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Selfhood Unbound: Redefining the Self in Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*

Bağımsız Benlik: Haruki Murakami'nin *Sahilde Kafka* Romanında Benliğin Yeniden Tanımı

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ABSTRACT
In *Kafka on the Shore*, Haruki Murakami redefines selfhood as a dynamic, interconnected phenomenon shaped by human-nonhuman interactions. Through dual narratives, Kafka Tamura's first-person perspective intertwines with that of his alter ego, Crow, while Satoru Nakata, who has no shadow, speaks in the third person, thereby emphasizing detachment and fragmentation. These stories converge in metaphysical spaces where past and present dissolve, creating rhizomatic connections between identities. Animistic elements, including talking cats, Crow, raining fish, and objects like the entrance stone, highlight the agency of nonhuman entities in shaping consciousness. Figures such as Johnnie Walker and Colonel Sanders critique Western consumerist culture, while Nakata's childhood trauma reflects Japan's struggle with historical amnesia and Western influence. Murakami presents selfhood as fluid, always open to transformation, suggesting that identity emerges through relational and cultural entanglements rather than fixed individuality. This paper, thus, examines narrative strategies, animism, and cultural critique to show how the novel positions selfhood as collective, evolving, and interconnected.

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Introduction

Haruki Murakami, acclaimed for his unique craft of fiction that blends surrealism and realism, defies conventional narrative structures and modes. His fiction weaves intricate, interconnected worlds in which the boundaries between reality, memory, and the metaphysical dissolve. In his enigmatic masterpiece *Kafka on the Shore*, too, Murakami challenges the boundaries of the self and the traditional notion of selfhood, presenting it as an interconnected, collective consciousness shaped by temporal and spatial subversions and by interactions with both human and nonhuman entities. The novel dismantles the idea of an autonomous self through a narrative structure that intertwines the experiences of two protagonists, Kafka Tamura and Satoru Nakata, both of whom appear independent yet are deeply interconnected. The dual narratives and the web of connections both stories draw together emphasize the interconnected nature and multiplicity of selfhood. Kafka's storyline alternates between a first-person perspective and the enigmatic voice of the boy named Crow, his shadow, who addresses Kafka as "you," thereby blurring the lines between self and alter ego. In contrast, Nakata, who notably lacks half of his shadow, refers to himself in the third person, emphasizing a detachment in selfhood. These narratives intersect on a metaphysical plane, where spaces such as the forest and the Komura library dissolve boundaries between past and present, merging identities in ways reminiscent of

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a rhizomatic structure in which connections and influences proliferate non-linearly.

The novel's animistic elements further emphasize this interconnectedness. Talking cats, a crow as Kafka's alter ego, and phenomena such as raining fish and leeches illustrate a world where animals and inanimate objects possess agency and participate in the collective consciousness. Specifically, objects such as the "entrance stone" and mystical places such as the library hold metaphysical significance, while creative artifacts, including Miss Saeki's haunting song and painting, contribute to this shared selfhood. These elements challenge anthropocentric perspectives, highlighting the role of nonhuman entities in shaping identity and experience. Furthermore, on a cultural level, Nakata's pivotal childhood incident after the WW2 – a mysterious trauma that erased his memory and intelligence – parallels Japan's collective struggle with erasing its past while embracing Western ideals. On an individual level, Kafka's Oedipal prophecy that he is destined to kill his father and be with his mother questions the predestined, parental, and genetic influences on selfhood. These notions underline the tension between cultural heritage and modern identity and suggest that selfhood, while influenced by predestined prophecies, genetic inheritance, and cultural history, is not fixed. Instead, Murakami portrays selfhood as fluid, always open to change and new possibilities. By rejecting absolutism, the novel emphasizes the potential for transformation and the interconnected nature of existence. Therefore, in his book, Murakami redefines the concept of selfhood as an interconnected, dynamic, collective consciousness shaped by interactions between human and nonhuman beings, by the intertwining of past, present, and future, and by the narrative's metaphysical dimensions. This article intervenes in Murakami scholarship by integrating psychological readings of subjectivity, postwar historical trauma, and theories of nonhuman agency within a single analytical framework. In doing so, this study argues that *Kafka on the Shore* reconceptualizes selfhood as a relational, collective, and processual phenomenon arising from human–nonhuman entanglements, narrative multiplicity, and unresolved historical trauma. Murakami's metaphysical landscapes are read alongside Japan's postwar trauma and animistic ontology to offer a new account of selfhood.

The novel opens with a young boy who names himself Kafka deciding to leave home to live in a corner of a small library and to flee the prophecy his father left him: that he is destined to kill his father and to have relationships with his sister and mother. Upon his fifteenth birthday, he embarks on a journey, not merely physical but spiritual. This opening signals the novel as a Bildungsroman, thereby indicating an inevitable transformation to follow. However, the novel transcends and redefines the genre's traditional trajectory. Jiwoon Baik argues that *Kafka on the Shore* subverts the traditional Bildungsroman form, where the protagonist matures through conflict and eventually integrates with society; instead, the protagonist achieves a tragic "reconciliation" with fate and reconciles with the fantasy world of his memories that is closed to the real world (2010, p. 69). Yet seeing Kafka's reality as the present, stripped of its memories and history, will not be this paper's focal point. There is, indeed, a strong theme of "reconciliation," but it is not limited to the fantasy world and is not closed off from the real one. The boundaries between subject and object, human and nonhuman, real and fantasy, fate and free will open a fertile terrain from which this analysis departs. Similarly, Haruki Murakami himself does not intend his novel to be classified as a Bildungsroman as he claims that his aim was not to make the novel "too enlightening" or guiding but rather to "let [Kafka] think, to let him decide on his own" (2002, as cited in Nihei, 2019, p. 77). Murakami's protagonist resists the kind of closure a conventional Bildungsroman hero would reach at the end; rather, both the novel and its protagonist reject finality, allowing for transformation and becoming.

