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**Negotiating Epistemological Boundaries Through Symbolic Space in Haruki Murakami's *The City and Its Uncertain Walls***

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**Abstract**

Haruki Murakami's *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* (2024) is a testament to the author's longstanding exploration of memory, identity, and the fragility of reality. The Walled City, the severed shadow, and the dual libraries are all recurring motifs in Murakami's works that question the notions of knowledge and truth. This article suggests that these spaces are epistemological structures that interrogate the boundaries of rational knowledge and offer alternative ways of knowing based on memory, imagination, and subjective experience in the novel. The study is based on the theories of space developed by Gaston Bachelard, Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre and Victor Turner, which focuses on the relationship between reality and imagination mediated by symbolic space. In the end, Murakami offers knowledge as a process, and not as a thing. This article focuses on the epistemological importance of symbolic space, thus offering a contribution to the current debates on spatiality, liminality and identity in postmodern fiction.

**Keywords:** Haruki Murakami, symbolic space, epistemology, heterotopia, liminality, memory, postmodern fiction

**Introduction: The symbolic space and the limits of knowledge**

In world literature, Haruki Murakami stands in a unique category for his remarkable talent in constructing narrative worlds where the ordinary and the extraordinary, the real and the dream, the past and the present, and the conscious and the unconscious coexist. In his novels, including *Kafka on the Shore*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *1Q84*, Murakami continually examines the fragility of identity and the uncertainty of human knowledge. His protagonists often move from reality to imagination and vice versa, both physically and

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psychologically, implying that human comprehension is always partial, tentative and heavily reliant on spatial positioning.

*The City and Its Uncertain Walls'* origins are a testament to Murakami's ongoing fascination with these themes. It was originally conceived as a novella of the same name in 1980, and expanded into the "End of the World" story line of his masterpiece *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985). Murakami's return to this architectural and psychological landscape is a decades later, matured, deeply philosophical exploration of the self. The story of the narrator's quest to find his missing teenage lover slowly evolves into a far-reaching exploration of memory, identity, ageing and the nature of existence. The novel is continually posing the question of the Cartesian split between the real and the unreal. The protagonist's experience of the Walled City is marked by a disorientation of his senses, indicating that reality is not a singular, objective truth but a complex and multifaceted one that needs to be explored and understood.

While much has been written on nostalgia, memory and trauma in Murakami's fiction, much less has been focused on the particular epistemological value of symbolic space in this recent novel. The Walled City, shadows, dreams and libraries have often been read as purely psychological constructs or as allegories of postmodern alienation. In this article, it is proposed, rather, that these spaces are active epistemological mechanisms that produce, regulate and destabilize knowledge. Symbolic space is a way for Murakami to question the boundaries of rational certainty and to suggest other modes of knowledge based on memory, imagination and emotional experience.

### **Murakami Studies and the Spatial Turn**

Literary studies have increasingly turned to the spatial, or the 'spatial turn' as it has been called, and this has led to new ways of thinking about how environments in a story can actively construct consciousness and meaning. According to Robert T. Tally Jr., literary cartography and spatiality can help readers grasp the way that narrative space structures human experience and can serve as a hermeneutic tool for geography. Space has become more and more acknowledged as more than a passive backdrop in contemporary Murakami scholarship. Wells, forests, underground passages, libraries and enclosed cities are liminal spaces in which traditional ontological categories break down.

Murakami's fictional worlds have long been observed to produce alternative realities that question common notions about living, and that are not meant to be escapist, but to be a way of engaging with greater psychological traumas. Theoretical approaches of Gaston Bachelard, Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre and Victor Turner offer a strong framework for unpacking these spaces. Bachelard's "topoanalysis" sees intimate space as a place of imagination and memory; Foucault's heterotopia is a space that reflects and contests

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dominant realities; Lefebvre's focus on the social production of space sees space as ideologically and psychologically charged, and Turner's liminal space is a place of intense psychological transformation.

All of these frameworks together suggest that symbolic spaces in *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* are not just locations, but are active, cognitive structures. They determine what is knowable, who knows it, and the psychological price of knowledge.

