled "FORMS OF EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN HARUKI MURAKAMI'S NORWEGIAN WOOD: TORU WATANABE ANALYSIS", the author states, "The journey of Toru's story makes him unable to cope with reality and sink into a phase of existential crisis, finding himself in trouble creating meaning for his existence" (Prameswari & Marsih, 2023, p. 174). In the Norwegian Wood, Toru finds himself in an uncertain crisis, questioning his existence. This crisis illustrates the existentialist concept. He feels the urge to create meaning in his life, fighting with himself. Here Sartre and Camus' ideas of existentialism are reflected, which states that individuals must find their purpose in life, and make life meaningful. Toru finds himself unable to make sense of this, resulting in an existential conflict.

In the story Kafka on the Shore, Nakata gives a name to every cat he meets. If the cat doesn't have a name, he names the cats for his convenience so that he doesn't get confused later. The first cat that Nakata talks to has no name, the cat forgets its name. Nakata then gives him the name "Otsuka". But the cat objected to that name.

"Otsuka?" the cat said, looking at him in surprise. "What are you talking about? Why do I have to be Otsuka?"

"No special reason. It makes things a lot easier for me if you have a name. That way somebody like me, who isn't very bright, can organize things better. It helps me remember."

"Interesting," the cat said. "Not that I follow you. Cats can get by without names. We go by smell, shape, things of this nature. As long as we know these things, there're no worries for us" (Murakami, 2005, p. 47).

In this piece, Murakami portrays the uncomplicated existence of cats. The existence of cats is not as complicated as that of humans, they can survive in the world without a name. They do not need a separate identity to identify themselves. This quote from Otsuka makes us think that name is one of the identity carriers in human life. Name or non-identity arouses anxiety in us, and creates existential crisis, while name also imposes responsibility on us. This quote from the cat reflects the imposition of meaning on existence. The attitude of the cat represents Sartre's existentialist ideas. He said that essence is not predetermined, individuals will find the meaning of their lives through their own choices, freedom, and actions. There will be no external pressure to establish oneself in the world.

In the article titled "Jean-Paul Sartre's Existential Freedom: A Critical Analysis", the author examined Sartre's idea of freedom. "Sartre argues that we are condemned to freedom, and any attempt to avoid the realities of our freedom by making excuses would result in bad faith. In Sartre's perspective, authentic existential living lies in our freedom to make choices and take responsibility" (Akinbode, 2023, P.16).

Sartre's idea of "condemned freedom" and taking responsibility for one's own choices resonates with the existential struggle of Kafka Tamura, the protagonist of Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*. The characters in this novel often bear the consequences of their decisions. Kafka runs

away from home to shape his destiny and faces feelings of isolation and responsibility. His decision to run away from home is an example of his independent spirit. He has to accept the consequences of his choice because it is his own decision and there is no external influence. Kafka's behavior is consistent with Sartre's concept of "bad faith", as Kafka is aware of the consequences of his actions, and does not want to avoid, but rather face, even any negative consequences.

"In everybody's life, there's a point of no return. And in very few cases, a point where you can't go forward anymore. And when we reach that point, all we can do is quietly accept the fact. That's how we survive" (Murakami, 2005, p. 407). This quote from *Kafka on the Shore* reflects responsibility surrounding existential choices and decisions. It expresses Kafka's certainty of accepting the consequences of choice. He must accept the consequences of his freedom and decisions, which reflects Sartre's ideas.

According to Sartre, people are completely free to choose their paths in life and form their identities based on their decisions and acts after birth. Sartre expressed this idea in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. "What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterward [...] He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. [...] Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism" (Sartre, 2007, p. 22).

*Kafka on the Shore* reflects this idea. Kafka runs away from home to create his identity and gain control over his life. He is prepared to endure solitude if needed, but he wants freedom. "I have

to get stronger. I have to turn into somebody who can do things for himself, who can make his own decisions. Even if that means I'll be alone" (Murakami, 2005,p. 109).

### **Chapter 3: Alienation and the Search for Meaning in Kafka on the Shore and Norwegian Wood**

#### **Kafka on the Shore:**

Kafka on the Shore is one of Haruki Murakami's most popular novels published in 2002. An English translation of the book was published in 2005, the translation was ranked among the "10 Best Books of 2005" by The New York Times. And later received the World Fantasy Award in 2006. The book Kafka on the Shore portrays the complex journey of existence that questions human consciousness. In Kafka on the Shore, the author depicts two parallel and similar stories. The main characters of this story are two, one is fifteen-year-old Kafka Tamura and the other is sixty-year-old Nakata Satoru. In the story, Kafka travels and travels to different places in search of his identity, and to change his destiny. "The main character must roam to find his identity, so readers must roam the text for meaning" (Garguilo, 2012, p. 36).