This notion resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "Oedipal reterritorializations,"[1] as Kafka's attempt to flee the Freudian Oedipal curse[2] symbolizes a deterritorialization, breaking

[1] In *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (1987), the Freudian Oedipus complex is criticized as a mechanism of reterritorialization which is a process through which capitalism and psychoanalysis reconstruct fixed identities and familial boundaries on the free, deterritorialized flows of desires.

[2] Sigmund Freud's (1900, 1905, 1923) concept of Oedipus complex forms the nucleus of psychoanalysis,

away from the familial and societal assemblages imposed upon him. His journey marks one of many deterritorializations, alternating between reterritorializations and ramifications, reflecting a continuous process of *becoming,* in which identity is in perpetual flux. A related philosophical move appears in a recent Murakami study by J. T. Milburn, who reads Murakami's fiction through Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming, emphasizing literary figures not as stable identities but as sites through which thought is transformed, repossessed, and reconfigured across a plane of immanence (2025, pp. 206-208). This flux of becoming is likened to a sandstorm in the novel as the boy called Crow explains to Kafka: "Sometimes fate is like a small sandstorm that keeps changing directions. … This storm is you. Something inside of you. So, all you can do is give in to it, step right inside the storm, closing your eyes and plugging up your ears so the sand doesn't get in, and walk through it, step by step" (Murakami, 2005, p. 4). The sandstorm here represents transformation, change, and the process of becoming, and it functions as part of deterritorialization. It is drawn not as an external, outside being; instead, it is highlighted that the storm is *you,* it is internal, it is familiar, it is inside you.

Change and transformation are not portrayed here as processes solely driven by external factors. On the contrary, they are described as holistic, transformative, dynamic processes originating from within. Such transformation is cyclic and rhizomatic, forming selfhood rather than merely preparatory to it; it is not merely a linear event affecting a preexisting self. The crow continues to describe this process, reminding Kafka that this symbolic, metaphysical storm will also cut through his flesh, shedding his blood and that of others, but eventually: "When you come out of the storm you won't be the same person who walked in" (Murakami, 2005, p. 5). If the entire story is understood as the sandstorm that Kafka enters, then it is true that by the end of the story, Kafka is no longer the person who walked into it in the first place. In fact, it is not only the person within who has changed but also the world he inhabits, which he perceives as going through a transformation, as echoed at the end of the novel: "You are a part of a new world" (p. 615). This suggests that reterritorializations might place you in your original territory, but neither you nor the world you perceive stays the same, nor does the territory you initially left. Both selfhood and perception change deeply with each step into deterritorialization. Nihei, similarly, reads the "sandstorm" in the novel as a metaphor for the unconscious struggle that Kafka (and Nakata) must confront. She emphasizes that Murakami's narrative vision, in which the imagination is uncontrollable and dreamlike, embodies an "unconscious compulsion to act" (2019, p. 85). Thus, the sandstorm for Kafka's journey symbolizes his confrontation with the unconscious; that is, he must recognize his inner turmoil and integrate it into his sense of self. Nihei also brings up Murakami's concept of "digging" into the unconscious, and this digging is done through "the act of crossing borders, which is closely related to the operation of distancing" (2019, p. 76). This self-distancing leads to othering, as evidenced by Kafka's referring to his alter ego as "Boy named Crow" and, most prominently, by Nakata's distanced narration.

Nakata's narration begins with his conversation with a cat. He refers to himself as if he is a third person, "Nakata's the name" (Murakami, 2005, p. 58), never uses the first-person singular pronoun I, and explains how, after an incident he was involved in when he was younger, he has become dumb ever since. As a result, he cannot read or write, but he can somehow communicate with cats. The incident, which left him unconscious for a while, deprived him of his intellect and erased his memory. This indicates a detachment from his human-centered mindset, leading him to a different level of consciousness in which he can communicate with nonhuman beings, such as cats. The split is evident in Kafka's narration as well. The boy named Crow accompanies Kafka on his journey, serving as his "shadow," his subconscious, spiritual guide. The way his shadow addresses him in the second-person singular, too, highlights a sort of detachment from the self–within. Kafka's split in the self manifests as spiritual growth and guidance, with the crow serving

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explaining how unconscious desire, repression and moral identity develop within familial structure. Yet, this structure stands as one of the most fixed and hierarchical models within psychoanalysis, a structure later thinkers sought to challenge (especially Feminist theorists) for its insistence on closure and universality. Murakami's narrative similarly attempts at unsettling this very structure.

as a spiritual animal symbolizing one's connection to wisdom and insight, signaling transformation and change. Whereas Nakata's split in the self manifests as independence in the consciousness and perception, with the cats symbolizing the autonomy, curiosity, and discovery.

