

Love, loss, and existential despair: The fragile relationships in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*

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Abstract - Against the backdrop of 1960s Japan, Haruki Murakami's novel *Norwegian Wood* examines the complex dynamics of broken relationships, emotional alienation, and existential crises. This article focuses at how the protagonists in the novel—Toru Watanabe, Naoko, Midori, Reiko, Nagasawa and Hatsumi manage their relationships while confronting personal traumas, identity crises, and meaning seeking in a shattered society. Inspired by existentialist notions from Jean-Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, Zygmunt Bauman, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir, this research looks at issues of loneliness, bereavement, ambiguous morality, and emotional paralysis. The study stresses Murakami's use of fractured narrative and retroactive storytelling to show the intricacy of human connection by way of a qualitative literary analysis including textual and character development analysis. Fundamentally, *Norwegian Wood* presents a remarkable commentary on the existential dilemmas of modern living, in which humans strive between desire and detachment, commitment and freedom, past and present, in an uncaring world.

Keywords: existentialism, haruki murakami, emotional detachment, identity crisis, postmodernism

1. Introduction

Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* is a profound exploration of the complexities of human relationships, focusing on love, loss, grief, and emotional detachment. The novel grapples with the emotional journey of mostly a group of young characters. Burdened with the traumatic memories of the past and the existential struggles of the present, each character is in quest for meaning in life. Such entities and themes are significant changes of the 20th century due to the

turmoil of unrestrained greed towards consumption and capitalist value and the complexity of terms in postmodern literature. Individuals started wandering about the essence of life where selfish desires, consumption, and materialism were at their peak. The novel proceeds with Toru Watanabe's depiction of the events from his past self. The events, therefore, delve into the complexities of human nature and relationships. This study analyses how the character's emotional isolation plays a role in the breakdown of cohesive and stable identities. Each relationship represents different perspectives highlighting the emotional distance, failed relationships, and pessimism, leading to a broader understanding of the existential challenges faced by contemporary men. This article also aims to analyse the dynamics of failed relationships in the novel, the theories that help to explore existential themes, and these concepts' effects on the character's journey, illustrating the challenges to find meaning and connection to the utterly indifferent universe.

Existentialism, as a philosophical movement, has significantly influenced modern literature, particularly in narratives exploring themes of alienation, identity crisis, and the search for meaning. Jean-Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir provide foundational theories in existential thought that inform literary analysis. Sartre's concept of "bad faith" (Sartre, 2022) and Camus' absurdism (Camus, 1955) offer insights into characters' struggles with autonomy and purpose. In the postmodern literary landscape, identity crises and emotional detachment are prevalent themes that authors use to depict the fragmented nature of modern existence (Bauman, 2000).

Haruki Murakami's works frequently explore themes of loneliness, existential despair, and the fragile nature of human relationships. His narrative style, often characterized by introspection and surrealist elements, aligns with postmodernist and existentialist literary traditions. Norwegian Wood (Murakami, 2007) diverges from his typically surrealistic approach and instead presents a realistic and melancholic portrayal of young adults grappling with grief and emotional paralysis. Scholars like Prameswari and Marsih (2023) have highlighted Murakami's nuanced portrayal of existential crises, focusing on the protagonists' psychological turmoil and their attempts to navigate an indifferent world.

Studies on existentialism in literature emphasize emotional detachment as a recurring motif. Sartre's notion that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 2022) suggests that individuals must forge their own identities, but this freedom can lead to despair and isolation. In Norwegian Wood, the protagonist Toru Watanabe's reluctance to form deep emotional connections aligns with Sartrean despair and Kierkegaard's concept of the 'aesthetic man' who struggles with commitment (Kierkegaard, 1992). Likewise, Naoko's unresolved grief and existential paralysis reflect Kierkegaard's 'sickness unto death'—a despair that prevents self-actualization (Kierkegaard & Lowrie, 1849).

The study on *The Old Man and the Sea* explores the theme of self-confidence through a literary analysis of the protagonist's struggles and resilience (Wajdi et al., 2024). The authors argue that Santiago's perseverance reflects a deeper psychological strength that transcends physical hardship (Wajdi et al., 2024). While their analysis effectively connects character development to broader themes of confidence and determination, it lacks engagement with alternative interpretations that might consider existential or fatalistic readings (Wajdi et al., 2024). The discussion remains limited in its theoretical framework, relying primarily on textual analysis rather than integrating perspectives from psychology or philosophical literature (Wajdi et al., 2024). Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into how Hemingway constructs self-confidence as an essential human trait (Wajdi et al., 2024).

The research on *Laskar Pelangi* presents a thorough examination of social class dynamics within the novel's Indonesian context (Wajdi et al., 2024). The authors effectively highlight how economic disparities shape the characters' educational opportunities and aspirations (Wajdi et al., 2024). The study benefits from its socio-historical approach, situating the novel within Indonesia's broader educational and social structures (Wajdi et al., 2024). However, its analysis

could have been strengthened by engaging with postcolonial or critical pedagogy theories to deepen the discussion on systemic inequality (Wajdi et al., 2024). Additionally, the study primarily focuses on class mobility but does not fully explore the intersection of class with other factors such as gender or ethnicity (Wajdi et al., 2024). Despite this, the research provides a compelling discussion on the ways literature can illuminate real-world social structures (Wajdi et al., 2024).

The fragility of romantic relationships in *Norwegian Wood* is indicative of existential dilemmas. Toru's indecision between Naoko and Midori exemplifies Kierkegaard's 'despair of possibility' – a condition where an individual drowns in infinite choices without establishing a meaningful direction (Kierkegaard, 1849). Furthermore, Nagasawa's hedonistic detachment aligns with Camus' absurd man, who recognizes life's meaninglessness but embraces pleasure as a response (Camus, 1955). However, his remorse following Hatsumi's death suggests an incomplete acceptance of existential absurdity, aligning him more closely with Kierkegaardian despair (Dobre, 1847).

Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) provides a feminist lens through which to analyze the female characters' struggles with societal roles and personal agency. Hatsumi, for instance, exemplifies Beauvoir's 'woman in love,' who sacrifices autonomy for an unreciprocated emotional dependency (Beauvoir, 1949). Reiko's retreat into isolation highlights patriarchal judgments on female sexuality, reinforcing de Beauvoir's argument that women are often defined by their relationships rather than their individual identities (Beauvoir & Parshley, 1949).

Cruz's (2019) study explores the intertextual connections in *Norwegian Wood*, emphasizing the interplay of memory and mindscapes within Murakami's narrative. The author effectively situates the novel within a broader literary framework, drawing on intertextual theory to reveal how Murakami's work resonates with other texts and cultural artifacts (Cruz, 2019). The analysis is well-structured, offering a compelling examination of how memory functions as a narrative device, yet it occasionally lacks engagement with alternative interpretations that might challenge its conclusions (Cruz, 2019). While the study convincingly demonstrates the novel's literary depth, it could benefit from a more nuanced discussion of how intertextuality shapes reader reception beyond the theoretical perspective provided (Cruz, 2019).

The use of intertextual references is extensive, but at times, the connections drawn between Murakami's work and other texts feel somewhat speculative without sufficient textual evidence (Cruz, 2019). Furthermore, although the paper presents a sophisticated reading of *Norwegian Wood*, it does not fully explore how cultural and historical contexts influence Murakami's narrative choices, limiting the scope of its critical insight (Cruz, 2019). The study's strength lies in its ability to illustrate the intricate layering of textual influences, but its reliance on theoretical frameworks occasionally overshadows a more direct engagement with the text itself (Cruz, 2019). Ultimately, while the research contributes valuable perspectives to Murakami studies, a more balanced integration of textual analysis and critical perspectives would enhance its scholarly impact (Cruz, 2019).

Postmodernism, as a literary movement, is characterized by fragmentation, metafiction, and the deconstruction of grand narratives. Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*, while primarily existential in theme, also embodies postmodernist elements through its nonlinear narrative, intertextual references, and ambiguous conclusion. The novel resists definitive interpretation, reflecting the postmodern skepticism towards absolute truths and fixed meanings. The characters' struggles with identity and reality align with the postmodernist idea that meaning is subjective and constructed rather than inherent. This aligns with Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000), where individuals navigate fluid and unstable identities in an ever-changing world.

The existential and psychological themes in *Norwegian Wood* resonate with broader literary discussions on alienation, identity, and the human condition. By integrating existentialist theories from Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Camus, as well as feminist perspectives from de Beauvoir,

this literature review situates Murakami's novel within a philosophical and literary framework. The novel's exploration of love, loss, and existential despair contributes to ongoing discussions on postmodern identity and emotional detachment, offering a profound commentary.

2. Method

To explore the dynamics of failed relationships, this paper will employ a qualitative literary analysis. The methodologies will include:

2.1 Textual Analysis

Close readings of passages focusing on the character's emotions, dialogues, thoughts, and actions from *Norwegian Wood* will be conducted to uncover how Murakami picturizes emotional detachment and the search for meaning. This will include an examination of narrative structure focusing on the relationships of Toru, Naoko, Midori, Nagasawa, Hatsumi, and Reiko.

2.2 Character Development Analysis

This thesis will explore different human conditions through the keen observation of the character development of each figure examining their evolving emotional state. To trace the character development, the analysis will centre its main focus on the character's memories, trauma, shortcomings, interactions, and backstories. A comparison between the emotional states and relationship dynamics of different characters in concern will be conducted to highlight the contrasts and similarities in their approaches to relationships and meaning.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The study will incorporate relevant philosophical theories, particularly those related to existentialism, emotional detachment, and the psychological impact of trauma. Learning about the theoretical foundation of existential theory is important to understand the human condition of each character in the novel. In this reference, the theories of Jean-Paul Sartre, Soren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, and attachment theory will be applied to understand the characters' behaviours.

3. Results and Discussions

The findings will be presented by the exploration of the following themes:

3.1 Emotional Detachment as the Central Motif

Throughout the novel the characters face the insufferable pain of existential crisis and it is one of the main reasons behind is the emotional detachment with each other, or anything in particular around them. Hence, the emotional distances make them crippled against the law of commitment, love, and dignity.

Toru Watanabe is the main character of the novel who exhibits emotional detachment both as a coping mechanism and a source of failed relationships. He often prevents himself from fully connecting to the surroundings and people. In the novel, he is deeply introspective, often lost in his thoughts and memories. He spends much of the story reflecting on his past. Such introspection is closely tied to his emotional detachment, as he tries to make sense of his feelings and the events that have shaped his life. The very first indication of emotional detachment can be traced from his dialogues. For example, while describing one of his romantic encounters from the past, Toru mentions that he doubts if he can ever love anybody and feels nothing can get inside his heart (Murakami, 2000: 35).

