
Postmodernist Escapism in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*

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Abstract: The objective of this paper is to examine the theme of escapism in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*, with particular attention to the postmodernist perspective that views Naoko's character with a psychological lens. Naoko is a figure of vulnerability and estrangement, and her withdrawal into solitude captures the existential confusion at the heart of all postmodernist stories. The study examines how her avoidance of personal tragedy and longing for certain social standards represent a desire for an unachievable utopia. The research emphasizes Murakami's critique of contemporary living and its effects on people's quest for meaning in the nothingness of postmodern life by examining the novel's symbolic landscapes of memory, dystopia, grief, and death.

Keywords: Alienation, Dystopia, Memory, Postmodernist Escapism, Trauma.

Introduction: Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* tells the tale of Toru Watanabe, a young child who suffers from trauma and grief because of the death of a loved one. The book is a remembrance of old recollections and is written in Toru Watanabe's first-person narrative. The narrative begins when Toru Watanabe, who is 37 years old, reaches Hamburg, New Germany, and hears the Beatles song "*Norwegian Wood*". Suddenly, he is struck with sadness and a sense of loss. He thinks about how things have changed in the last few years.

When Toru Watanabe's best friend Kizuki commits suicide on his seventeenth birthday, his entire world falls apart. Toru and Kizuki's girlfriend Naoko come closer as they share their sadness and turn to one another for comfort. An intimate rendezvous on Naoko's twentieth birthday marks the culmination of their growing bond, but the emotional strain breaks her, and she withdraws to a sanatorium close to Kyoto. With frequent visits and emotional letters, Toru remains by her side, becoming friends with Reiko, Naoko's roommate, who shares her own traumatic past.

In the meantime, Toru gets closer to Midori Kobayashi, a brave and vivacious student who contrasts sharply with Naoko's vulnerability. Unable to completely let go of his connection with Naoko, Toru confides in Reiko about his love for Midori despite feeling torn about his affection for both women. When Naoko kills herself, tragedy strikes once more, shattering Toru. He cuts all connections with Midori and drifts aimlessly throughout Japan, lost in despair. Reiko eventually assists Toru in gaining perspective, and he comes to see the importance of Midori in his life. After getting back with Reiko to talk about their losses together, Toru eventually finds the confidence to approach Midori and tell her how he feels.

The year 1949 marks the birth of Haruki Murakami. His writings have been translated into fifty languages and are much admired worldwide. Numerous honours have been bestowed upon him throughout his life. He examines existential crises, trauma, memory, and other topics in his writing. Among his most famous pieces is, *Norwegian Wood*, which tells the tale of a young child who struggles with mental anguish, sadness, and love. Murakami's use of music is crucial since it establishes the tone of the narrative. In addition to establishing a personal bond between the protagonist and the music, Murakami uses music to transport listeners to their former selves and arouse feelings of nostalgia. Thus, in Murakami's works, memory and music are intricately entwined.

The 1940s saw the development of a theory in English literature known as Postmodernist Theory. The literary trend known as postmodernism gained popularity in the middle of the 20th century. The goal of the movement was to dismantle the people's long-standing, inflexible customs and stereotypes. A paramount hypothesis that falls under postmodernism is escapism. Escapism enables people to escape reality and find comfort in their own fantasy world. A close reading of this novel, finds Naoko fleeing the actual world and entering a sanatorium as a result of her horrific past life memories.

Postmodern literature offers an escape from a world where reality often feels elusive and divided through its shattered narratives and complex realities. *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami is frequently hailed as a moving story of love and sorrow, but underlying its poetic prose is a deeper examination of the postmodernist escapist characteristic of people turning to memories, relationships, and parallel universes for solace. The escape from structured reality into fragmented, subjective experiences, which is a hallmark of postmodernist escapism, serves as an important prism through which to examine this narrative's emotional and psychological undercurrents. In addition to improving our comprehension of Murakami's narrative devices, an analysis of *Norwegian Wood's* postmodernist escapism provides insight into the universal want to escape the complexity of existence. Therefore, this paper aims to examine how postmodernist escapism is manifested in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*.