Apart from the animal figures, the image of a shadow is also an essential symbol of selfhood. The Crow follows Kafka like a shadow, just like the Oedipus curse that keeps on following him no matter how far he runs: "The omen is still with me though, like a shadow" (Murakami, 2005, p. 13). On the other hand, Nakata physically lacks half of his shadow, while the other half is faint and weak. This is why the tomcat he encounters advises him to stop looking for lost cats and instead to "start searching for the other half of your shadow" (p. 65). The shadow, here, as a metaphor, evokes the nature of selfhood; the loss of it, the fragility of it, and the haunting nature of it. Even through this single metaphor, Murakami delves into the question of whether selfhood is inherently haunted by the legacy of one's heritage and whether that heritage can ever be fully erased, only to be found later. This exploration further depicts selfhood as not fixed and always in flux.

Daniel Krahn reads Nakata's narrative "as a sort of psychic parallel, with Nakata as a manifestation or emanation of Kafka's unconsciousness" (2021, p. 100). This underscores the division between consciousness and unconsciousness, yet opens the possibility of "reintegration," as Krahn calls it (p. 100). The reintegration Krahn mentions can be understood as reterritorialization among the characters, as if each has a minor role within their shared rhizome to rediscover, reintegrate, or reterritorialize themselves. The reterritorialization, or reintegration, occurs once the characters enter Murakami's "other worlds: dark places of isolation that bring the unconscious to the surface" (p. 100). These other worlds in *Kafka on the Shore,* bringing the unconscious to the surface, are Komura library – Kafka's destined place and his place of refuge and transformation, and Nakata's mysterious calling to it, and the woods, where Nakata underwent the strange affliction that left him unconscious, wherein un-aged soldiers of WWII and a teacher reside. These spaces, as Matthew Carl Strecher interprets, are a manifestation of the realm of the unconscious, where "the metaphysical world is thrown wide open, depicted as a kind of 'shared space' to which all characters appear to have access, wherein they meet, engage one another, and return to 'this side'" (2014, p. 76). The interaction in such metaphysical spaces reveals the interconnectedness of the novel's world, hints at relationality among individuals, and underscores a collective consciousness that extends beyond the confines of time, space, and the body. Such experiences and encounters occur beyond human-centered understanding, across multiple dimensions, encompassing nonhuman and inanimate beings, and extend beyond our restricted, linear, and fixed conception of existence. The core catalyst of all events unfolding in the narrative is a single inanimate matter – the entrance stone, initiating and affecting the narrative to evolve. This inanimate catalyst enables the collapse of ontological boundaries and initiates a series of relational movements that allow selfhood to reconfigure.

Beyond the Human: Animism, Agency, and the Vitality of Things

The vitality of objects and nonhuman agency are key elements in the novel. In her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things,* Jane Bennett asserts the vitality and agency of nonhuman matter, arguing that objects possess a form of agency or rather a "thing-power" (2010, p. 4). Assemblages of human and nonhuman elements collaboratively shape the world and constitute power as coming from both within and from the collective. As Baruch Spinoza explains, "Everything in so far as it is in itself endeavours to persist in its own being" (1919, p. 91). In his letter to Schuller, he further emphasizes that even a falling stone is endeavouring, within its capacity, to keep moving: "*every* individual thing is necessarily determined by some external cause to exist and produce effects in a certain and determinate way" (Spinoza, 1674, pp. 85-86). There is an emphasis on the thing's agency, elevating it to an actant, recognizing its capacity to affect other bodies, to increase or decrease their power, or even to initiate or block it. Bennet acknowledges that "we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world" (2010, p. 4). Murakami presents this notion in his narration through inanimate and nonhuman elements such as talking cats, a rain of fish and leeches, and, most importantly, through the vital

matter: the entrance stone. Just as Spinoza's falling stone endeavors to keep moving, the entrance stone in the novel seeks to participate in rhizomic transformations and to allow change in the character's reality and selfhood. Similarly, Ljiljana Pticina observes that "Murakami successfully leads all his characters from the exit to the entrance, and sometimes again to the exit… until they became products of the Self, and not simple flesh for the system to be fed" (2025, p. 180). In the novel, nonhuman, inanimate elements enable this transformation, their vitality functioning as a component in redefining selfhood

Bennett supports the ability of things, in their energetic vitality, to make things happen and to produce effects, and considers them not reducible to the contexts in which human subjects set them, nor entirely exhausted by their semiotics (2010, p. 5). The things typically perceived as inert possess vitality, agency, and power in themselves. By rejecting any strict ontological divide between human and nonhuman life, Spinoza argues that "other individual things, which are all, though in various grades, animate" (1919, p. 47). Similarly, Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests that "our gaze, prompted by the experience of our own body, will discover in all other 'objects' the miracle of expressions" (2002, p. 230). Taken together, these philosophical perspectives converge in what Bennett (2010) conceptualizes as "thing-power," which foregrounds the vitality and agency of matter and necessitates a shift away from human-centered thinking. In the novel, Nakata is the one who manages to see, accept, and even communicate with things as they are. However, this capacity does not stem from an enlightened consciousness; rather, it emerges from a bizarre conscious-level cognitive and mnemonic disruption and from body-mind detachment, thereby freeing him from his human-centered mind and rational model of subjecthood. But, in his case, to be freed from a human-centered mind does not mean emancipation but displacement: he is decentered from the hierarchical epistemologies that elevate human rationality above other forms of being. He becomes more instinctual, intuitive, and materially attuned, moving through the world less as an autonomous subject than as Spinoza's analogy of a stone that falls and endeavors to keep on moving. Only then does Nakata gain the ability and mode of perception to converse with cats, effortlessly manipulate the weather, mysteriously discover his way to his destination, driven by an intuitive sense of duty, despite his inability to read and write, encounter consumerist icons like Colonel Sanders (the face of KFC), and Johnnie Walker (the icon of a whiskey brand), and ultimately find the entrance stone to close the gateway between this world and the other; marking a distinction between the levels of consciousness. He transcends the rigid boundaries of human experience that are set to limit our selfhood and perception.