Fifteen-year-old Kafka Tamura runs away from home on his fifteenth birthday. He decides to run away from home to get rid of his father's prophecy. When Kafka was four years old, his mother abandoned Kafka and his father, taking his sister with him. Which was very painful for Kafka, but even more painful happened when his father predicted a terrible future for him.

"Someday you will murder your father and be with your mother" (Murakami, 2005, p.201).

Kafka's father curses Kafka out of anger at his mother, seeking to punish the woman who



abandoned him through Kafka. To escape this curse, Kafka fled and took refuge in a famous library. Kafka met Nakata there. Nakata is a sixty-year-old man with some extraordinary powers, such as the fact that he can talk to cats. Nakata meets a truck driver named Hoshino. Hoshino finds Nakata in common with his grandfather, which makes him feel a special connection with Nakata. The two of them travel together from Nakano in Tokyo to Shikoku for a special purpose. Initially, Nakata's journey seems to be different from the original story, but later Murakami creates a link between the characters in the novel and portrays various themes through it. In the book *Kafka on the Shore*, Murakami depicts the complex flow of existence of these two main characters and other characters. Kafka embarks on a journey to find his identity. At first, Kafka tries to escape his misfortune, but later he faces it instead of running away from it and accepts the flow of his fate. Instead of ignoring all the mysteries and contradictions of his life, he accepts that not everything in life can be controlled, and not all questions can be answered. “Kafka's reconciliation with time actualizes the world view of Greek tragedy: the world moves around by fate, not by human will” (Jiwoon, 2010, p.68). After a journey of self-discovery, Kafka seeks to return to reality through receptivity and lead a peaceful life.

### **Alienation from Society:**

Alienation is one of the central themes in *Kafka on the Shore* that reflects the complexity of the character's existence. Kafka felt alienated from his family. The sense of isolation caused by his father's prophecy influences Kafka to run away from home. Kafka tends to escape, he flees the modern capitalist society of Tokyo and takes refuge in a remote suburb. Running away from home in search of his existence, he encounters various incidents that highlight his sense of isolation. He is troubled by questions about himself and feels alienated from society, suffering from loneliness. Through this story, Murakami tries to show that not only the Japanese of his

generation but also the people of the next generation suffer from existential crisis. Kafka's character is self-centered, friendless, lonely, and less social. Kafka's decision to run away from home is not only to escape the curse but also a rejection of social expectations. He explains, "Naturally I have zero friends. I've built a wall around me, never letting anybody inside and trying not to venture outside myself. Who could like someone like that? They all keep an eye on me from a distance. But I'm just glad they didn't bother me. They might hate me, or even be afraid of me" (Murakami, 2005, p. 7).

Kafka's isolation from others is due to his father's prophecies, as he has no memory of his mother and sister. So he wants to distance himself from everything so that the prophecy does not come true unknowingly. Kafka's sense of alienation from society is more clearly understood when he runs away from home. He feels this when he sees children his age going to school. "The platforms on the other side are packed with junior and senior high school kids in summer uniforms, school bags slung across their shoulders. All heading to school. Not me, though. I'm alone, going in the opposite direction. We're on different tracks in more ways than one" (Murakami, 2005, p.35). Kafka tries to assert his individuality by taking different actions and differentiating himself from others. He feels different from his peers because he is on a different track. When the train starts moving in the opposite direction, Kafka does not find himself connecting with them, he thinks they are "faceless hordes of people.

"The station's packed with people streaming in and out, all of them dressed in their favorite clothes, bags or briefcases in hand, each one dashing off to take care of some pressing business...In a hundred years everybody here...will have disappeared from the face of the earth and turned into ashes or dust. A weird thought, but everything in front of me starts to seem

unreal like a gust of wind could blow it all away” (Murakami, 2005, p. 56). Kafka's sense of isolation is evident through this passage. This reflects his sense of disconnection from the society in which he lives. According to him, society consists of people living in some narrow world who are busy with their work. Kafka here tries to understand how people can be immersed in the present and accept the existence of things despite knowing that everything is impermanent.

His isolation from society evokes deep loneliness in Kafka, he hesitates about his decision. “All of a sudden the air feels thin and something heavy is bearing down on my chest. Am I doing the right thing? The thought makes me feel helpless, and isolated. I turn my back on the school kids and try not to look at them anymore” (Murakami, 2005, p.34). This quote reveals Kafka's doubts about the decisions he has made. Kafka's feelings in moments of doubt are vividly depicted here. With thin air and something heavy trapped in his chest, he tries to convey the weight of his decision. Being the opposite of the school kids reveals his desire to be a part of everyone as well as his deep loneliness.