(Murakami) in "Murakami, Haruki's Postmodern World" analyses the overemphasis on development and romantic love, investigating how Murakami's characters oppose these ideas through emotional detachment and egalitarianism. Novels that explore postmodern utopias and attack modernist uniformity, such as *Dance Dance Dance* and *Norwegian Wood*,

are emphasised. (Kim) in "Rethinking Haruki Murakami: An Alternative History of Traumas and Aftermaths in *Kafka on the Shore*" discusses trauma and its aftermath as the main topics. The essay explores how Murakami emphasises issues of memory, identity, and reconciliation in *Kafka on the Shore* by fusing surrealist and symbolic elements to depict emotional healing. (Blacker) in "The Teleology of Trauma: How Haruki Murakami Shapes Narratives and Their Methods in Creating and Understanding Trauma" discusses Murakami's fractured narratives in order to illustrate the process of comprehending trauma. It makes the case that his tales, especially *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, defy linear narrative in order to reflect the erratic process of self-discovery and healing. (Potik) in "Existential Issues in the Fiction Writing of Haruki Murakami" discusses themes that appear frequently in Murakami's writings, such as absurdity, alienation, and the quest for identity. The study looks at how his characters struggle with existential issues and frequently look for purpose in a chaotic and fractured world. (Issa) "Masculinity and Gender Roles in Selected Stories by Haruki Murakami" examines how male protagonists and gender roles are portrayed. It draws attention to Murakami's complex handling of both conventional and unconventional roles, exposing a critical yet progressive view of masculinity. (Shin) in "Mobility in the Work of Haruki Murakami" explores *Dance Dance Dance* as a story about both emotional and physical transformation. The study emphasises how Murakami's protagonists search for meaning and connection through both literal and symbolic journeys. (Katō) in "The problem of Tatemashi in Murakami Haruki's work: comparing *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *1Q84*" highlights how social structures undermine personal autonomy and identity, mirroring cultural quandaries in Japan. (Fauziyati) Educational Values in *After Dark* presents the book as a moral and philosophical examination of current challenges while delving into themes of human connection and resiliency. Examining how evil is portrayed in *Kafka on the Shore*, Japanese Literature and Aesthetics of Shadow" connects it to traditional Japanese aesthetics and the philosophical study of morality. (Thi) Examining how evil is portrayed in *Kafka on the Shore*, "Japanese Literature and Aesthetics of Shadow" connects it to traditional Japanese aesthetics and the philosophical study of morality. (Ota) in "Study on the Music in the Works of Haruki Murakami": This article explores the ubiquitous role of music in Murakami's books, from *Hear the Wind Sing* to *Dance Dance Dance*, emphasizing how it influences character emotions, narrative structures, and thematic depth—a feature that gives Naoko's experiences in *Norwegian Wood* more depth. (Gabriel) in "Back to the Unfamiliar: Murakami Haruki's Travel Writings": examines and estrangement shown in his works of fiction, providing analogies to Naoko's emotional and psychological escape. (Chozick) in "De-Exoticizing Haruki Murakami's Reception" discusses how Murakami's work has been received in the West, highlighting his universal themes that speak to Naoko's intensely human concerns and arguing against exoticized interpretations. (Strecher) in "The 'Empty' Narrative and Haruki Murakami's Celebrity" this study explores Murakami's worldwide literary renown and connects it to his "empty" and minimalist narrative style, which offers readers a contemplative environment in which to interact with subjects like as Naoko's fractured psyche. (Akashi) in "Translator celebrity: investigating Haruki Murakami's visibility as a translator examines Murakami's function as a translator", examining how his translations impact his narrative style and worldwide literary identity, which in turn indirectly molds characters such as Naoko