The novel acknowledges the existence of nonhuman perspectives: Nakata tries to name the tomcat "Otsuka," and the cat explains: "Cats can get by without names. We go by smell, shape, things of this nature. As long as we know, there's no worries for us" (Murakami, 2005, p. 59). In his conversation with Nakata, Mr. Otsuka, the tomcat, even recognizes that he cannot write either and that his mind is average, but this has never been inconvenient for him. Cats' independent nature is further demonstrated when Otsuka describes them as "creatures of habit," with very ordered lives (p. 62). Murakami portrays the cats in his novel as autonomous, conscious, intelligent, and significant beings who influence the subsequent course of events. Contrary to Western philosophy, which distinguishes the human species as *the* singularly aware, conscious, and intellectual beings, Murakami's world presents an alternative, challenging view of consciousness and selfhood beyond the human realm. The juxtaposition of autonomous nonhuman beings with the fragmented consciousness of humans suggests that selfhood extends beyond anthropocentric boundaries. These relational configurations of selfhood invite a theoretical reframing of selfhood beyond anthropocentrism. At this stage, Deleuze and Guattari's models of selfhood provide a useful basis. Their idea of "becoming-animal" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 238), in which identity is fluid, and consciousness arises from relational assemblages rather than individual subjectivity, aligns with the novel's exploration of selfhood. On their way to selfhood, neither Nakata nor Kafka is completely isolated; their transformation arises through interspecies, nonhierarchical connection, within a shared field of being. Thus, Murakami's world operates rhizomatically, portraying meaning and agency as emerging from connections rather

than fixed origins.

In her article "Connectivity Thinking, Animism, and the Pursuit of Liveliness," Deborah Bird Rose addresses the dualistic Western thought that separates human and nonhuman beings, arguing for a renewed perspective that defends connectivity, diversity, complexity, and the relationality of all beings. Drawing on Val Plumwood's ideas, Bird Rose discusses the "hyperseparation" in Western philosophy, which operates through numerous dualisms, such as mind/matter and culture/nature (2017, p. 493). Concepts such as separation, opposition, hierarchy, and domination cloud our worldview and enforce the idea that humans and nature are inherently different, with humans deemed superior. This leads to the notion of "dead matter": a world without mind or self-livelihood, in which humans are the only mindful, thinking agents (Bird Rose, 2017, p. 494). Through animistic thinking, however, this human-centric notion is challenged, and nonhuman beings, such as animals and matter, are understood as persons with their own interests, desires, and ways of life. Murakami's world in *Kafka on the Shore,* therefore, is an animistic one, encompassing the liveliness of all beings beyond the human sphere. Namely, cats in the novel present this dynamic by refusing human superiority, asserting their vitality and personhood, living according to their own way of life, and playing active roles in the story. Animals–cats, do not exist as "mere machines" but rather as persons, with personalities and habits, perhaps even more intelligent and insightful than their human counterparts.

Intelligence, therefore, is not an exclusive or elevating hallmark of humanity and personhood, but rather a shared trait across species. The complexity of being is expressed in Bennett's study, in which she ascribes to human individuals a composition of vital materials, highlighting their thing power. She expresses that "we are walking, talking minerals" (2010, p. 11). This statement resonates with the cats in the novel, who are walking and *talking*. In *Postmodern Fables*, Jean-François Lyotard further demonstrates the materiality in humankind: "Humankind is taken for a complex material system; consciousness, for an effect of language; and language for a highly complex material system" (1997, p. 98). Likewise, Richard Rorty describes humans as extremely complex animals, denying the idea that they possess an extra added ingredient called "intellect" or "a rational soul," which he also suggests casts "doubt on the distinction between adapting to reality and knowing reality" (1995, p. 199). These approaches, which challenge human exceptionalism and superiority, could reduce humans to mere *things*. This reduction raises the question of whether Nakata, bereaved of his intellect and reason, is a *thing* or a *soul* without reason? Or can he not represent the two existences, or the symbiosis of the two? Perhaps he represents the rawest, primal form of personhood, not exhausted by human-centric constructs, concepts, or societal systems, unbothered by the complexities of modernity and reality, and more attuned to nature and the collective.