### **Walled City and the Architecture of Epistemological Enclosure**

The Walled City is the most important symbolic place in the novel. It is something that lies outside the normal empirical realm, and it is a threshold between modes of being. The city is at once familiar and yet utterly foreign, welcoming and yet not fully intelligible. The first time the protagonist comes across the Wall, it is not just a boundary, but a massive, uninterrupted wall that completely cuts off the town from the outside world, and thus from the course of global history.

Walls have historically been a sign of protection, defense and exclusion. But in Murakami's novel they take on a more epistemological meaning. The Wall is not a stone or brick structure, it is a living, breathing entity, self-repairing and actively resisting invaders. The city operates as a closed system with its own rules and logic, outside of the linear conceptions of time and historical memory. Those who enter the city must accept an alternative, very limited system of knowledge.

In the terms of Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad, the Walled City is an extreme example of "conceived space" – a highly ordered, regulated and sterilized space – that violently suppresses the chaotic "lived space" of human emotion and trauma. The city is very similar to what Foucault calls a heterotopia. It mirrors and challenges the external world. In its confines, familiar assumptions are turned upside down. Time seems to be suspended, most obviously represented by a clock tower in the center of the town square without hands. Time does not move forward, memory does not have any value, and identity is not historically coherent. The city thus reveals the extreme limitations of rational systems that look for fixed truths and stable meanings, the truth of the Walled City being based on the erasure of the past.

The narrator's first wish to go into the city is a universal human desire to avoid suffering, old age and uncertainty. But the city ultimately shows that certainty is expensive. The city is also devoid of pain, memory, and emotional complexity, which in turn limits true human understanding. Murakami thus offers the city as a metaphor for epistemological enclosure, a space in which certainty is only attained by the violent eradication of the ambiguous, in which the inhabitants live in a placid but deeply empty way.

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**Severed Shadows, Ritual, and Fragmented Subjectivity**

The novel's most striking and violent spatial mechanics is the separation of people from their shadows, geographically. This motif is a continuation of Murakami's ongoing exploration of split selves and fractured identities. The shadow is a symbolic and material expression of memory, suffering, emotional experience and historical consciousness. The Gatekeeper physically slices the protagonist's shadow at the gates of the city with a special knife, thus creating a physical, visceral and irrevocable cost for entry into the epistemological safety of the town.

The shadow's removal is at first liberating. The people of the Walled City are relieved of painful memories, grief and the emotional burden of the outside world. But as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the shadow is the most important, most true part of the human being. Without it, people are empty vessels, idealized but incomplete versions of themselves. In the cold outpost of the Gatekeeper's estate, the protagonist visits his shadow as it nears death during the cold winter. The shadow tells him that life without suffering, without fighting, without time is empty. It states that the self is an illusion if it is not burdened by past.

The cut off shadow that is dying is a spatial fragmentation of subjectivity. Current theories of identity and trauma do not see a unified, Cartesian self, but rather the trauma that fragments the psyche, that remains unassimilated and disjointed. Murakami's literalization of the shadow is a reflection of this psychoanalytical understanding. Identity does not come from artificial coherence, but from painful negotiation of conflicting memories and traumas.

Moreover, the shadow represents knowledge that can only be gained in ways that are not purely rational. Trauma, loss and vulnerability are important sources of knowledge. The city tries to remove epistemological uncertainty by cutting the shadow and allowing it to slowly fade and die in the winter cold. But it also eradicates the experiences from which meaningful knowledge can arise. Murakami proposes that such spatial bifurcation of the body is a way to achieve real understanding, not by eliminating suffering, but by actively and painfully experiencing it.

**Archives of the Ineffable: Libraries, Dreams, and Alternative Epistemic Systems**

The library is a focal point of the symbolic geography of the novel. Murakami's libraries, traditionally related to empirical knowledge, preservation, and taxonomic learning, are liminal spaces that connect different realities and states of consciousness. The novel is a stark contrast between two archives: the Dream Library within the Wall and the Z Library, within the real world of Fukushima.

The Walled City's Dream Library is not a typical archive. Instead of keeping the information in written form, it stores the dreams, memories and emotional baggage of the townspeople in glowing egg-like orbs. The protagonist's job is to be the "Dream Reader", to lay his hands on these orbs and absorb what they contain without the aid of written language or logical syntax. This is a space of experiential knowledge only, no empirical knowledge. Characters are presented with truths that cannot be expressed in words, and so create an alternative epistemology, one of sensory absorption instead of rational deciphering. But this knowledge is locked up, it is felt and not acted upon and the Dream Library becomes a mausoleum of lost consciousness.