If we look closely we can find that much of his detachment is shaped by the suicide of his childhood friend Kizuki and after that people gets disappeared from his life one after another as the adult Toru narrates:

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

The mentioned quote indicates the disappearances, in other words, the suicide of his love interest Naoko and all the relationships that never find a happy conclusion in his life. Despite being surrounded by people, he often feels isolated and unable to connect on a deeper level throughout the novel. Even though Jean-Paul Sartre stresses on acceptance by saying, 'Man must confront the isolation of their existence.' (Sartre, 2007: 28) In the novel, however, Toru struggles to come to terms with the isolation of his existence. The theme of Isolation and emotional detachment is apparent when Toru describes himself as- unworldly. He finds it difficult when there is a choice to make, a meaning to create, and a relationship to settle in. Without having a predetermined purpose or priori, he grapples with indecision. For example- when it comes to his preference of his accommodation in Tokyo he would choose a comfortable solitude rather than living in a dorm. Yet whatever his preferences are, he in the end dismisses those by saying 'I didn't care where I lived' (ibid.:11) which conveys the fact that Toru is too indifferent to care about his surroundings and whereabouts. However, it is also prevalent in the story that Toru does not like to be alone, but he has difficulties, fear, and hesitations in getting involved with people. Apparently, just when Midori asks him if he enjoys solitude, he answers that he doesn't make friends because it only leads to disappointments (ibid.: 68).

This fear of getting involved with people appears as a coping mechanism and in the long run existential crisis for him. Sartre says that "existence precedes essence" which means shaping one's life in personal freedom. Such freedom comes with burdens of responsibility as well as limitation of power giving birth to 'despair' that leaves people emotionally detached. (Sartre, 2007: 21) Hence, Toru Watanabe's emotional detachment acts as a coping mechanism to avoid the anxiety of making choices and bearing the consequences of those choices. This notion of detachment is seen when Nagasawa comments on Toru while describing his character:

'He may be a nice guy, but deep down his heart is incapable of loving anybody. There's always some part of him somewhere that's wide awake and detached.' (Murakami, 2000: 277).

Toru doesn't seem to revolt against Nagasawa's comment as he himself is aware of his inability to get attached to anyone, this is more perceptible when he says to Hatsumi that it must be a wonderful thing to be so sure that she loves somebody (ibid.: 248) This proves Toru is not as attached as Hatsumi regarding his connections and he finds it beautiful and inaccessible due to his inability to be sure about own feelings.

Similarly, emotional detachment in another character- Nagasawa is highly evident, mostly because he is a self-centred man who can never commit to anyone. Being in a relationship with Hatsumi makes no difference to his amoral desires. Although they have been together for a long time, they are not successful in making it a meaningful relationship. He prefers self-indulgence and freedom over genuine human connection. His incompetence in relationships and uncentred morality are comparable with Soren Kierkegaard's concept of *preferential* or *erotic love* that is solely based on passion and self. Kierkegaard says 'Erotic love and friendship are related to passion, but all passion whether it attacks or defends itself, fight in one way only, either/or: Either I exist and I am the highest, or I do not exist at all, either all or nothing.' (Lowrie, 1938 as cited in Dobre, n.d.: 3) So, it means that erotic love is all about one's personal desires and views. It is a kind of love that refuses to have a sense of duty towards others. In this reference Kierkegaard in his book *The Works of Love* has distinguishes the types of love as selfish-preferential love (such as erotic love or friendship) and neighbourly, unconditional love (agape), which is rooted in the command to 'love thy neighbour as thyself' (1949: 37-51). Neighbourly love requires the sense of absolute duty towards neighbours, that is other, that we are human in a broader sense, which Nagasawa clearly lacks. Kierkegaard would likely view Nagasawa's failure to love Hatsumi as a failure to understand love as a duty. According to Kierkegaard, neighbourly love requires more than just passion or affection; it demands a commitment to the other person's

happiness and well-being. Hatsumi's tragic end can be seen as the result of Nagasawa's inability to love her beyond his self-interest. He refuses the ethical duty of love, treating her instead as a means to his desires, creating emotional detachment in the long run.

Furthermore, Nagasawa's emotional detachment can be interpreted as an example of Sartre's *bad faith*. He is highly self-aware and intelligent but uses his detachment and promiscuity as a way to avoid confronting the existential reality of freedom and responsibility in relationships. The reduction of everything to material facticity is to deny the reality of consciousness which is a profound element of the human being (Krause, 2020). By refusing to engage deeply with Hatsumi or any of his romantic partners, he denies the possibility of authentic emotional connection. Instead, he chooses to view relationships as transactional, reducing love to a series of casual affairs that allow him to remain distant and emotionally uninvolved. In the novel we find Naoko terms Nagasawa as a lot sicker in the head than she is (ibid.: 145).

Both Naoko and Nagasawa, however, avoid the responsibility of freedom leading their relationships to failure, yet their ways are different in the sense that Nagasawa willingly evades making choices for any kind of commitment while Naoko is more inclined towards the existential despair to make new choices. The constant pursuit of pleasure allows him to distract himself from any long-term commitment, avoiding the uncertainty and pain that can come with love and vulnerability. However, in the end, we find that Nagasawa cannot totally pull himself away from this vulnerability as he is in remorse and distress by losing Hatsumi.

3.2 Unsolved Grief

Memories and nostalgia play a vital role in the novel as we find one of the main characters Naoko struggling with the unsolved grief from the past. Characters are engulfed by the despair linked the post-trauma, this very despair can be well described through the lens of Søren Kierkegaard's theory of 'Despair' in his book *The Sickness Unto Death*. According to Kierkegaard, being in despair means being in sickness unto death, such sickness only ends with bodily death, until then despair always remains, hence despair is the disconsolation of not being able to die (1941: 15). The despair, therefore stays within the characters, even though the perimeter of having to deal with this is different for each of them, it takes a toll on their relationships and in the long run on their life. Both Naoko and Toru are affected terribly by the sudden demise of their bosom friend Kizuki and they have come to Tokyo in quest of a new life, perhaps a meaning to live on. Therefore, the unsolved grief stays within the characters, this is evident especially when Toru often speaks of his emotional turbulences:

'The night Kizuki died, however, I lost the ability to see death (and life) in such simple terms. Death was not the opposite of life. It was already here, within my being, it had always been here, and no struggle would permit me to forget that. When it took the 17-year-old Kizuki that night in May, death took me as well' (Murakami, 2000: 31).