Nakata's effortless connection to natural and unnatural matters further reinforces his primal, intrinsic bond with both the natural world and the collective. While Kafka flees home, Nakata also embarks on a nearly quest-like journey to find the entrance stone that will restore the order of the world. Whenever there is a disturbance in the natural order – a break in reality that aligns with the novel's metaphysical, dreamlike atmosphere – strange incidents occur, such as thunderstorms or fish and leeches falling from the sky. Nakata senses and predicts these disturbances intuitively, revealing his connection to nature and his role in the two worlds of the novel. His mission-driven journey takes him to the house of Johnnie Walker – the infamous cat-catcher, with the help of a dog, where he seeks a lost cat called Goma. This is one of the moments when the novel's two narrative structures clash, and two characters almost replace each other across different realms. Kafka, who is predestined to kill his father, kills him through Nakata's narrative, as Nakata himself. When Kafka wakes up after this incident, he is covered in blood but remembers nothing about the murder. This incident resonates with Stacy Alaimo's notion of "trans-corporeality." It is as if a trans-corporeal experience occurs between Nakata and Kafka. For Alaimo, trans-corporeality emphasizes movement across bodies and sites, revealing the material interconnections between human corporeality and the more-than-human world (2008, p. 238). Therefore, the concept creates an "epistemological space that acknowledges the often

unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures" (Alaimo, 2008, p. 238). This challenges the idea of the body as a closed or autonomous entity. In this sense, the shared experiential field between Nakata and Kafka can be read as a trans-corporeal relation, blurring the boundaries of selfhood, redeeming them as transparent and transitory, shattering the divisions between self and other, unconscious and conscious, and depicting consciousness as both collective and shared.

A new perspective on selfhood and the animistic element of the novel emerges once Nakata arrives at Johnnie Walker's place. Johnnie Walker, an iconic figure of a Scottish whisky produced by a British company, serves as a metaphor for Western consumerism and imperialist culture. The character, Kafka's father, "borrows his name and appearance" and hence is "famous the world over" (Murakami, 2005, p. 164). Walker tells Nakata that a person has to have a name and an appearance – a notion challenged by the tomcat, who, despite lacking a name, possesses a distinct personality. Walker's remark also deconstructs the concept of personhood, since both his name and appearance are borrowed, reframing these attributes as fluid performances that can be altered. Johnnie Walker is the antagonist, killing cats, collecting their heads, and harvesting their souls to create "a special kind of flute" which will help him collect larger souls and an even bigger flute which will rival the universe (Murakami, 2005, p. 184). This flute, though, cannot be heard or detected by ordinary people; however, Nakata might be able to hear it, or perhaps even has heard it before, hinting at his unusual ability to communicate with cats. He explains that cats serve as the starting point for this project because an essential order must be followed, emphasizing a hierarchy among souls.

This notion reinforces the idea that Western consumerist culture, here represented by a Western whisky brand icon consuming souls, instrumentalizes individuals for greater gain. A similar interpretation is offered by Amy Ty Lai, who characterizes him as a "commercial icon, a symbol of globalization and its sweeping power" (2007, p. 173). He is indeed a commercial icon, representing the consumerist effect and power worldwide. By prioritizing certain lives over others within this hierarchy, the novel criticizes the dehumanizing tendencies of a culture driven by consumption and domination, where even the essence of life becomes commodified. Strecher discusses the very effect that takes its toll on Japan's post-war consumer culture, and how Murakami's magical realist fiction turns it into a narrative fault line that reveals the hollowing of personal identity. He presents Murakami's first readers as the "first post-war generation" – the generation born after 1945, which thus never experienced wartime hardship or political movements (such as Zenkyōtō[3] student movement), which no longer existed. When such political rallying points disappeared in the early 1970s (e.g., the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and anti-U.S. bases), Japanese society, he argues, shifted from collective protest to "material pursuits and affluence" (Strecher, 1999, p. 264). For Murakami's generation, the loss of a unifying political cause meant the disappearance of a clear avenue for self-definition. Thereby, the article notes that the "very affluence … may pose the greatest threat to the development of a sense of self or individuality" (Strecher, 1999, p. 264). Thus, Murakami's narrative exposes this cultural shift – from a politically engaged, protest-driven youth culture to a consumer-driven society bestialized by the figure of Johnny Walker. Nakata's lost memory and Kafka Tamura's quest for selfhood thus gain deeper metaphorical resonance here. In short, the collapse of such political and national movements left a vacuum that postwar affluence filled, forcing Murakami's generation to seek identity in a culture without a collective purpose, which is a premise that the entire novel attempts to explore throughout the narrative. This transformation, driven by a capitalist logic that thrives on movement and replacement, resonates with Brian Massumi's (2002) Deleuzian process philosophy and his notion of affective social change mediated by motion and difference. Murakami's postwar generation, thus, resides within the very affective circuits of globalization and consumption that collectively redefine identity.

[3] A radical Japanese student movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s that organized protests against university administration, U.S.-Japan policies, and broader social injustices. It aimed to redefine political engagement and challenge hierarchical structures in both academia and society.

In his encounter with Johnnie Walker, Nakata is conflicted about the *mission* of killing Walker to save the cats. Johnnie Walker likens their conflict to a war, where people are forced to become soldiers, carry guns, and have to kill the other soldiers on the other side; otherwise, they will be the ones to be killed. This, as Walker puts it, is "human history in a nutshell" (Murakami, 2005, p. 187). History and war are key elements in the novel; the novel's two narrative structures correspond to two generations, with Kafka representing the younger and Nakata the older. Nakata's mysterious incident that swept away his memory and left him unconscious occurred in 1944, reported as "Rice Bowl Hill Incident" through the interviews with the teacher in charge of his class. She explains that they saw a silver light in the sky, assuming it was a plane on its way to bomb a large city (Murakami, 2005, p. 15). While they were hunting mushrooms in the woods, the children began collapsing and falling unconscious mysteriously. In this incident, only Nakata failed to regain consciousness and lost all memory, abilities, and intellect.