Kafka's decision to run away from home is not only to find his identity but also to escape from the curse placed upon him. Although Kafka denies this omen is a part of his identity, he wants to escape and ignore this identity. Kafka wants to separate himself from society and at the same time Kafka feels isolated from society. After Kafka leaves the house, a fear of being caught by the police arises in him, but later he finds that no one outside is paying much attention to him. So there is no basis for his fear, everyone is busy with their work. He feels like an invisible person as no one is paying any attention to him. "No one gives me a second glance. I'm starting to feel like the Invisible Man or something" (Murakami, 2005, p.55).

Kafka feels ignored by society, despite his joy in not being the target of suspicion. When he is alone at Oshima's cabin later in the forest, in complete darkness, he finds this sense of isolation intolerable. "I feel so alone I can't stand it. In the darkness, in the middle of the night, surrounded by a deep forest, I couldn't be more alone" (Murakami, 2005, p. 371). Kafka's quest for freedom is surrounded by a deep sense of loneliness, which suggests that he is neither free nor immune to human feelings.

On the other hand, Nakata's life story is also tragic. Nakata lives alone, an unfortunate incident in childhood leaves him physically and emotionally isolated from society. He cannot fully enjoy life and participate fully in regular life activities. Murakami portrays Nakata's isolation and existential struggle in this story. Nakata lost his memory and intelligence, becoming mentally retarded after being involved in an incident while in elementary school. This incident isolates him from society and forces him to lead a marginal life. Nakata cannot read or write, his disability forced him to accept a narrow lifestyle. Nakata describes himself as an "empty vessel", feeling so disconnected from society that he cannot feel whether he is alive or dead. He hasn't made friends with anyone, and these things don't bother him too much because he can be lonely and get lost in his world. "Didn't make any friends. None of this bothered him, though. Being left alone meant he could be lost in his little world" (Murakami, 2005, p. 212).

Both Nakata and Kafka are alienated from society, but Nakata doesn't have any negative feelings operating around his physical handicap. But he acknowledges his sense of isolation, admitting that he has no one. "Nakata doesn't have anybody. Nothing. I'm not connected at all" (Murakami, 2005, p.37).

The novel's characters' sense of alienation from society is connected to the theme of abandonment. Kafka's mother abandoned him as a child, creating an initial sense of alienation in Kafka. A sense of abandonment by the woman who gave him life makes Kafka feel rejected. Kafka shares feelings with Sakura about his parents. "Maybe neither one of them wants to have anything to do with me, no one's searching for me. I mean, they left and everything.' Without me, I silently complete the thought" (Murakami, 2005, p. 91).

Nakata was also abandoned by his parents after he lost his memory. While his parents focused on their children's education, Nakata was unable to study, his parents focused on their other children and ignored Nakata. They paid more attention to Nakata's younger brothers and sent Nakata to his grandparents to be raised. After Nakata is abandoned by his parents, Nakata does not hold any grudge against his parents. Herein lies the difference between Nakata and Kafka. Kafka blames his parents for his fortune, believing that by leaving home he will be able to live a completely independent life. But on the other hand, Nakata believes that he will need the help of other humans to survive, humans cannot live alone. When a cat named Mimi helps Nakata find Goma, a lost cat, Nakata tells the cat that he can't leave without the help of other people. "He can't get by without other people's help" (Murakami, 2005, p. 78).

Although Kafka initially finds it possible to be alone, he later realizes that it is not possible to completely isolate himself from society and its people. After running away from home, he has to accept the help of Sakura, Oshima, and Miss Saeki.

Kafka Tamura's journey in *Kafka on the Shore* reflects his life struggle and Sartre's concept of "Bad Faith". According to this concept, a person pretends to avoid and not face the harsh reality. According to Sartre, people deceive themselves to avoid freedom and the responsibilities

associated with it. People blame others for their problems to avoid self-awareness and face reality. Kafka fell into this self-delusion at the age of fifteen and decided to run away from home, believing that his fate was predetermined. He travels away from home to escape his dark fate, and he blames his parents in part for his fate. This is consistent with the concept of bad faith, where one blames an external medium for one's problems. Initially, Kafka suffers from such self-deception, but later he faces the truth of his life and tries to free himself from his inner conflicts.

Another example of Kafka's association with "bad faith" is a fear of becoming abusive like his own father. "There's no way to erase the DNA they passed down to me. If I want to drive that away I'd have to get rid of me" (Murakami, 2005, p.9). Kafka fears his father's prophecy that he will fulfill the Oedipal curse. His future is predetermined and all his activities will be governed by it. This belief illustrates Sartre's "Bad Faith", as Kafka thinks his fate is predetermined and fixed. In this regard, he has no control over his decision-making and the same in shaping his life. This idea or belief keeps one away from taking responsibility for forming his own identity and limits him.