One of the pivotal characters- Naoko has never been able to get rid of the emotional unsteadiness she has from the loss of her past. Just like Toru Watanabe she has come to Tokyo to start all over again, fall in love, and have a new life. But nothing was enough to make her happy again, not Ami hostel, not Reiko, and not even Toru. Hence, Naoko's story is a powerful exploration of how unresolved trauma and emotional detachment can prevent individuals from moving forward in life. Her emotional wounds in the end never allow her to be able to love again, to be present with Toru, or to envision a future. At a point when Toru asks Naoko if she can let down her guard and relax, Naoko shares her words of hopelessness and inescapable past: 'If I relaxed my body now, I'd fall apart. I've always lived like this, and it's the only way I know how to go on living' (ibid.: 8). Naoko's despair is similar to Søren Kierkegaard's 'Despair of Necessity due to lack of Possibility', which speaks of a kind of despair that occurs in a situation as a person feels trapped by the limitation of his or her current situation. It is the feeling of being bound to a life that one didn't choose, feeling like there are no alternatives or new possibilities to pursue.

Everything appears meaningless to Naoko as Kierkegaard distinguishes this type of despair by saying 'either that everything has become necessary to a man/ or that everything has

become trivial' (1941: 41). In Naoko's case we can agree with the latter which underlines her sense of meaninglessness. As the story of the novel develops, we find Naoko in utter despair with her unsolved grief. The suicide of her beloved sister and boyfriend took a toll on her mind creating a void. Her emotional burden makes her feel as though her fate is sealed, limiting her capacity for new opportunities or personal growth. The relevancy of Naoko's nature of despair is seen when she writes of her difficulties in writing letters that once she tries to sit down in front of a blank sheet of paper, she begins to feel depressed. (Murakami, 2000: 308) Furthermore, every time Toru tries to get close to her, she distances herself; later she explains to him why she has been avoiding anything meaningful:

'I'm a far more flawed human being than you realize. My sickness is lot worse than you think: it has far deeper roots. And that's why I want you to go on ahead of me if you can. Don't wait for me' (Murakami, 2000: 192)

The despair is at the peak in Naoko as Kierkegaard posits that it rises from a disconnection between one's ideal self and actual self and Naoko's acknowledgment of being a 'flawed human being' underscores her struggle with identity and self-acceptance. Furthermore, Kierkegaard in his *Sickness Unto Death* emphasizes that despair is the result of failing to become a 'self' in the true, authentic sense. Naoko's despair comes from her inability to form a coherent self-identity apart from Kizuki. Kierkegaard would argue that Naoko's unresolved grief over Kizuki and her sister represents a form of existential despair in which she cannot reconcile her past with her present, nor does she take responsibility for creating a future. Her slow descent into mental illness and eventually choosing death can be seen as 'losing herself' as Kierkegaard says losing the self entirely and in such a way that is not noticed in the least. The torment, therefore, remains in the self of not being able to get rid of it (1941:19).

3.3 Existential Crisis

Murakami uses the theme of failed relationships to comment on the alienation and disconnection that characterize modern existence. For example, in the novel, Midori Kobayashi constantly searches for an identity in an indifferent world. Her circumstances and relationships hardly portray stability, rather she grows a sense of existential dilemma. She constantly looks for confirmation in Toru Watanabe who is unable to make their relationship stable. Such characters frequently experience deep existential crises where they're forced to deal with shattered personalities and the quest for purpose in a society of anarchy.

In this reference, Reiko Ishida, the roommate of Naoko in Ami Hostel is one of the pivotal figures centring upon the theme of existential crisis and failed relationship. Even though she appears to be a bright and positive woman, she has gone through the experiences of failed marriage and awful encounters. Due to her past experiences, she has isolated herself from the outside world and confines in the unrealistically peaceful world of the sanatorium. She enjoys being in the company of people and taking care of them yet she fears about starting anything new for herself. In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard describes *despair* as the inability to reconcile the self with its potential. Reiko's despair stems from her inability to become the person she once envisioned herself to be – a successful musician and wife. After the collapse of her marriage and career, she retreats into a form of despair where she questions every core of her identity. As Kierkegaard says 'The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation that the relation relates itself to its own self' (Kierkegaard, 1941: 9). As a matter of fact, Reiko is trapped in despair because she cannot reconcile her 'ideal self' with the reality of her failed life. Her retreat to the sanatorium symbolizes her existential paralysis, a refusal or inability to continue forward with the creation of a meaningful life. Also, it can be aligned with Sartre's *Bad Faith* which points to Reiko's denial of her freedom and having the tendency to escape from reality. Sartre's notion of *Bad Faith* involves self-deception, where individuals deny their own freedom by conforming to societal expectations or accepting roles imposed upon them. Such

denial restricts her from making a meaningful relationship. Even though her husband wants to give her a new life, she succumbs to her trauma and decides to quit her social life. It is more like that she cannot forgive herself for what happened and her isolation works as a means of avoiding reality.