through nuanced linguistic and cultural interactions. (Grajadian) in “Beyond the Music of Words: From the “Sound of Loneliness” to the “Resonance of Love” in Haruki Murakami’s Literature” discuss emotional and aural themes in Murakami’s writings, following the progression from themes of loneliness to love-based relationships. It draws attention to the ways that sound and quiet in *Norwegian Wood* intensify the hardships and moments of comfort experienced by characters like Naoko. (Dao) in “The movie adaptation of the novel ‘*Norwegian wood*’” examine how the film depicts Haruki Murakami’s novel’s themes of love, loss, and mental distress, the research paper on the Norwegian Wood movie also looks at the difficulties in converting the book’s introspective narrative into a movie. (Islam) in “Suicide, Memory and Trauma in Haruki Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood*” explores the recurring themes of psychological pain and loss through the lens of suicide, memory, and trauma. It looks at how Kizuki and Naoko’s suicides impact Toru Watanabe’s path, mirroring more general existential and emotional issues based on loss and remembrance. (Dyah Ayu Prameswari, Forms of Existential Crisis in Haruki Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood* : Toru Watanabe Analysis) the study explores Toru’s struggles with identity, alienation, and loneliness. His character narrative exhibits existential undertones as the study highlights his search for purpose amid the chaos of love, death, and emotional detachment. (Farah Rizky Irawati) in “Character’s Id, Ego, and Superego in *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami”, Naoko applies Freudian psychoanalysis to her own psyche. It sheds light on her mental instability and catastrophic choices by highlighting the interaction of her id-driven cravings, ego’s control struggles, and superego’s moral difficulties. (Amalia) in the article “Hysteria in the Novel *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami” explores Naoko’s mental collapse and concludes that it is hysteria. It explores how social pressures and unsolved traumas worsen her mental health, presenting her sickness as both cultural and personal. (Pratiwi) The main character’s social life in *Norwegian Wood*: A Sociology of Literature, Toru Watanabe places Toru’s interactions in the perspective of larger social structures. The study examines how his relationships with other people reflect the social changes that occurred in Japan after the 1960s, with a particular emphasis on how standards for friendship and love changed. (Kurniawan) “Toru Watanabe’s Mental Development in *Norwegian Wood* (1987): An Individual Psychological Approach” explores the resilience and emotional development of Toru. The essay highlights his path to self-actualization by following his development via relationships, self-reflection, and loss management. (Adhikari) The conflict between contemporary Western influences and traditional Japanese ideals is examined in “Cultural Ambivalence in Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood*” according to the article, the novel captures Japan’s 1960s cultural identity dilemma.

(Mattsson) An analysis of Kobayashi Midori’s speech in Murakami’s in “Portraying Characteristics in English Translation of Japanese: A Case Study of the Speech” examines how Midori’s dialogues are translated while maintaining her lively personality. It explores linguistic subtleties and cultural connotations in order to portray her audacity and uniqueness. (Okada) in Traces of a Different Sort of ‘Groupism’ in *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami (b. 1949) highlights how “groupism” appears in interpersonal connections while delving into the novel’s complex dynamics of individual and collective identity. It looks at how the

characters' interactions are shaped by social and cultural conformity. (Dil) in “What’s Wrong with these People? The Anatomy of Dependence in *Norwegian Wood*” examines the individuals' emotional and psychological interconnectedness, paying particular attention to their co-dependency issues. It talks about how these connections speak to existential and societal issues. (Kieran James) “Tales from the Hard Side: A French existentialist perspective on Haruki Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood*”, examines *Norwegian Wood* through a French existentialist lens, linking themes of absurdity, freedom, and alienation. It presents Toru's path as illustrative of existential theory. (Nugroho) in “American Cultural Imperialism in 1960s Japan as Seen in Haruki Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood*” examines how American culture affected Japanese society in the 1960s as it is depicted in the book. It assesses the effects of this cultural conflict on the identities and way of life of the characters.

(Indah Permatasari) in “Self-Concept as a Result of Personality Disorder Portrayed in Haruki Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood*” examines personality disorders and how they affect a person's self-concept while concentrating on the psychological complexity of Naoko and other characters. It connects these characteristics to more general story ideas. “(Dyah Ayu Prameswari, Forms of Existential Crisis in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* : Toru Watanabe Analysis)” examines Toru Watanabe's existential issues, such as death, purpose, and loneliness. According to the report, his voyage is essential to the existential themes of the book. (Prihartanti) “Social Function of Maxim to Present “Coming of Age” Value through Bildungsroman Novel Translation Entitled *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami” demonstrates how the book's structure and maxims add to its bildungsroman quality. It uses language analysis to look at the story's themes of coming of age.