### **Norwegian Wood:**

The novel *Norwegian Wood* is a popular work by Murakami that was published in 1987. The protagonist's existential crisis is reflected in this story through a series of events. The story revolves around Toru Watanabe. In the story, the suicide of Toru's friend Kizuki greatly affects Toru's life and creates a sense of anguish within him. Toru struggles to cope with this tragic event and decides to move away from her hometown of Kobe. He begins studying at a private university in Tokyo, but there Toru meets his friend Kizuki's ex-girlfriend, Naoko. Toru begins

to feel a strong attraction towards Naoko but it is one-sided, as Naoko cannot accept the death of her lover and the pain leads Naoko to commit suicide. After Kizuki's suicide, Naoko's suicide brings Toru's life into turmoil. Even when another girl named Midori Kobayashi appears in Toru's life, Toru can't forget Naoko's memory which makes him unable to accept reality. Toru cannot create meaning in life and thus sinks into an existential crisis. He suffers from existential depression and feels emotionally detached from everything. Toru's life is confined to a routine of events, where he finds no joy or purpose. In university classes, he is always quiet and keeps himself apart from others. "All I managed to do was isolate myself more than ever from the other students. By remaining silent when my name was called, I made everyone uncomfortable for a few seconds. None of the other students spoke to me, and I spoke to none of them" (Murakami, 2000, p.59). Here Toru's existential crisis is depicted in behavioural terms. Toru has no interest in developing social skills, does not pay attention in class, and does not make any friends. Toru doesn't respond even when the name is called to register which creates an uncomfortable situation among everyone in the class.

Toru makes a few friends but is limited to a few people. Ever since Kizuki's death, Toru can't open his heart to anyone, and can't express his feelings. He finds it difficult to get close to others or form friendships. "Toru thinks that he lost one person to whom he could speak honestly of his feelings when he lost Kizuki" (Murakami, 2000, p. 56). He prefers to be alone and tends to isolate himself from others. His socialization is limited to a few friends thus he spends most of his time alone. Toru has no siblings, he is the only child of her parents, and he doesn't feel lonely because of that. He never thought he should have a sibling, he wanted to be alone. His conversation with Midori illustrates his enjoyment of being alone.

“Do you always travel alone like that?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You enjoy solitude?” she asked, leaning her cheek on her hand.

“Travelling alone, eating alone, sitting off by yourself in lecture halls...”

“Nobody likes being alone that much. I don’t go out of my way to make friends, that’s all. It just leads to disappointment” (Murakami, 2000, p. 70-71).

Toru's conversation with Midori shows that Toru doesn't want to force himself to be friends with someone because he thinks it will end up disappointing him or that he will get hurt. He is afraid to make friends because Kizuki's suicide leaves a scar in his heart that he never heals from. This dialogue reflects various existential themes, one of which is alienation. "No one likes to be so alone," expresses Toru's interest in avoiding long isolation and building friendships. But he always feels isolated from society and people, so he wants to spend time in solitude. Sartre emphasizes living truthfully, living without deep relationships requires solitude or facing reality.

By choosing isolation, Toru exercises his freedom to face life and embraces all personal responsibility. Also, this line depicts the complexity of human relationships, which is one of the themes of Sartre's existentialist ideas. While relationships with humans are seen as essential, interactions with humans are also responsible as the source of the human existential crisis.

"For my part, I would have preferred to rent an apartment and live in comfortable solitude, but knowing what my parents had to spend on matriculation fees and tuition at the private university I was attending, I was in no position to insist. And besides, I didn’t care where I live"



(Murakami, 2000, p. 14). Toru is drawn to solitude, as seen by his preference for isolation over living in a dorm with a roommate. He does not share his personal life or feelings with anyone. Toru believes that by being apart from everyone, he will temporarily forget the passing of his friend Kizuki.

Toru's desire to be alone reflects themes of existentialism. Especially feelings of isolation, personal freedom, responsibility, and rejection of social expectations. Toru feels isolated from his surroundings and feels no connection even with the other inhabitants of the place where he lives. Existential alienation is depicted here, where the individual feels alienation and struggles to find purpose or meaning in his existence and life. Besides, Toru is aware of his parents' financial capabilities and aware of their limitations. As a result, he stays in the dormitory thinking about the cost despite wanting to be alone. Here the issue of personal freedom and external constraints is depicted, which is consistent with Sartre's existentialist ideas. Sartre emphasizes radical freedom but recognizes that human choice or freedom often faces limitations due to circumstances, which is called facticity.

Even after many attempts, Toru cannot overcome the grief of the death of her loved ones. The 37-year-old Toru remembers his friends. After he lands in Germany, he hears the Beatles' Norwegian Wood song and remembers old memories and painful moments. He feels like he's a caretaker of memories and grief. His memories are filled with tragedy, starting with the death of his friend Kizuki and later his lover Naoko following the same path. Hearing the song brings back memories of his sad days.

