International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Embracing Individuality: A Study of Nonconformity and Vulnerability in Norwegian Wood

Suganthi M[1], Dr.Sreeja Balakrishnan[2]

[1] Avinashilingam Institute for Home Scince and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore, 641043, India
[2] Avinashilingam Institute for Home Scince and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore, 641043, India

ABSTRACT :

Norwegian Wood is one of Haruki Murakami's most melancholic works, revealing multiple layers of perspective as characters navigate trauma, seeking a foothold in their existence. Murakami's novels consistently explore themes of memory and death, showing the desire for a meaningful life even in the face of mortality. Death is a universal theme intricately woven throughout Murakami's narratives, emphasizing the need to move forward despite life's challenges. This study aims to recognize the significance of individuals grappling with trauma, choosing to live and cultivate their existence by seeking meaningful values. It emphasizes that, while memory and death are common topics, credit should be given to those, like Midori, seeking solace amidst traumatic circumstances to anchor their shoulders and find shelter. The main insight of the study is to explore Midori as a non-conformist. Despite vulnerability, she turns her weaknesses into strengths, evolving to exist even more powerfully than before.

Trauma and healing are two important factors that can bring changes and shape the values of everyone's life. Nowadays, the impact of trauma is globally tremendous after the novel coronavirus pandemic. People are facing various mental struggles and seeking validation from others. This pandemic has turned out to be especially challenging for those who have lost their beloved ones, leading them into the depths of grief and depression. Mentioning this recent pandemic would be a better example for highlighting the pain of grief and depression portrayed in Haruki Murakami's Norwegian Wood. Individuals in the novel go through endless complexities and insecurities, even though they are in their teenage years. They painfully experience the pain of the traumatic phase and build certain values and ethics on their own. This analysis focuses on the character Midori, who stands out among the other characters in the novel. Murakami never disappoints readers by adding eccentric characters to his novels, and Midori is no exception. The primary purpose of introducing this unique character is to inject colourful values into the capitalist society depicted in the novel, where the main protagonist, Toru, finds himself struggling with a sense of strangeness beyond his assigned role. Murakami's intention in bringing forth this multilayered character is to reveal the essence of life and provide insights into coping with the passage of time.

Murakami has depicted the evolution of individualism among Japanese individuals. He remarks on the abrupt changes in the psychosocial tension of the young generation in Japan. Introducing many characters in the novel is an interesting aspect, but they adhere to different social norms. On the other hand, Midori and Toru fight against social norms to build their own values and ethical standards. Murakami introduces a certain ideology into these two characters—one who always questions the political mechanisms of societies and the other who consistently chooses to exist as a nonconformist. Before delving deeply into the character of Midori, it is necessary to study the other characters so that one can understand what Murakami actually tried to convey through them.

The novel prominently holds the idea of nonconformism. There are people who simply want to follow the rules and norms without understanding the actual history of why one should follow them. On the other hand, there are students who question everything in the novel. This leads to identifying the characters' personality traits by understanding their political, economic, and psychological factors. Murakami strongly allows his female characters to explore their willpower patiently and
Other male characters such as Nagasawa, Kizuki, and the Storm Trooper are the ones afraid of their self-determination, instead pretending to be conformists by following their desires according to societal norms. However, they fail to live the way they truly want to.

Toru Watanabe, the central protagonist of the novel, assumes a significant role in Midori's life. Upon his arrival in Tokyo, he embarks on a poignant journey of self-discovery, maneuvering through diverse situations while grappling with the search for identity among new acquaintances, evolving values, and the complexities of love. His character undergoes initial development as he confronts emotional challenges, notably when navigating the intricate waves of emotions alongside Naoko. As a teenager, Toru navigates the memories of his deceased friend, Kizuki and assumes the responsibility of caring for Kizuki's girlfriend, Naoko.

Murakami beautifully intertwines Toru and Midori's emotional healing and personal growth journey in the novel. Meanwhile, Toru copes with his emotions for Naoko and grapples with the search for a meaningful existence. He begins to observe everyone in the dormitory, witnessing a group of people who support capitalism and pressure other students to follow suit. Toru has a friend named Storm Trooper, and he wonders about his lifestyle and discipline.