Based on the recent researches above on Haruki Murakami and *Norwegian Wood* this paper addresses the research gap of postmodernist escapism in the above text as none of the researchers have ventured to talk about Postmodernism escapism in *Norwegian Wood*.

Discussion: In literature, the term "Postmodernist Escapism" is a theme or trend in which characters or storylines escape the complexity, tragedies, or alienation of the modern world by seeking solace in other realities, fractured identities, or detached emotional states. This escapist embrace ambiguity, subjectivity, and a fractured worldview, frequently challenging conventional ideas of truth, time, and meaning. Escapism is an act of seeking solace from the real world because the person is unable to cope with the real world, there are many ways by which a person can escape from actuality. Emotional dependency, daydreaming or imagination, feeling of nostalgia, isolation, engagement with art and media etc can become a source for escaping.

This prose deftly intertwines the individuals' internal conflict with the more general themes of love, grief, and self-discovery. Naoko stands out among its cast as a moving example of postmodernist escapism—a withdrawal from the chaos of the outside world into an inner world characterized by trauma, fragility, and a need for comfort. By analysing Naoko's disengagement from reality, her symbolic retreat into nature, and her eventual resignation to

despair as representative of a larger postmodern disillusionment, this study examines how her character exemplifies postmodernist escapism.

Naoko's long-standing trauma is the starting point of her escape trip. The suicides of two important people in her life—her sister and later her boyfriend Kizuki—mars her life. Naoko's psychological equilibrium is destroyed by these losses, and she struggles with unresolved grief and feelings of inadequacy. Her battle is made more intense by the story's postmodernist setting, which challenges conventional wisdom regarding identity, love, and healing. Trauma turns into a destabilizing factor in Naoko's situation, leading to a fractured sense of self. She frequently refers to her incapacity to articulate her ideas and feelings clearly when she says that she feels broken. Her battle with language is a metaphor for her larger battle to make sense of her inner suffering in light of the outside world. Because of this, Naoko's reality is not only broken but also uncontrollable, which makes her turn to escaping as a means of surviving.

Please forgive me for not answering sooner. But try to understand. It took me a very long time before I was in any condition to write, and I have started this letter at least ten times. Writing is a painful process for me. Let me begin with my conclusion. I have decided to take a year off from college. Officially, it's a leave of absence, but I suspect that I will never be going back. (p.55)

Escapism as a conscious and unconscious coping strategy is poignantly illustrated in Naoko's letter. Her choice to drop out of college is a reflection of her increased detachment from the outside world as a result of the intense emotional suffering and uncertainty she is experiencing. In order to deal with her fragile mental condition, she withdraws from relationships and social institutions, making her retreat not just physical but also psychological. The conflict between the human yearning for connection and the need for solitude. Although Naoko's decision to distance herself shows a desire for healing and clarity, it also exposes her incapacity to face or make peace with her past, especially the pain of her sibling's and boyfriend Kizuki's suicides as well as her complicated connection with Toru.

Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night so scared," said Naoko, pressing up against my arm. "I'm scared I'll never get better again. I'll stay twisted like this and grow old and waste away here. I get so chilled it's like I'm all frozen inside. It's horrible... so cold... (p.186)

Naoko's confession is a reflection of her intense inner turmoil and her overwhelming sense of loneliness. Her worry of "wasting away" and "staying twisted" is a metaphor for the crippling burden of her mental illness and trauma. As Naoko's desire to "get better" represents a need to escape not just her physical captivity in the sanatorium but also the interior prison of her emotional suffering and guilt, this text speaks to the concept of escapism. Her statement that she feels "frozen inside" highlights the sense of immobility she goes through, where time

seems to stop and the prospect of recovery seems far off and unreachable. Naoko's dilemma can be elucidated as a literary metaphor for escapism, in which the mind runs away from intolerable truths.