Nakata's memory loss and reduced intelligence stand as a metaphor for Japan's historical trauma, reflecting its troubled past and fractured collective memory. He embodies postwar Japan's sense of amnesia and the societal disruptions that followed World War II. The plane in the sky that the schoolteacher describes foreshadows the cataclysmic events of 1945, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which not only devastated two cities but also left an unforgettable mark on the nation's collective psyche. Nakata, therefore, embodies this traumatic rupture because he lacks memory, shadow, and *soul*. Thus, Johnnie Walker's attempt at collecting larger souls like human souls symbolizes the Western powers collecting the souls, the personalities of Japan. This is why Nakata/Kafka's, the young generation's unconscious, alter ego, or reflection, is the one dealing with the demons of Japan's recent history through Western icons such as Johnnie Walker and Colonel Sanders. Through Nakata's narrative, the demon Johnnie Walker is defeated, thereby repelling the curse on Kafka and, symbolically, on the younger generation. In parallel with this view, Joshua P. S. Kim interprets Kafka (through his youth and deliberate isolation) and Nakata (through his cognitive and social detachment) as parallel figures of detachment – both initially "detached" and "uninitiated" until the murder of Johnnie Walker occurs, marking their initiation into the real, interconnected world and the impossibility of full detachment (2022, p. 423). It is a way of coming to terms with the past trauma and defeating it in order not to be consumed by it. The fact that Johnnie Walker is, in fact, the father of Kafka, who leaves a mark on him, reinforces the theme of generational trauma and highlights how such trauma can be confronted and ultimately overcome. Selfhood is not condemned to be bound by past traumas and mistakes; rather, it holds the potential to transform and transcend such limitations – this is what the novel seeks to convey.

In the murder scene where Nakata is triggered by Johnnie Walker's violence and asking him to stop by crying "I don't feel myself anymore," Walker celebrates this opportunity: "You're no longer yourself. That's the ticket, Mr. Nakata. Wonderful! The most important thing of all. 'O, full of scorpions is my mind! *Macbeth* again!" (Murakami, 2005, pp. 194-195). Stepping out of selfhood is characterized here as a ticket, an opportunity, a line of flight. By stepping out of the self, by deterritorialization, one is able to change and adapt to changes in the assemblage to which one belongs. This little possibility of freedom enables change, and this change ultimately affects the other multiplicities with which it is connected. The assemblage that Kafka and Nakata, and all the other resident characters, undergo is ultimately affected by this pivotal moment; by the very act of stepping out of selfhood. Additionally, Johnnie Walker's quotation of Shakespeare's Macbeth, a character driven by the witches' prophecy to seize the throne through regicide, further highlights the Western intertextual themes echoed in the novel. The very Oedipus curse inflicted on Kafka already stands as a Western intertextual element about the concept of predestination. Kafka's name, however, serving as another Western reference to the Prague author, Franz Kafka, and his renowned novel,[4] evokes the possibility of metamorphosis, an internal transformation. This parallel not only mirrors the question of fate but also reveals the tension between destiny and choice, reflecting the novel's underlying exploration of agency

[4] *Metamorphosis* (1915).

and predetermination, which are essential to selfhood.

The question of predestination drives the novel's structure. In *Assemblage Theory*, Manuel DeLanda defines the assemblage as a multiplicity made up of many heterogeneous terms; a symbiosis, not filiations but alliances; not successions or lines of descent, but contagions, the wind (2016, p. 1). Therefore, assemblages reject concrete, rigid biological and social codes, instead accepting variable parameters that determine whether the ensemble is coded or decoded (DeLanda, 2016, p. 3). In *Kafka on the Shore,* filiations are decoded, and alliances homogenize individuals by preserving their heterogeneity. Although Kafka and Nakata never meet in person, they are deeply interconnected, as if embodying two versions of the same self. Both are detached from their original assemblages and connected, like the pathways of a rhizome, in a nonlinear, complex way. Once their roles are fulfilled, they continue to proceed independently. Nakata's role in this assemblage is to kill Johnnie Walker and find the entrance stone to close the gate between the worlds.

Therefore, after the murder of Johnnie Walker/Kafka's father, Kafka wakes up, disoriented, covered in blood, imagining murdering his father but not remembering anything. The novel contains liminal spaces that blur the boundaries between reality, time, and identity. The Komura Library is one such space, which represents a collective history and memory – where Kafka takes refuge from his curse. The library is a significant metaphor for the collective consciousness as Kafka, a member of the younger generation, tries to find himself, while Nakata describes himself as "empty inside," like "a library without a single book" (Murakami, 2005, p. 400). This contrast between the two characters demonstrates the rupture in collective memory, but at the same time, opens room for reterritorializations. The Komura Library is one of the spaces in which reterritorializations are realized in Kafka. There, he meets Miss Saeki, who is revealed to be his mother, and with whom he unwittingly fulfills the prophecy of engaging in an incestuous relationship. However, he also decodes his past through Miss Saeki's song and painting, bridging past and future events and demonstrating the power of art and objects in shaping reality. As previously discussed, objects have their own agency in the novel, playing an active role within the shared assemblage. They have the power to shape, initiate, or connect events, influencing the course of reality in meaningful ways. One such example is Miss Saeki's song, "Kafka on the Shore," in which the lyrics go thus:

> The drowning girl's fingers
> Search for the entrance stone, and more.
> Lifting the hem of her azure dress,
> She gazes –
> At Kafka on the shore. (Murakami, 2005, p. 330)