"The melody never failed to send a shudder through me, but this time it hit me harder than ever. I bent forward, my face in my hands to keep my skull from splitting open. I straightened up and

looked out of the window at the dark clouds hanging over the North Sea, thinking of all I had lost in the course of my life: times gone forever, friends who had died or disappeared, feelings I would never know again" (Murakami, 2000, p.5).

This scene reflects Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy of freedom, time, and the past. Sartre explained that once people's pasts are gone, they cannot be brought back. Impermanence is one of the truths of human life and death is inevitable. "Death exists, not as the opposite but as a part of life. It was already here, within my being, it has always been here, and no struggle would permit me to forget that" (Murakami, 2000, p. 25). These truths shape people's lives but do not determine the future, people have the freedom to move forward in life despite the weight of their memories.

#### **Chapter 4: Absurdity and Freedom in Murakami's Narrative World**

##### **Absurdity in *Kafka on the Shore*:**

Haruki Murakami explores absurdity, one of the themes of existentialism, by examining the absurdities of life depicted in Kafka's story *On the Shore*. "The theory of absurdism is in a way closely related to the theories of existentialism. It was first with its modern implications by Soren Kierkegaard who developed existentialist philosophy by confronting the crises humans faced with the Absurd" (Arinze & Onwuatuegwu, 2020). In existential terms, absurdity is the desire to find meaning in life in an irrational and perishable world. "The feeling of the absurd can arise in many ways from the perception of the inhumanity and indifference of nature, from the realization of man's temporality or death which reveals the uselessness of human life, or from the shock occasioned by perceiving the ultimate pointlessness of daily life and its routine"

(Camus, 1942). The characters in this story, in their quest to find the meaning of life, encounter many strange events that often question reality. According to the philosopher Camus, not only the world but also human beings are absurd. In this universe we expect to find meaning or purpose in life, this human expectation is even more absurd than life itself. Camus believes that "I said that the world is absurd, but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world" (Camus, 1955, p. 15).

Haruki Murakami also questions why everyone is always in a rush in an absurd through the character of Kafka Tamura. "The station's packed with people streaming in and out, all of them dressed in their favorite clothes, bags or briefcases in hand, each one dashing off to take care of some pressing business. I stare at this ceaseless, rushing crowd and imagine a time a hundred years from now. In a hundred years everybody here- me included- will have disappeared from the face of the earth and turned into ashes or dust. A weird thought, but everything in front of me starts to seem unreal like a gust of wind could blow it all away. I spread my hands out in front of me and take a good hard look at them. What am I always so tense about? Why this desperate struggle just to survive?" (Murakami, 2005, p.56).

Kafka's question reflects Albert Camus' concept of the absurd. Here is reflected in man's struggle to find meaning in life and the indifference of the universe in this regard. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus explains that absurdity stems from our desire to find meaning in life, an attempt to find meaning in a world that does not provide it. In this part of the story Kafka while waiting at the station observes the station people, their busyness, and crowding. He thinks about

how in the next hundred years everyone will die and turn to dust, while knowing this certain outcome, people are preoccupied with the present. Kafka's thought reflects Camus's absurdity.

"Why this desperate struggle just to survive?" Kafka questions the reasons for human engagement, expressing curiosity about the purpose of their activities. Life has no inherent meaning yet man continues to try to find himself, to find the meaning of life. Camus's philosophy is reflected here, that people live despite the lack of logic in life. To Kafka, everything around seems unreal, which can blow away like a gust of wind, depicting the instability of the world. Kafka naturally felt the absurdity after learning the transitory nature of life. Even if life has no definite meaning, man must decide how he will confront this reality.

Nakata, the second protagonist of the story, who is physically disabled due to a childhood accident, does not fully survive but merely maintains a habitual existence. Despite losing the ability to read and write due to a mysterious childhood accident, he can understand cat language and speak with cats. An incident that happened to him as a child turned him into a mindless person, leaving Nakata with no hope of happiness. He has no ambitions for himself, he only works to find lost cats. He faces the absurdity of life and after that neither joy nor worry, he does not feel any kind of emotion. He welcomes life as it is. He never feels lonely or unhappy. "A constant smile on his face, he (has) never tired of any chores" (Murakami, 2005). Nakata doesn't complain or question his lifestyle and absurd nature. Although the childhood accident limited him, he feels no regret or despair about his condition. Rather, he accepts the limitations of his life. "He understands he is different from other people. He thinks his shadow on the ground is paler, lighter than that of other people" (Murakami, 2005). He finds satisfaction in his daily work, helping others find lost cats, and not trying to find a higher meaning in life. This attitude

of receptivity reflects Camus' concept of absurdity which states that money is not necessary to live life meaningfully. Even though life has no ultimate meaning, one has to accept the absurdity of life and live it to the fullest.