Furthermore, Reiko's character is emblematic of this fragmented identity. Throughout the novel, her past life as a talented pianist and wife is contrasted sharply with her present self – an older woman living in a sanatorium, haunted by trauma and mental instability. Reiko's mental breakdown and the subsequent collapse of her former life represent the postmodern disillusionment with a stable identity. She cannot reconcile her past as a successful musician and wife with her present role as a woman ostracized from society due to her psychological struggles. This fragmentation is further reflected in her complex relationship with Naoko and Toru. On one hand, she plays the role of a mentor and protector for Naoko, offering guidance and emotional support. On the other hand, Reiko is deeply fragile and wounded, revealing her own vulnerabilities and failures, especially in her admission of sexual trauma and the breakdown of her marriage. This duality within her character illustrates the postmodern idea that identity is not fixed or coherent but rather constantly shifting and shaped by personal and societal breakdowns. Reiko's mental illness can be seen as a reflection of this postmodern condition, where the breakdown of her personal life and identity mirrors a larger societal disintegration.

Her life at the sanatorium is a form of retreat from the chaotic, disorienting outside world, but it is also a recognition that traditional paths to healing or fulfilment are no longer viable for her. Additionally, Reiko's fear of being in a committed relationship can be seen as the result of *liquid modernity*, as stated by Zygmunt Bauman, describing the transient and fluid nature of contemporary life. In a world characterized by rapid change, uncertainty, and flexibility, individuals find it increasingly difficult to maintain stable identities, relationships, or commitments. Bauman argues that this liquid state of modern life leads to widespread disillusionment, as people are no longer able to rely on social frameworks to give meaning to their lives. Instead, they are forced to constantly adapt, reinvent themselves, and navigate a world where nothing remains fixed. Again, he mentions that the present-day commitment may stand in the way of the next day's opportunities, the lighter and superficial they are, the less the likely damage (Bauman, 2000). So, for Reiko Amy hostel is a lighter burden compared to the reality she once belonged to. Also, Reiko's music, once a source of identity and purpose, has lost its meaning for her. In postmodern existentialism, the loss of such a defining aspect of oneself symbolizes the collapse of meaning in a world where traditional roles and purposes no longer hold weight. This loss leaves Reiko facing the void, the absence of purpose or meaning, and her resignation to life in the sanatorium reflects a postmodern acceptance of this void.

Her psychological trauma stems from societal pressure and personal insecurities too. So, she accepts the limitations of the life in Sanatorium where she can live without getting involved in meaningful relationships. De Beauvoir argues that women are often positioned as the *Other* in a male-dominated world, defined by their relationships with men rather than as autonomous beings. Reiko's identity seems shaped by her relationships – first as a wife and musician, and later as a mentor to Naoko and Toru. Her sense of failure is tied to societal expectations of her as a woman in these roles. 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (1949: 330). Reiko's story shows how she has been molded by societal pressures. Her sense of failure as a musician and wife, and later as an older woman living in isolation, reflects the limitations placed on her autonomy. Reiko's experience with the young girl who seduced her can be interpreted through de Beauvoir's critique of the way female sexuality is regulated and judged by patriarchal norms. Reiko internalizes shame and guilt over this incident, which contributes to her eventual withdrawal from society. In the novel Reiko shares how other people viewed her after the incident with her student. The neighbours were strangely looking at her, there was a new distance in their eyes (Murakami, 2000: 208) Their tone of voice was different than before. The woman next door stopped visiting her. All of these give Reiko signs of illness. Later from a housewife,

she learns about the rumour for which everyone has been avoiding her. Far from being the truth of what happened, the rumour was a terrible lie against her which Reiko's moral sense has shaken and therefore affects the very existence among others. Reiko's sexuality becomes a source of shame, a situation that defines much of her self-perception. De Beauvoir's critique of societal norms about female sexuality helps explain why Reiko is unable to reconcile this event with her sense of self-worth, leading her to retreat into a life of isolation. Yet, in her mentorship of Toru, she begins to reclaim some sense of agency, though it is tinged with resignation. It is worth saying that Reiko's character is a rich embodiment of existential struggle.

3.4 The Quest for Meaning and Ambiguous Morality

The protagonist Toru Watanabe's journey throughout the novel is marked by his search for meaning in a world that seems increasingly fragmented and meaningless. As we go through the story of his past self, he seems to lead a life without knowing why he is doing what he is doing. His volatile nature is evident in many cases, especially in his habit of sexual interactions. His ambiguous morality leads him to engage in physical relationships even when he doesn't understand his peers or is not sure about his own motives. Consequently, Toru claims to be in love with Naoko yet he is involved in sexual endeavours. Yet, this is something he does not particularly like, on the contrary, he hates himself every next day for this. It is very much clear as he says-

'I had to stay put until morning and go back to the dorm filled with self-loathing and disillusionment, sunlight stabbing my eyes, mouth coated with, head belonging to someone else' (Murakami, 2000: 43).

Such ambiguity proves his inability to settle in certain someone or a purpose. This sort of purposelessness can be aligned with Soren Kierkegaard's theme of *Aesthetic Man* in his book *Either/Or*. Soren Kierkegaard, a theist existentialist points out two different ways of leading life- the aesthetic and the ethical. While describing the nature of aesthetic man, he suffers from indecision and regret. He says that an aesthetic man shall regret if he marries or doesn't marry, either way, he will keep regretting. This concept of aesthetic man can be aligned with the emotional restlessness and ambiguity in Toru Watanabe's struggles between Naoko and Midori. Regarding his feelings for both of the women, Toru expresses that he has always loved Naoko and still does but there is an irresistible power between him and Midori which bound to sweep him into the future. What he feels for Naoko is a gentle and transparent love, and for Midori, he feels something that walks on its own living, breathing, throbbing, and shaking the roots of his being. He admits he doesn't know what to do and finds himself tossed into this labyrinth of getting into complicated emotions (Murakami, 2000: 353). Thus, his inability to commit fully to either woman mirrors the existential uncertainty and regret; that Kierkegaard identifies in the aesthetic stage. Toru Watanabe is in bewilderment about how to limit the self-capacity which contradicts Kierkegaard's solution to embrace one's true self and make meaning in life, as for Kierkegaard someone who tries to reach for the infinite choices must also remember to step down and correct the limited (self-capacity) (Perkins, 1987, 56 cited in Setiawan, 2023, para.17).