Toru has different relationship dynamics with everyone. With Kizuki, Toru is obedient, serene, true to himself, and never anxious. However, with Nagasawa, he tends to change his values and pursues what he gets influenced by Nagasawa. He does everything that Nagasawa does without any second thought. With Naoko, Toru experiences an emotional rollercoaster. He always waits for her letters, never wanting his love to be reciprocated because he knows Naoko is going through a tough phase after losing her boyfriend. However, with Midori, Toru exists in a better way. He feels himself better in her point of view, and they both always discuss beyond the accepted definitions of society. Growing with Midori literally turns Toru into a better person who discovers new perspectives of life.

Toru and Nagasawa are two different identities. Nagasawa is quite selfish about himself, always putting himself first and least bothered about others. Despite being a decent guy, he fails to respect certain individual values and ethics. Both he and Toru share a similar interest in reading books, discussing authors like Dostoevsky, Fitzgerald, and Dickens. However, despite these shared interests, their life ethics differ. Nagasawa values himself more than others, while Toru is in the process of self-discovery, studying societal patterns through his experiences, and placing value on human ideas and emotions. Nagasawa believes that power and social existence hold significant importance in life, but he fails to uphold fundamental values and beliefs. He expresses his ideology as follows,

Of course life frightens me sometimes. I don't happen to take that as the premise for everything else, though. I'm going to give it 100 per cent and go as far as I can. I'll take what I want and leave what I don't want. That's how I

intend to live my life, and if things go bad, I'll stop and reconsider at that point. If you think about it, an unfair society is a society that makes it possible for you to exploit your abilities to the limit. (266)

Nagasawa places a high value on power and social existence, suggesting that these elements are crucial in life. This implies a prioritization of personal success and social standing. is portrayed as someone who fails to endure fundamental values and beliefs. This implies that he may be willing to compromise on ethical principles or personal convictions in pursuit of his goals.

It has been substantiated that individuals akin to Nagasawa are subject to societal influences, and they harbour a skepticism towards the adequacy of nonconformity and vulnerability, perceiving these traits as indicative of weakness.

Ivanov, the Russian sociologist, supports the viewpoint of the quoted author by providing an explanation of conformism. According to Ivanov, conformism involves the unavoidable submission of an individual's personality to external, officially approved clichés, and standards. It signifies obedience to 'the social elite' and a heightened awareness of the opinions of those who hold significance. In simpler terms, conformism is seen by Ivanov as a way of existing where the individual trims down their personality to fit accepted societal norms and expectations.

Toru and Midori distinguish themselves within this context, engaging in discussions about Japanese students who feign revolutionary ideals and espouse comprehensive knowledge of Marxism. Toru's awareness of the intellectual demands posed by a work like Das Kapital and his recognition that a specific intellectual apparatus, or knowledge base, is necessary to fully grasp its content. In Murakami's words, "I understood some bits, not others. You have to acquire the necessary intellectual apparatus to read a book like Das Kapital. I think I understand the general idea of Marxism" (233). Toru is expressing his thoughts about understanding some aspects of a complex work like Das Kapital, written by Karl Marx. He acknowledges that comprehending such a book requires the acquisition of a certain intellectual foundation or background. Toru admits that while he may not grasp every detail, he believes he has a general understanding of Marxist ideology.

Though Midori recounts an instance of discrimination wherein she is reproached by an individual for purportedly lacking awareness of Marxism and their collective principles. However, subsequent revelations lead Midori to ascertain that these individuals are merely masquerading, fabricating a façade for the sake of garnering fame and popularity. In Murakami's words,

You know, when I went to university I joined a folk-music club. I just wanted to sing songs. But the members were a load of frauds. I get goose-bumps just thinking about them. The first thing they tell you when you enter the club is you have to read Marx. "Read page so-and-so to such-and-such for next time.' Somebody gave a lecture on how folk songs have to be deeply involved with society and the radical movement. So, what the hell, I went home and tried as hard as I could to read it, but I didn't understand a thing. It was worse than the subjunctive. I gave up after three pages. So I went to the next week's meeting like a good little scout and said I had read it, but I couldn't understand it. From that point on they treated me like an idiot. (233-234)

Reflecting on this period, Midori describes the members as "a load of frauds." Upon joining, she was confronted with the expectation to delve into Marxist literature, specifically Das Kapital, as a prerequisite for participation. The club emphasized the necessity for folk songs to be intricately connected with societal and radical movements, prompting Midori to make a diligent attempt to comprehend the material. Despite her sincere efforts, she found the content challenging, equating it to the difficulty of grappling with the subjunctive tense in language studies. Frustrated, Midori eventually abandoned the endeavour after three pages.