The song, as a creative artifact, narrates the events that resonate with Kafka's and Nakata's realities. Although Miss Saeki is unaware of Nakata's presence, her lyrics refer to "the entrance stone," as though this single object is what connects all these individuals within the same assemblage. The lyrics also contain other references to Kafka's and Nakata's shared reality, revealing that all these individuals are interconnected beyond time and space: "Little fish rain down from the sky. / Outside the window there are soldiers, / steeling themselves to die" (Murakami, 2005, p. 299). Virginia Yeung reads this song as an example of "time's arrow flying back and forth at the same time … the song is a work of the past, yet the cryptic lyrics allude to things that happened decades later" (2016, p. 149). Therefore, Kafka realizes that the strange rain of fish is also mentioned in the song, written years prior to Kafka's reality. The artifacts, such as the song and the painting, possess the power to merge past and future, serving almost as totemic objects that encapsulate and unify the spirit of the individuals in the novel beyond the limits of time and space. The totemic presence and the liminal spaces manifest themselves primarily in the forest with figures such as soldiers and a teacher.

Between Worlds: Metaphysics, Reconciliation, and Becoming

As echoed in the lyrics of the song, there are two soldiers in the depths of the forest that Kafka encounters. They resemble guiding spirits, protecting the entrance, and serving as historical figures trapped in the past, as they are the same soldiers who disappeared during World War II. Strecher notes that Murakami's fiction centers on an "other world" or a "metaphysical world," guiding readers into the individual's inner narrative ("*monogatari*") while also "tapping into *the* collective, universal Narrative, with a capital *N*," rooted in human history and experience (2014, p. 16). Rebecca Suter demonstrates that this other world ("*achiragawa*") coexists with reality and claims that the nature and function of *achiragawa* are connected to Murakami's "two-story house" metaphor (2019, p. 135-136). In this metaphor, Murakami likens the mind to a "two-story house," with a "basement" accessible through a secret door, where "you connect with your past … because you have entered in your own soul" (2002, as cited in Strecher, 2014, p. 21). Suter also mentions Murakami's use of "fantastic hesitation," where events are presented in a way that is neither purely supernatural nor purely rational, leaving the reader in a liminal zone in between (2019, p. 141). Thus, the metaphysical in Murakami does not function as an external event but as an extension of the character's inner consciousness, just like the forest in the novel.

Strecher further describes the forest as a "metaphysical realm" and notes that Kafka's conversation with the soldiers is not literal but rather internal, as his lines are not written in quotation marks (2014, p. 96). Kafka's observation that seeing the two soldiers is "something words can't express" reinforces this ineffability (Murakami, 2005, p. 604). Both soldiers advise him not to look back until he reaches his destination, and there he feels as if he is amid a horrific sandstorm – the novel's central metaphor. The teacher figure in the forest, revealed to be Miss Saeki, also guides him. She represents forgiveness and reconciliation for Kafka as reflected in the words of the boy named Crow: "Mother, you say. I forgive you. And with those words, audibly, the frozen part of your heart crumbles" (Murakami, 2005, p. 581). The paternal curse and the maternal rejection are finally resolved; however, this resolution is not conclusive for Kafka's ongoing journey of self-discovery.

Between the past and the present, the real and the dream, Kafka moves forward as he comes to terms with his past and embraces the future. The forest becomes a space for Kafka from which he returns "stronger than ever before, ready to face his future with a new determination" and is afforded "a sense of closure with the past, and desire to construct something new in the future" (Strecher, 2020, p. 341). The metaphysical realm of death grants him the possibility of renewal and closure. Once he is reconciled with his past, he breaks free from the shackles of his predestination. Here, the novel, once again, celebrates coming to terms with the past, the possibility of reconciliation, and the possibility of a line of flight – a sense of freedom. Kafka describes himself as "safe inside this container called *me,*" and "the outlines of this being – *me* – fit right inside and are locked neatly away," and that he's where he belongs (Murakami, 2005, p. 69). However, he learns that *me* is not permanently locked away within the outlines of his being; this understanding emerges through his processes of deterritorialization, reconciliation with his past, and the lines of flight that liberate him from that "container." Selfhood, thus, becomes a fluid concept, extending beyond the social, historical, and biological boundaries that try to define it.

This redefinition of selfhood is not limited to metaphysical or psychological transformation; it is also articulated through the novel's treatment of the physical body itself. As Strecher observes, Murakami, in his fiction, treats the physical body as "little more than a container, housing a core identity – a soul, a *kokoro* – that is by no means permanently fixed to that container" (2014, p. 207). This might be the reason for Kafka's disdain for his own body, because, as Strecher argues, while the "contents" of that body may well be the "soul" of Nakata, the vessel itself is the product of Johnnie Walker, and as such it bears the *physical* curse of that origin (2014, p. 207). The separation of body and soul here does not directly indicate dualism; instead, it reveals a dynamic assemblage of human and nonhuman forces that is similar to the break in identity Kafka experiences through his own deterritorialization from the Oedipal, hereditary, and corporeal

limits imposed on him. In this way, Kafka's disgust toward his own body gains significance as if he carries a hereditary curse: "I don't like the container I'm stuck in. … My face, my hands, my blood, my genes … I hate everything I inherited from my parents. I'd like nothing better than to escape it all, like running away from home" (Murakami, 2005, p. 349). Strecher highlights the importance of "blood" in the novel by drawing our attention to Kafka's feeling "himself to be trapped by what he sees as his father's tainted blood, by the very genetic material that flows through his veins" (2014, p. 147). His struggle, thus, has two lanes: a rebellion against the flesh (the vessel or the "container"), and an effort to escape the deterministic roles encoded within it. Therefore, the prophecy becomes a metaphor for the quintessential Deleuzian line of flight away from both corporeal and genealogical territories.