### **Freedom and Responsibility in Norwegian Wood:**

The concept of freedom is a central idea in existential philosophy, with freedom comes responsibility. Sartre's philosophy of existentialism is reflected in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*. The story reflects Sartre's idea of existential freedom through Toru Watanabe's struggle with freedom, personal choice, and the responsibilities that arise from freedom. The inevitability that the individual must bear the burden of their personal choice is reflected in various ways in Murakami's literary works. Sartre argues that "Human freedom and responsibility must be accepted for they are the head and shoulders above the rest. As humans, they ought to find their course through the world and make their own choices about what they consider value, what they are going to expect from one another, and what they are going to decide is good or bad" (Sartre, 2007).

In the story, *Norwegian Wood*, Toru is often conflicted about personal decisions and a sense of responsibility. It is important to develop one's values in life and to make one's own decisions independently without any external influence, in addition, one must bear the burden of responsibility that comes with freedom. Toru is interested in creating a personal essence and is aware of the limitations of personal freedom. Thinking and acting according to the rules set by society restricts the individual freedom of the people. "If you only read the books that everyone else is reading, you can only think what everyone else is thinking" (Murakami, 2000, p. 38). This

quote is consistent with Sartre's philosophy of personal freedom and responsibility. It is important to have personal freedom of thought and choice because according to Sartre true freedom is independent of external influence. "Sartre's existentialism is concerned with man's freedom and its aim is to instill a new way of thinking and a better way of life of people" (Satre, 2007). Reading the same books as others disrupts individual thinking, which limits personal freedom. The ability to make independent decisions is one of the parts of individual freedom, so individuality must be expressed rather than passively following something. By associating with conventional ideas or practices, the individual loses his or her individuality and gets stuck in conventional limiting ways of thinking and societal expectations. With the freedom to choose one's own choices comes certain responsibilities that the individual has to accept. By reading the books that others are reading, one does not form one's unique thoughts, instead of having different ideas, the same opinion or thoughts are formed as everyone else's opinion. If one thinks independently or makes any choice, he has to accept the consequences as well, such as living with the outcomes of those choices. Toru often questions his existence and activities and suffers from confusion as to whether he is doing the morally right thing. Such moments of self-doubt are associated with the freedom to make decisions that the individual must accept. Throughout the novel, Toru's freedom of decision-making and the burden of responsibility associated with it are observed. Toru's relationship with Naoko and Midori comes with various changes and complications. Toru finds himself in a difficult situation where Toru has to choose a single path. He decides to remain loyal to Naoko and lets Midori go. Toru makes this decision despite knowing that he will suffer emotionally after ending his relationship with Midori. Yet he makes his decision independently, bearing the burden of the decision, despite knowing the consequences. "Humans have freedom to think and to make choices, it is undeniable that they

are responsible for the consequences as well, for one's choices can influence the whole humanity" (Satre, 2007). According to Sartre with freedom comes the burden of responsibility and Toru accepts that responsibility through his decision making.

### **Chapter 5: Identity, Society, and Isolation Identity Crisis in Kafka on the Shore:**

Kafka on the Shore traces the story's protagonist Kafka Tamura's struggle with identity formation. Kafka runs away from home to find his freedom and true identity. He decides to run away from home to find his existence as well as freedom from societal expectations and his father's ominous predictions. Kafka believed that living in isolation, away from home and society would allow him to become truly independent, to find his own identity. But soon this view of Kafka changes when he runs away from home and realizes that identity is difficult to define. And creating one's identity is much more complex than simply seeking freedom. This is reflected in Kafka's thinking where Kafka's confused notion of freedom is revealed. "I'm free...I shut my eyes and think hard and deeply about how free I am, but I can't understand what it means. All I know is I'm alone. All alone in an unfamiliar place, like some solitary explorer who's lost his compass and his map. Is this what it means to be free?" (Murakami, 2005, p.44). Through the character of Kafka Tamura, Murakami reflects on how social expectations complicate people's path to self-discovery. Oshima guides Kafka and tells him the complexities he must face to create an independent identity. "I think you have a right to live however you want. Whether you're fifteen or fifty-one...But unfortunately society doesn't agree" (Murakami, 2005, p.198).

Kafka wants to create individual freedom and self-identity by isolating himself and maintaining distance from everyone. But after running away from home, he meets different people.

According to Crow, a wiser version of Kafka himself, this attachment to humans hinders this purpose of Kafka. "You aren't free. But is that what you want? To be free?" (Murakami, 2005, p.314). Crow's question makes Kafka hesitant, thinking about how his connection to Miss Saeki and others prevents him from choosing his path and being completely independent. Oshima answers the question Crow raised, "Perhaps most people in the world aren't trying to be free, Kafka. They just think they are. It's all an illusion. If they were free, most people would be in a real bind...People prefer not being free...The people who build high, strong fences are the ones who survive the best. You deny that reality only at the risk of being driven into the wilderness yourself (Murakami, 2005, p.315). To be free or independent is to be alone, which Kafka understands later. He understands that human identity is not fixed, it is always changing and identity is formed through external pressures and internal human conflicts.