Midori's narrative trajectory in Norwegian Wood is marked by significant adversities. The loss of her mother and the ailing state of her father, who languishes on his deathbed, contribute to the profound challenges she endures. In portraying Midori, Haruki Murakami employs a vivid narrative lens that captures her character intricately. Her self-representation as a working-class individual serves as a poignant element of her identity within the narrative. Despite the weight of her circumstances, Murakami delineates Midori as a character imbued with humour, talkativeness, and, notably, a consistent coherence in her expressions. This portrayal underscores her emotional evolution amid the crucible of struggles and traumas she confronts.

Midori's ability to inject humour into her discourse, coupled with her articulate and sensible communication, serves as a testament to her resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms. Through Murakami's nuanced portrayal, Midori emerges as a multifaceted character, whose emotional transformation becomes palpable within the narrative framework.

Midori's contemplation on death is characterized by a distinctive perspective, one that diverges from a morose fixation on melancholia. Instead, she envisions a tranquil demise, pondering the possibility of peacefully succumbing to an accidental fire. This portrayal suggests a nuanced confrontation with mortality, where Midori's desire is framed within the context of a serene and inevitable end, rather than a manifestation of a melancholic inclination towards self-harm. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of post-mourning positive transformation, which involves the acceptance of loss (Butler 21), and Sigmund Freud's notion of ideal mourning, emphasizing the ego's liberation from the anguish of loss (Freud 245), Midori's approach to mourning appears to align with these theoretical frameworks. The completeness of Midori's mourning process is reflected in her contemplation of death as a peaceful eventuality rather than an obsessive fixation on ending her life due to melancholia. In Murakami's words,

Nah, a funeral's a piece of cake. We've had plenty of practice. You put on a black kimono and sit there like a lady and everybody else takes care of business - an uncle, a neighbour, like that. They bring the sake, order the sushi, say comforting things, cry, carry on, divide up the keepsakes. It's a breeze. A picnic. Compared to nursing someone day after day, it's an absolute picnic. We were drained, my sister and me. We couldn't even cry. We didn't have any tears left. Really. Except, when you do that, they start whispering about you: "Those girls are as cold as ice.' So then, we're never going to cry, that's just how the two of us are. I know we could have faked it, but we would never do anything like that. (299)

In essence, Midori's mindset reflects a transformative engagement with grief and loss, where she navigates the complexities of mourning in a manner that aligns with the concepts of positive transformation and the ego's emancipation from the grief of loss as proposed by Butler and Freud, respectively. This suggests a nuanced portrayal of Midori's emotional journey in the narrative, marked by a contemplative acceptance of mortality.

Midori's emotional honesty, where she openly expresses her feelings and vulnerabilities, fosters a deeper connection with Toru. This honesty contributes to the development of trust and emotional intimacy between them. Midori and Toru share similar values and perspectives that align with their non-conformist attitudes. Their shared worldview creates a strong connection, as they find common ground in navigating societal expectations and personal challenges.

Toru's understanding and support play a crucial role in Midori's emotional journey. Toru listens to her, respects her individuality, and provides companionship. In the midst of their bittersweet experiences, Toru becomes a source of solace and understanding for Midori.

Murakami articulates her longing for love, "somewhere between 'not enough' and 'not at all'. I was always hungry for love. Just once, I wanted to know what it was like to get my fill of it – to be fed so much love I couldn't take any more" (99).

Toru's presence and his own emotional journey may contribute to Midori's positive transformation. His understanding and support may play a role in shaping her outlook on life and love and that's how they interpreted their longing for love.

It is a universal truth that humans are emotionally dependent on others, whether in friendships, romantic relationships, or family connections. Murakami beautifully portrayed various relationship dynamics in the novel, providing a rich foundation for psychological analysis. The narrative explores themes such as attachment, coping mechanisms, identity formation, societal influences, and the interplay of trauma and healing.

The most significant manifestation of vulnerability in Kizuki and Naoko's relationship is Kizuki's suicide. His decision to take his own life has a profound impact on Naoko, leaving her emotionally fragile and struggling to make sense of the loss. Following Kizuki's death, Naoko experiences intense emotional turmoil. She becomes vulnerable to the overwhelming grief and sadness associated with the loss of a loved one. Her mental health deteriorates, leading to her admission to a sanatorium.

Naoko's placement in a sanatorium is emblematic of her vulnerability.