Kafka's "container" extends beyond the outlines of his body throughout the novel; one such extension of his container is the Komura library, where he spends most of his time. Daniel Krahn reads the library as an "ontological metaphor" containing all potentials, possibilities, interpretations, and intertextual references (2021, p. 112). He claims that the novel does not produce a new version of the self but rather interrogates the limitations of the realist one (p. 112). However, the gist of selfhood lies in its capacity to challenge limitations and make room for new versions of it, rather than producing a new version of the self, a concept Murakami masterfully conveys in his narrative. In an interview, Murakami admits that his fiction is a "constructive destruction" (Ellis et al., 2005, p. 554). He continues to emphasize that his conclusions are not final: "Nothing is conclusive. It's changeable. I always feel that everything is changeable in my fiction" (Ellis et al., 2005, p. 561). Murakami's fiction, therefore, creates space for possibilities and multiplicities, functioning as a rhizomic structure that denies hierarchies and rigid boundaries of being. The act of *being* represented as an ongoing process, continuously shifting from one assemblage to another, is always shaped by lines of flight and connections that transcend the boundaries of time, space, and reality. This is why the novel ends with a hopeful note: "When you wake up, you'll be in a brand-new world" (Murakami, 2005, p. 615). Just as the individual undergoes a transformation, the assemblage to which he belongs changes accordingly. Selfhood is neither absolute nor conclusive; consequently, identity remains unresolved, leaving the novel open-ended.

Conclusion

In *Kafka on the Shore*, Haruki Murakami presents the multiplicity of being, rejects absolutism, and celebrates the interconnectedness of existence. In his enigmatic, dream-like fiction, the two worlds collide: the conscious and the unconscious, the past and the present, the real and the dream. Murakami describes writing his fiction as a dream, a procedure of the dream (Ellis et al., 2005, p. 559). Just like the rhizomic structure of the narration, the very act of writing is also described as an independent, changing, dream-like procedure. Thereby, the ending also gets no absolute resolution; instead, it celebrates the possibility of different worlds one can enter, different assemblages. Through its animistic elements, the novel also acknowledges the nonhuman entities, treating them as active participants in the course of events. Talking cats, the painting, the song, and the entrance stone exemplify the animistic world Murakami builds in *Kafka on the Shore*. Without their effect, the story cannot progress; and without their presence, the individuals in the story cannot continue their course of *becoming*. The novel's encompassing, interconnected, and non-hierarchical structure demonstrates a different dimensional way of being, transcending time, space, and even the body.

The story frequently questions the past and the inherited, ancestral, genetic, and cultural codes that shape our identity, making this question one of its central themes. Beyond Kafka's paternal Oedipal curse and maternal rejection, Murakami also delves into the troubled and traumatic history of Japan and the invasive, globalized, consumerist culture of America as fundamental metaphors in his fiction, using surrealist figures such as Johnnie Walker and Colonel Sanders. These two metaphorical elements significantly shape and reflect the past and present struggles of Japanese individuals' sense of selfhood. As Murakami himself spent years in America and later returned to Japan, the self-discovery he explores in this bildungsroman also mirrors his own re-

entry, realization, and reterritorialization of the world he had left. He comments on America as "discovered in [his] temporality … seen through a class window," and that he saw this pervasive culture "as a fiction" that he could see "America through [his] own fictional window" (Ellis et al., 2005, p. 555). Also, given his dual role as translator[5] and author, he serves as a "cultural mediator," fostering a dialogue between Western realism and Japanese metaphysical and animistic traditions (Nihei, 2016, p. 383).

Drawing on his interpretation of America, his role as a cultural mediator, and the nonconclusive nature of his fiction, Murakami presents selfhood as an ever-evolving construct, shaped by external realities that are themselves subjective and constructed by social and cultural narratives. Furthermore, as earlier sections of this analysis suggest, Western consumerist culture, epitomized and bestialized by Johnnie Walker as a soul-collecting villain, and the societal amnesia represented by Nakata highlight the tension among historical trauma, generational memory, and the pressures of a commodified, postwar society. Murakami's narrative demonstrates that the pursuit of individuality and identity in such a landscape requires confronting inherited trauma, but it does not reduce selfhood to this fixation; instead, it requires negotiating the influence of globalized forces and ultimately integrating these external forces into a personal and collective understanding of the self. Through the protagonist's personal quest in *Kafka on the Shore*, the concepts of reality and, thereby, selfhood are revealed to be mediated and shaped by individual and cultural lenses. The novel shows us that the process of becoming never ends; as one entrance opens, another closes, but the journey persists.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Declaration of AI Use

Any AI-assisted tools, if used, were limited to language editing. No AI tools were used for data collection, analysis, or interpretation of findings. The author(s) assume sole responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and final content of the manuscript.

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[5] Chikako Nihei points out that Murakami's retranslation of *The Catcher in the Rye* (2003) "foreignizes" Salinger's prose, especially through the use of the intimate pronoun *kimi* for "you" (2016, p. 384). This positions Murakami in a liminal space where cultural borders are blurred and translation becomes a creative act. This sensibility is visible in *Kafka on the Shore* as well.

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