Besides, Toru Watanabe's simultaneous relationships with Naoko and Midori also highlight the internal struggles. These relationships are emblematic of Toru's journey through love, loss, and the search for identity, with each woman representing different aspects of his emotional world. Toru's lack of commitment can be brought under the light of Soren Kierkegaard's implication on 'Despair of Possibility due to lack of Necessity' from his creation *The Sickness unto the Death*. While describing different forms of Despair, Kierkegaard speaks of the kind of despair that arises out of an abundance of possibilities without any direction or meaning. There is a sense of infinite freedom, yet it is without any purpose and ground. This despair is characterized by a lack of commitment to anything specific which is evident in Toru's indecision in his romantic endeavours. Throughout the novel, it is depicted that Toru has

multiple possibilities in front of him, especially in terms of relationships. Yet mostly he feels lost, drifting through life without a clear sense of purpose or commitment. With time he simply loses himself which Kierkegaard points out as 'the misfortune is that the man did not become aware of himself, aware that the self he is, is a perfectly definite something, and so is the necessary.'

The possibilities appear in such a way that he doesn't know where to locate his necessity, as a result, he becomes the 'mirage' as Kierkegaard mentions (1941: 37). Hence, his existential confusion stems from his inability to fully engage with any option. His simultaneous feelings are obvious in many parts of the story, such as when Toru often thinks of Naoko and their endless walking (Murakami, 2000: 76) even when being with Midori. Similarly, Midori also appears in his mind even when he is writing a letter to Naoko. After spending time with Midori for a while Toru contemplates 'Without my being aware of it, she had become a huge presence inside me.' (ibid: 338) Both of the girls and Midori become his love interests as his feelings constantly wander back and forth to them we see Toru saying: 'I tried to write to Midori, but I gave up after several starts and wrote to Naoko' (ibid: 334). So, Toru's feeling of despair rises from not knowing his own necessity as Kierkegaard says about such kind of people 'What really is lacking is the power to obey, to submit to the necessary in oneself, to what may be called one's limit' (1941: 37).

Furthermore, Toru constantly sets on a journey to find meaning in life since he must create value as Sartre mentions 'man is condemned to be free: condemned because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does' (2007: 29). So, Toru must decide and take responsibility for the people he cares about and that is something that creates anguish in him as Sartre says: 'our responsibility is much greater than might have supposed' (2007: 24). Here Sartre emphasizes the burden of absolute freedom accompanying the duty to make authentic choices. Therefore, this need to create meaning in lived life without having any dependency on a divine entity or any sort of medium of tranquilization creates anguish as we see Toru Watanabe torn apart carrying the weight of making choices. The absolute freedom of mankind is also responsible for ambiguous morality in Toru as man makes himself by choosing his own morality (Sartre, 2007: 46).

Similarly, Naoko is also in anguish as she stresses over not only her own mental condition but also her relationship with Toru; she is afraid to face reality and take responsibility for others. In this relation Sartre explains the concept of *Anguish* in his *Existentialism is Humanism*:

'A man who commits himself and who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own full and profound responsibility' (2007: 25).

Her emotional distress can also be explained with the theme of Soren Kierkegaard's *Anxiety* from his book *The Concept of Anxiety*. According to him, Anxiety is freedom's actuality (1980: 42). That means anxiety comes from man's choice of decisions, such tension leads to despair. For example, her contemplation on a fabricated reality where she could settle under ordinary circumstances also shows her anguish and despair as she must choose a way of life not only for herself but also for Toru:

'I sometimes wonder: IF you and I had met under absolutely ordinary circumstances, and IF we had liked each other, what would have happened? IF I had been normal and you had been normal and there had been no Kizuki, what would have happened? Of course, this "IF" is way too big' (Murakami, 2000: 27).

3.5 Fragility and Emotional Isolation.

Naoko is one of the protagonists whose emotional detachment is deeply rooted in her past traumas, including the suicide of her own sister and boyfriend Kizuki. Hence, the despair in Naoko oozes out of the feeling of being unable to escape the trauma as Kierkegaard's concept of 'Despair' is the sickness in self, the feeling of not being able to die or escape this feeling. Such

trapped feelings lead Naoko to be isolated from the world. In the Sanatorium she feels safe, as she expresses in her letters to Toru that her deformities seem natural here along with others having troubled history as well, she feels afraid to leave this place and face the real world. However, she only momentarily finds solace in the sanatorium, in the long run, her troubled emotion keeps coming back leading her to commit suicide as the ultimate escape. Despite the shared history and deep care for Toru Watanabe, Naoko's relationship with him is characterized by a profound emotional distance. Both Toru and Naoko feel the emotional distance between each other, at a point, Toru realizes that his arm is not what she needs, but the arm of someone else (Murakami, 2000: 35). Their relationship here can be viewed through the lens of Sartre's 'bad faith'. Even though she longs for connection, she is unable to fully commit to Toru. Thus, she embodies Sartre's idea of living inauthentically, as she oscillates between wanting something and withdrawing from it at the same time. Naoko's inability to overcome her emotional barriers eventually leads to the failure of their relationship and her tragic end.