The controlled and isolated environment represents a protective measure to address her mental health challenges but also underscores her fragility in the face of emotional distress. Murakami's novels often highlight the perspective of human interaction with nature. In Norwegian Wood, Naoko gradually reconnects with life after moving into the sanatorium, where she takes care of birds and works in the fields. Similarly, in Kafka on the Shore, the protagonist loses himself in the woods and finds his way back to reality.

The novel may also touch upon the psychological impact of societal expectations on personal relationships. Nagasawa and Hatsumi's relationship, influenced by societal norms, reflects the psychological tension between individual desires and societal pressures. Nagasawa with detachment, and Toru with authenticity. These coping strategies can be analysed in the context of psychological resilience and adaptation.

Nagasawa's hedonistic lifestyle, characterized by his pursuit of pleasure and disregard for emotional connections, might symbolize a form of discontent with conventional values. Murakami might use Nagasawa to critique the emptiness that can accompany a life solely focused on pleasure. Nagasawa's relationships, particularly with Hatsumi, may be used by Murakami to explore the complexity of human connections. Murakami articulates that, "Things like that just happen. There's probably not much you can do about them. It's certainly true in my case. Ofcourse, Nagasawa would say it's my responsibility, not his" (284). The casual and detached nature of their relationship contrasts with more emotionally invested connections, highlighting the various forms relationships can take.

Nagasawa engages in relationships with multiple girls despite being romantically involved with Hatsumi. For him, such relationships are easily navigable, while Hatsumi finds the situation emotionally distressing. Hatsumi remains loyal and committed to Nagasawa, but he displays a nonchalant attitude, indicating that he is indifferent to whether Hatsumi chooses to stay or leave. This dynamic raises questions about the complexities of love, loyalty, and differing perspectives on commitment within the context of their relationship.

The relationship between Toru and Midori explores the psychological aspects of authenticity and emotional connection. Their bond emphasizes the importance of genuine communication, shared values, and mutual understanding, contributing to their psychological well-being. Midori grapples with enduring insecurities stemming from a lack of proper parental affection and the challenges of living independently. Despite these hardships, her values stand in stark contrast to those of Nagasawa. Midori frequently reveals her vulnerabilities in the presence of Toru, expressing a deep longing for love

and reassurance. Her journey, marked by experiences of bullying, insecurity, and trauma, is ultimately characterized by resilience and a hopeful outlook on love. This examination highlights the intricate interplay of Midori's personal struggles and her enduring hope for emotional fulfilment.

Midori exhibits an unbiased and open-minded approach to life and relationships. Unlike some characters who may be constrained by societal norms or personal prejudices, Midori embraces a non-judgmental perspective. Her unbiased mindset allows her to navigate relationships with authenticity and without conforming to societal expectations. Her authenticity in expressing her thoughts and emotions contributes to her uniqueness. She openly communicates her vulnerabilities, desires, and insecurities without pretending, fostering a genuine connection with those around her. This level of emotional honesty sets her apart in a narrative where characters often grapple with internal conflicts.

Midori's non-conformist attitude aligns with the novel's broader themes of individuality and resistance against societal norms. Her willingness to embrace her unique qualities, rather than conforming to conventional expectations, positions her as a character who stands out in the narrative.

REFERENCES :

1. Crutchfield, R. S. (1955). Conformity and character. American Psychologist, 10(5), 191–198.
2. Danzig, M. E. (1963). The individual in society: A textbook of social psychology. Social Forces, 41(4), 564.
3. Freud, S., & Strachey, J. (1964). The ego and the id and other works.
4. Fromm, E. (1956). The art of loving. In R. N. Anshen (Ed.), Harper and Brothers.
5. Gaitanidis, I. (2012). Spiritual therapies in Japan. Japanese Journal of Religious Studies, 39(2), 353–385.
6. Ivanov, V. G. (1980). Collectivism. Lenizdat.
7. Kislyakov, P. A., et al. (2019). Conformism as a mechanism of safe prosocial behavior formation. Uchenye Zapiski RGSU, 18(2), 23–30.
8. Murakami, H. (2003). Norwegian Wood. Vintage Books.
9. Muto, T. (2016). Acceptance and commitment therapy in Murakami Haruki. Pragmatic Case Studies in Psychotherapy, 11(7).
10. Nayak, I. (2018). Memory and nostalgia in Haruki Murakami's fiction. The Critical Endeavor, 24.
11. Oe, K. (1989). Japan's dual identity: A writer's dilemma. In M. Miyoshi & H. O. Harootunian (Eds.), Postmodernism & Japan. Duke University Press.