As long as we are here, we can get by without hurting others or being hurt by them because we know that we are 'deformed'. That's what distinguishes us from outside world: most people go about their lives unconscious of their deformities, while in this little world of ours the deformities themselves are a precondition. (p.114)

In this excerpt from *Norwegian Wood*, Naoko considers the difference between the sanatorium's isolated environment and the outside world. Her usage of the word "deformed" alludes to the emotional and psychological wounds she and other sanatorium residents have sustained. The institution turns into a place of escape, providing a break from the demands of society and external criticism. Their "deformities" are recognized and tolerated here, fostering a tenuous peace in which people can coexist without harming one another or suffering harm themselves. This regulated setting acts as a purposeful retreat from the complexity of the outside world and a kind of collective escapism. But this retreat also highlights the characters' incapacity to face and make peace with their suffering, keeping them in a transitional state where they are unable to deal with the difficulties of getting better or interacting with the outside world. Murakami criticizes the illusory comfort of escapism with this contradiction, arguing that although it may offer momentary respite, it eventually distances people from the dynamic, although flawed, reality of human life. The sanatorium turns into a symbolic haven that provides security while simultaneously maintaining emotional inertia.

I often reread your letters at night when I'm lonely and in pain. I get confused by a lot of things that come from outside, but your descriptions of the world around you give me wonderful relief. It's so strange! I wonder why that should be? So, I read them over and over, and Reiko reads them, too. Then we talk about the things you tell me. I really liked the part about that girl Midori's father. We look forward to getting your letter every week as one of our few entertainments- (p.307-308)

Naoko's dependence on Toru's letters as a means of emotional escape is evident in this passage from the work of fiction by Murakami. She finds comfort and release from the routine and emotional upheaval of her solitary existence in the sanatorium through the letters, which give her a link to the outside world. Through Toru's evocative descriptions, Naoko is able to temporarily escape into a world outside of her immediate surroundings and see the subtleties and complexity of life outside of her cramped lifestyle. Reading and talking about the letters with Reiko on a regular basis emphasizes the value of shared narratives and storytelling as a coping mechanism. The letters are more than just a diversion for Naoko; they serve as a link to a world she feels cut off from and a tiny window into a life that seems inaccessible. But this need also draws attention to a more profound melancholy: her incapacity to interact with the outside world or find comparable solace within herself.

Conclusion: Naoko in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* epitomizes postmodernist escapism, which is a deep retreat from a society that is unsatisfactory in terms of meaning, security, or comfort. In addition to being a story of personal hardship, her journey reflects a larger philosophical conundrum that speaks to the disjointed and estranged spirit of postmodern literature. Murakami illustrates escapism as a reaction to unresolved trauma and the incapacity to reconcile one's own suffering with the turmoil of the outside world through Naoko's character. The main causes of Naoko's complex escapism are her tragic experiences, including the suicide of her first love, Kizuki, and her ensuing mental health issues. She embodies the postmodern state in which a person seeks solace from a fractured reality by withdrawing to the sanatorium, symbolizing both a literal and figurative separation from civilization. A yearning to escape the cacophony of modern life into a place that offers a semblance of order, albeit temporary and false, is symbolized by the sanatorium's lovely yet otherworldly setting in contrast to Tokyo's busy urbanity.

From a postmodern perspective, Naoko's retreat represents a resignation to the overwhelming complexity of her reality rather than a solution. The limitations of escapism as a coping strategy are demonstrated by her incapacity to completely interact with Toru and heal from her experiences. This facet of her personality is consistent with the postmodernist concept of disconnection, which holds that deeper alienation frequently results from efforts to find meaning. Murakami's depiction of Naoko's inner world, which is full of unsaid worries and eerie recollections, highlights how vulnerable the human psyche is to the unstoppable passage of time and the loss of innocence. Naoko's escape can also be seen as a critique of the rigidity of traditional therapeutic methods and societal expectations. Similar to the fractured narratives of postmodern literature, her struggle casts doubt on the idea of linear recovery and presents healing as nonlinear and elusive. By doing this, Murakami connects Naoko's tale to the general postmodernist themes of confusion and identity exploration.

In conclusion, postmodernist escapism is perfectly captured in Naoko's tragic story in *Norwegian Wood*. Her persona illustrates the difficulty of finding safety in a world that provides only uncertainty and loss rather than clear-cut solutions. In the end, Naoko's destiny acts as a sad indication to readers of the delicate balance betwixt flight and engagement in the search for meaning in an incomprehensible world, emphasizing the need to face one's inner anguish rather than run away from it.

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