On the other hand, Oshima suffers from an identity crisis. Although she is a woman, she mentally identifies herself as a man. She does not disclose it publicly out of fear of being marginalized by going beyond social expectations. "My body is physically female, but my mind's completely male... Emotionally I live as a man. But I am not a lesbian, even though I dress this way. My sexual preference is for men. In other words, I'm a female but I'm gay" (Murakami, 2005, p. 60). In society, he struggles to define himself and form his own identity because he does not fit into the prevailing norms of society. According to Sartre, identity is not something fixed or bound by any previous rules, it is variable. People create identity through their choices, this is reflected in Oshima's case.



### **Toru's Isolation and Societal Disconnection:**

In the story *Norwegian Wood*, the protagonist Toru Watanabe's tendency towards isolation and detachment from social connections is particularly observed. Toru shows no interest in participating in social activities. He feels disconnected from everything and feels like an outsider who tries to observe everything from the outside. According to Toru, relationships ultimately result in depression in people, therefore he avoids close relationships. "I don't go out of my way to make friends, that's all. It just leads to disappointment" (Murakami, 2000, p. 70-71). Toru likes to be alone, reading books, or spending time walking alone. He chooses solitude to escape from emotional depression and pain. He realizes this after the death of his friend Kizuki, his death had a significant impact on Toru's life and wellbeing. Toru hesitates to get fully involved in relationships. The relationship between Toru and Naoko is also complicated. Though Toru wants to be with Naoko, he cannot close the gap between them. "I could have closed the distance between us, but something held me back" (Murakami, 2000, p. 24). After Kizuki's death, Toru and Naoko develop a connection, but they cannot be fully united. Grief over Kizuki's death creates a kind of estrangement between them, with Toru unable to express himself completely.

The fear of bearing the pain of loss works in him all the time.

Toru's relationship with Naoko and Midori reflects his disconnection profoundly. Toru's relationship with Naoko does not end in a good way, Naoko's suicide causes Toru to feel even more lonely in his life. On the other hand, he is also ambivalent about his relationship with Midori, as he cannot deny his loyalty to Naoko and his attraction to Midori. Toru is always hesitant about his relationship and wants to escape from everything. He tries to escape from any major move and shifts the city to another place to forget the grief of his friend's death. Escaping

seems to be Toru's way of dealing with grief. After Kizuki's death, Toru leaves his town to escape the memory and grief, he did the same when Naoko committed suicide. "I remember the sights and sounds and smells enough, but the names of the towns are gone, as well as any sense of the order which I traveled from place to place" (Murakami, 2000, p. 324).

Toru doesn't keep in touch with his classmates, he tries to keep herself busy with his studies. He chooses to study drama as a means of passing time, keeping away from all political activities.

Toru is not interested in maintaining contact with anyone, he wants to live alone. "For my part, I would have preferred to rent a flat and live in comfortable solitude" (Murakami, 2000, p.14).

Toru barely participates in his life, where people of his age take every opportunity to develop their skills. Before he starts his new life in the dorm, he plans how he will spend his time. He sits alone in the classroom, eats, and spends time alone, he feels isolated from others. While his friends around him are having fun with each other, Toru feels like he is not a part of this happiness. He prefers to be alone, avoids people and he enjoys his life. "There was only one thing for me to do when I started my new life in the dorm: stop taking everything so seriously; establish a proper distance between myself and everything else" (Murakami, 2000, p.30).

## **Chapter 6: The Role of Magical Realism in Depicting Existential Themes**

Haruki Murakami portrays the characters' existential crisis by applying magical realism to his stories. Murakami presents the existential struggles of ordinary people in his stories through the medium of magic realism, combining surreal and magical elements to create a dreamlike atmosphere in the story, the author reflected the existential journey of the characters. The story weaves back and forth between Kafka, Nakata's past, Ms. Saeki's past, and Oshima's thoughts, all these are linked by the elements of magical realism. In the stories of Murakami, ideas,

symbols, and objects from everyday are often given humanlike qualities. There is a very thin border between dreams and reality in Murakami's narratives. In the midst of everything, Kafka tries to know who he is and why he exists. "What is it inside me that makes up me? Is this what's supposed to stand up to the void?" (Murakami, 2005, p.417).

In a 2011 interview with Sam Anderson of The New York Times, Murakami expressed his views on imagining the supernatural in a realistic world. "I live in Tokyo, a kind of civilized world – like New York or Los Angeles or London or Paris. If you want to find a magical situation, magical things, you have to go deep inside yourself. So that's what I do. People say it's magic realism – but in the depths of my soul, it's just realism. Not magical. While I'm writing, it's very natural, very logical, very realistic and reasonable" (Anderson, 2011). This interview shows how Murakami uses magic realism as a storytelling technique. Another thing Murakami points out is that he doesn't enjoy writing in a genre that readers already know. He says, "Things are not what they seem" and "What's the fun in writing about things readers already know about?"