Another character Hatsumi is crucial in picturizing the complexities of human relationships, fragility, and the impact of unmoving emotional dependency. In the novel her love interest Nagasawa cannot get rid of boundless sexual interactions and defends his action, he therefore, justifies himself to Hatsumi by saying that he has a hunger for sleeping with girls and can only live with that hunger. Yet, Hatsumi sticks to him with futile hope that one day he will change as she expresses to Toru 'People change, though, don't you think?' (Murakami, 2000: 284). The unfulfilled desire inside her creates an identity crisis. Furthermore, her lack of emotional intelligence makes her vulnerable, she cannot resonate with her love for Nagasawa and overlooks his follies. So, in the end, she meets her tragic end not being able to withdraw herself from this unhealthy feeling and find meaning in life. Her inclination towards unrequited life can be discussed under Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the *Other* and *Woman in Love*. In the book *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir examines how women are often encouraged to define their worth based on their relationships with men, becoming passive subjects who sacrifice their desires and agency to accommodate male expectations.

Hatsumi's life seems to revolve around Nagasawa, and her sense of identity becomes tied to the hope that he will eventually choose her over his transient affairs. In this sense, she becomes the *Other*—her identity and happiness are dependent on Nagasawa's decisions. As for women's concept of love, Beauvoir says that love works differently for males and females. For women, it is total devotion as Beauvoir says 'Love becomes a religion for her' while for men it is merely an occupation or a momentary part of life. From the very beginning of life, women are given the idea that they are destined for male and male is a sovereign with whom equality is not permitted. (1994: 774) So, it is safe to acclaim that from Beauvoir's perspective, Hatsumi's emotional dependence on Nagasawa is a form of self-objectification. She allows herself to become secondary, centring her emotional world around Nagasawa's actions. Instead of asserting her autonomy, she waits for her lover to validate her through commitment, a process that leads to her emotional destruction.

Hatsumi's tragedy aligns with Beauvoir's critique of women who, in their romantic relationships, sacrifice their own subjectivity to fit into the roles imposed by male-dominated expectations and in the process, they lose their identity. Due to Hatsumi's illogical expectations from someone who constantly denies commitment and declares his autonomy on his amoral desires, their relationship becomes complicated assigning a sharp contrast between their existence and perspectives. Again, her refusal of the freedom of life aligns with Sartre's concept of Bad Faith. For Sartre, the essence of bad faith is to allow others, or the world, to define what you are (Krause, 2020, para. 2). Hatsumi concentrates her whole existence on her relationship with Nagasawa which is living in bad faith. The novel suggests that Hatsumi commits suicide even though she marries someone else, she cannot find any meaning or purpose in her own life without Nagasawa's reciprocal love.

3.6 Existential Hungers for Connections

Midori always expects a deep yearning for love, for example- 'I was hungry for love. Just once, I wanted to know what it was like to get my fill of it.' (Murakami,2022: 99), yet she is disillusioned regarding her connections. Such contrasting personality highlights Kierkegaard's notion of existential despair, where individuals seek fulfilment in relationships yet often face disillusionment. In Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death*, the concept of the individual's relationship with the self and the constant struggle between despair and the authentic self-highlights Midori's failure to properly relate to herself or any higher purpose. Although Midori stands out as a vibrant character, her life is marked by the complexities in her relationships and a feeling of abandonment by significant figures in her life. In the novel, we learn that Midori is not truthfully accepting her present or her past. This is evident when she denies her present condition by fabricating lies about her history related to her father. At first, she says to Toru that her mother has died and after that, her father has departed to Uganda leaving her alone. Later, Toru finds out the truth that Midori has been busy taking care of his bedridden father at a hospital. Moreover, Midori's dissatisfaction with her relationship with her boyfriend and willingness to be sexually involved with Toru shows her denial of truth and possessing ambiguous emotions. According to Midori, she never got proper attention all through her life, her father and mother didn't love her enough to deny the depravity of love in life.

After the death of her father and mother, she has been living almost alone, her culinary skills speak of her habit of living alone; yet she abhors it so, she wants to keep people, especially Toru Watanabe, whom she finds comforting. Through the company of Toru, Midori is actually trying to establish a new identity discarding her present self. So, the loss of identity is seen through Midori's odd way of averting reality- by lying or making impulsive decisions. Midori represents someone who wants affirmation in a world that often seeks to limit personal expressions. She is bold in stating what she wants, but at times, this authenticity leads to a confrontation with societal expectations, much like Kierkegaard's view that the pursuit of the self is a solitary and sometimes painful journey. In this relation, he also explains one of the forms of his despair where man wills to tear himself away from the power that constitutes him, so the despair lies in being unable to get rid of the strong power that compels him to be someone he is not (1941: 18).

Consequently, Midori is in despair for her current condition and relationships, she wills to change it by doing something out of the box. This is seen in her day-to-day endeavours like singing a song aloud when the neighbourhood is on fire, learning culinary even when her family cannot afford it, and having uncensored discussions, and especially is noticed in her expectations from Toru. Knowing the fact that Toru is in love with another girl, she still pursues him and expects him to be only hers. Hence, Midori's desire for an authentic relationship contrasts with the emotionally detached Toru, putting her in a Kierkegaardian position of striving for selfhood amidst imperfect relationships.

Midori's refusal to conform to societal expectations can also be aligned with Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism which emphasizes radical freedom, arguing that individuals are condemned to be free and must take responsibility for their action choices. Midori is always making meaning of her life by challenging traditional gender roles and expressing sexual desires and frustration without the slightest hesitations. However, her relationships, particularly with Toru, demonstrate a complex situation between her sense of freedom and a longing for connection. In this case, Sartre would argue that Midori must take responsibility for her choices, including her emotional openness and dependency on Toru, without falling into 'bad faith' by relying too heavily on others to define her own happiness. Bad Faith according to Sartre is to force ourselves into decisions to adhere to uncertain truths (2007: 68).