The external world (the remote Z Library) on the other hand is more traditional with bound books, cataloging systems, and a warm wood-burning stove. But it's also a very permeable border between realities. It becomes a place where memory, imagination and spectral beings converge. Even this physical space is not subject to objective logic, as the protagonist's encounters with the ghost of the previous director, Mr. Koyasu, demonstrate. Koyasu, appearing in his familiar cardigan to give guidance, is a continuous, unbroken connection to the past, in stark contrast to the amnesia of the Walled City.

Bachelard's notion of poetic space can shed light on the meaning of these libraries. Bachelard's intimate spaces are those that foster the imagination, that shelter the dreamer and that contain the most profound corners of human memory. Murakami's libraries do just that. They maintain forms of knowledge that are not included in rational, hyper-capitalist systems. Dreams and ghosts are not illusions, but significant epistemic phenomena, which open up hidden aspects of reality, intuition and spectral memory as alternative to reason.

### **The Liminal and the Cartographic and the Critique of Rational Knowledge**

The anthropological notion of liminality is a very useful theory for the spatial movement in the novel, as proposed by Victor Turner. Liminal spaces are "betwixt and between" the categories and therefore challenge the conventional systems of meaning. They are marked by deep ambiguity, change and uncertainty – the places where the rules of society and physics are temporarily suspended.

The shadow is found in the Walled City, the perimeter gatehouse, and the rural Fukushima library, all liminal spaces. They are in precarious positions between reality and imagination, memory and forgetting, self and other. The characters that enter these spaces experience significant epistemological shifts that question their understanding of the world.

The boundaries are most violated in the character of M, the savant boy in the real world. Although M never actually visited the Walled City, she obsessively maps its labyrinthine streets, the Wall and the clock tower with perfect accuracy. The boy's

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cartographic addiction is a deep epistemological disruption. He is able to see the unmappable, which is a testament to the fact that epistemological boundaries can be circumvented by those who can see the world beyond the neurotypical, rational. Typically used by empirical science and colonization, cartography is here used as an act of magical realism, a link between the subconscious and the physical.

Significantly, Murakami does not depict this uncertainty as a cognitive lack. Rather, ambiguity is a very productive state. Meaning is created in the ongoing transition from one reality to another, not in the holding on to one point of view. Knowledge is therefore not a fixed possession, but a process of negotiation, a spatial process. This focus on liminality is a direct attack on Enlightenment rationalism. There are no sterile structures of thought that can contain the irrationality of grief, longing and love.

### **Conclusion: Beyond Certainty**

In addition to its symbolic space, *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* proposes a unique epistemological ethics of humility, openness and vulnerability. Murakami directly confronts the modern need for answers, for totalization of understanding. The Walled City is a place of perfect security and coherence, but it's one that is maintained by violence and exclusion. Memory, grief and emotional complexity have to be literally cut away and sacrificed.

The narrator's experiences of uncertainty in the outside world, on the other hand, generate far more profound, and more painful, modes of understanding. When the protagonist returns to the real world, he realizes that his body is old, that he is going to die and that time cannot be stopped. He acknowledges that lived reality means giving up the idealized perfection of the Walled City which is timeless. The novel suggests that a life free of the suffering of time is a life free of meaning.

In this article, it has been shown that symbolic space is the main epistemological mechanism of the novel. Murakami's organic Walled City, which is geographically cut off, shadows, ineffable dreams, and liminal libraries, systematically questions the boundaries of rational certainty, and places memory, imagination, and subjective experience as superior ways of knowing.

The symbolic spaces of the novel are not just atmospheric but rather epistemological structures that actively influence the production, limitation and transformation of knowledge. Murakami's work undermines the boundaries between reality and imagination, the conscious self and the repressed other, and shows the fragility of absolute truth. In the end, *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* suggests that knowledge is not a product of empirical control, but of brave encounters with ambiguity. Space becomes the medium where reality, memory and

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imagination converge and where the limits of human knowledge are never set but always in the fragile and beautiful process of being negotiated.

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