As a postmodern novel, *Kafka on the Shore* breaks with established notions of storytelling style in several ways. As the story unfolds, Nakata has the ability to talk to and understand cats, fish rain from the sky, a young teenage version of Miss Saeki appears in imaginary form, World War II soldiers appear, all of which are magical realism. Also the murders of Johnnie Walker and Kafka's father remain a mystery. All these factors combine to create a magical mystery ride for the reader which makes the story even more popular. At the beginning and end of the story is the character Crow, "The Boy Named Crow" who appears as Kafka's inner self and offers him various advice. While working in the library, Kafka meets Miss Psyche, whom he believes to be his mother. One night when Kafka sleeps alone in the library, he dreams of the 16-year-old

ghost of Miss Saeki. After meeting her ghost in a dream, Kafka feels a deep and surreal connection, Miss Saeki's beauty captivates Kafka, he feels the boundaries between reality and fantasy blur and confronts existential conflict. "You're afraid of imagination. And even more afraid of dreams. Afraid of the responsibility that begins in dreams. But you have to sleep, and dreams are a part of sleep. When you're awake you can suppress imagination. But you can't suppress dreams" (Murakami, 2005, p.148). In Murakami's stories reality and dreams are combined and inseparable from each other. Murakami uses magical realism to explore the relationships between characters in his stories. Instead of writing directly about relationships, he tries to describe events indirectly by combining magical reality with events. This is one of Murakami's writing techniques that reflects magical realism in his stories. The use of magical realism can be seen from the beginning of the novel. The story begins and ends with the character 'The Boy Named Crow', a character depicted in the story as Kafka's inner self. Kafka runs away from home to escape his father's Oedipal curse, an example of magical realism in believing in ancient things such as curses or prophecies. Murakami puts a lot of complexities into his story to portray existential themes, he uses surrealist elements with blurs the line between real and unreal. Murakami was asked about the real and the unreal in his works by his readers, and he answers "But I can't always see the borderline between the unreal world and the unrealistic world. So, in many cases, they're mixed up. In Japan, I think that other world is very close to our real life, and if we decide to go to the other side it's not so difficult. I get the impression that in the western world it isn't so easy to go to the other side; you have to go through some trials to get to the other world. But in Japan, if you want to go there, you go there. So, in my stories, if you go down the bottom of the well, there's another world. And you can't necessarily tell the difference between this side and the other side". In Murakami's narratives, cat

plays an important role, the cat being held in high esteem in Buddhism. Murakami reflects the myths that comprise Buddhist mythology within occult reality. Murakami's stories reflect an existential crisis by combining fantastical or magical realism with mundane subjects. The narrative style of Murakami's novels and the existence of magical realism is described by Stretcher in his scholarly work on Murakami's fiction. He states that, "He (Murakami) permits the narrators obsessive desire for the object to bring it magically from the inside to the external world. The result is something just a little more than a mere image."

Murakami keeps readers and characters separated from meaning through his storytelling style, so that mystery is always present in his stories. Murakami deliberately does not give details to the readers so that the reader's interest remains intact till the end of the story. Murakami admitted this in an interview with Asahi Shimbun, a Japanese newspaper. He leaves blank spaces for readers to connect the blank dots by thinking for themselves. His fans ask him various questions through the website, which Murakami does not answer. Because he thinks that by reading the texts multiple times, the readers can discover the answers to the questions themselves. Murakami wants to present his story to readers as a kind of puzzle. This is another element of magical realism.

## Conclusion

Existentialism and the human struggle to find meaning in life is universal and transcends any cultural boundaries. Although Western influences are more prominent in exploring existentialism, and it focuses on the philosophy of Sartre, Camus, or Kafka. Often the views of non-Western literature or writers are overlooked and given less prominence. Haruki Murakami's literary works deeply reflect existentialist themes in the context of Japanese literature. Yet the literature of Japanese authors is marginalized in the wider discussion or research on existentialism. Murakami's literature explores the human experience of alienation, identity crisis, and the search for meaning in life in an indifferent world. Murakami's characters suffer from a profound identity crisis, and his literary work explores existentialism at the same time. This paper attempts to draw common lines between existentialist thought in Western and Asian literature. This paper reveals how Murakami's works offer a unique interpretation of Japanese culture, not just existentialism. In exploring world literature, Murakami's novels create scope to expand people's thinking about existentialism. It also encourages the examination of other cultural contexts and their struggles with existentialism beyond the canonized novels of Western literature.

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