Midori is indeed relying heavily on the uncertain truths as she starts relying on someone who is detached and is in love with someone else. Her frustration and desire for a deeper connection with Toru can be seen as her struggle with the existential burden of freedom: to find meaning in her life independent of others. Although the ending of the novel is not clear whether

she ends up with Toru or not, the opening part of the novel suggests that 37 years old Toru is telling us the story of his past when his friends have died and disappeared. So, it is safe to affirm that they never find a happy ending. We can assume that Toru's detachment and Midori's expectations were indeed a sharp contrast leading to the failure of their relationship.

3.7 Acknowledgment of the absurdity of life

Nagasawa recognizes that traditional pursuits—such as relationships, careers, and societal approval are ultimately meaningless in the grand scheme of things, thus, he appears to have an awareness of the absurdity of life. His decision to live life in a seemingly hedonistic and detached manner can be seen as a response to this awareness, where he chooses to indulge in life's pleasures without attaching meaning to them. Kierkegaard in his book *Either/Or* describes the *Aesthetic Life* as one focused on pleasure, novelty, and immediate gratification, often at the expense of deeper ethical commitments. Nagasawa's lifestyle epitomizes the aesthetic stage—he indulges in casual sex, alcohol, and the pursuit of success, all while avoiding any ethical or emotional commitment, particularly in his relationship with Hatsumi. Kierkegaard says that an aesthetic man wants to grasp every possibility, without knowing his limitations and commitments. He looks for the passion of the possible, the eye which everywhere, ever young, ever burning, sees possibility (1992: 50). Nagasawa seems to possess the desire to participate in every possible, sometimes too much in worldly pursuits which is at times even inspiring to Toru.

The examples are- his constant seduction, obsessive study habits, intense visions of success, etc., which can be compared with the hamster on a constant run over a wheel unable to rest as he has to pursue, perhaps some invisible goals. The amorous adventures are to him like an eternity as Kierkegaard's aesthetic man's imagination of eternity is the image of a voluptuous lady in a harem reclining on a sofa, not caring about anything in the world. (1992: 44) When Hatsumi questions Nagasawa about why she is not enough for him, he says- 'It's just a hunger I have inside me. I can only live with that hunger. That's what makes me me' (Murakami, 2000: 274). It can also be implied that Nagasawa embraces Albert Camus's philosophy of the *absurd man* with his emphasis on living with the awareness of this absurdity. In his *Myth of Sisyphus* Camus describes the absurd man as someone who lives fully aware of the absurdity of life but refuses to succumb to despair or search for false consolations (Camus, 1983: 66-84).

Nagasawa's hedonistic, detached approach to life mirrors Camus' description of the absurd hero who lives for immediate pleasures and experiences, not expecting life to offer any greater meaning. His words and actions speak of his acceptance of the absurdity of life, one of such instances is when he says to Toru that the world is an inherently unfair place where he didn't write the rules. Again, his advice to Toru Watanabe- 'Don't feel sorry for yourself, only arseholes do that' (ibid.: 316) suggests his acceptance of the futility of life and refusal to have any regret. Yet, Camus portrays Sisyphus as being happy in his eternal struggle, this is where, however, Nagasawa lacks the characteristic of an absurd man. Even when he is aware and vocal about the absurdity of the world, he doesn't seem unaffected by it all through the story.

The very first impression of Nagasawa is that he is a guiltless womanizer, yet he seems to be in deep sadness after the death of his girlfriend Hatsumi. In his letter to Toru, he says 'Hatsumi's death has extinguished something. This is unbearably *sad* and painful, even to me.' (ibid.: 279) So, Nagasawa has yet to fully embrace the absurd unlike *Don Juan* as described by Camus, is a man without regret. He might recognize and announce the absurd, but to some extent he fails to live with the rebellion force of Sisyphus as Camus speaks of. Nagasawa is rather in despair, maybe he has always been in despair Kierkegaard mentions that some people lose themselves entirely in a way that is not noticed in the least- eternity will nevertheless make it manifest that his situation was despair (1941: 19). Therefore, he falls under the category of Kierkegaard's *Despair of Infinitude due to lack of Finitude*, which exemplifies the man who becomes an abstract sentiment as the self is more and more volatilized, and in process, he loses himself more and more. In short, Nagasawa loses himself long before he realizes his absurd endeavours.

His nature of not being able to realize the limitations of life makes him fail in any sort of relationship.

4. Conclusion

Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* presents a deeply introspective exploration of failed relationships, emotional detachment, and existential struggles. Through the lens of Toru Watanabe and other characters, the novel portrays the emotional and psychological toll of grief, loss, and the search for meaning in a disoriented world. The study has tried to demonstrate how emotional isolation, unresolved trauma, and existential uncertainty contribute to the breakdown of relationships. Toru's detachment, Naoko's despair, Midori's longing for connection, Hatsumi's identity crisis, Reiko and Nagasawa's avoidance of commitment all exemplify the complexities of love and human connection in a postmodern world. Drawing on existentialist and psychological theories, the analysis reveals that the novel does not offer a resolution to these struggles but rather underscores the perpetual nature of human longing and self-discovery.

In essence, *Norwegian Wood* presents love not as a redemptive force but as a fragile, fleeting experience shaped by personal limitations and existential dilemmas. Through the theoretical studies on different philosopher's concepts of despair, anguish, freedom of choice, bad faith, liquid modernity, the other and the absurd man; the dynamics of different human emotion and its calamity can be traced. The ambiguous ending reflects the novel's rejection of closure, leaving the protagonist and the reader to confront the uncertainties of existence. Murakami's work serves as a profound meditation on the nature of relationships, suggesting that in the face of an indifferent universe, meaning and connection remain elusive, yet persist as fundamental human pursuits.

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