

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Trauma, Resistance and Resilience in Murakami's '*Kafka on the Shore*'**Yogesh Kshirsagar**

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the conflicts among trauma, resistance, resilience, and acceptance in *Kafka on the Shore* through thematic and qualitative analyses of Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* (2002; tr. 2005). The novel depicts both individual and collective traumas, contrasted through two protagonists. The parallel stories of the protagonists, Kafka Tamura and Nakata Satoru, highlight the themes of trauma, resistance, resilience, and acceptance through gradual intertwining. The paper presents how Kafka is affected by his personal psychological traumatic childhood experiences with lasting effects, and how he attempts to resist them and becomes resilient. The paper analyses the other strand of narrative in which Nakata faces trauma, resists it, and finds a resolution. His trauma appears more socio-political and collective, referring to Japanese human conditions after the World Wars in the mid-twentieth century. The other characters, Miss Saeki, Oshima, and Hoshino, play a key role in reflecting trauma and in the quests undertaken by Kafka and Nakata. They support Kafka and Nakata in finding ways to overcome traumatic experiences, internal conflicts, and quotidian dilemmas. The characters strive to resist trauma, to escape suffering through it, and, ultimately, to accept their circumstances and move forward. Through these interwoven narratives,

Murakami illustrates a universal movement: from the paralysis of trauma, through deliberate resistance, to resilient acceptance of the past as an inseparable part of the self. The novel thus offers a nuanced meditation on how individuals and societies can navigate historical and personal wounds without being defined by them.

Keywords: Trauma, Resistance, Resilience, Collective and Individual Memory

FULL RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

"Listen up - there's no war that will end all wars." (Murakami 507)

Kafka on the Shore (2002; tr. 2005) by Haruki Murakami explores both worldly and psychological struggles and outbursts of its characters. The internal and external traumas they experience reflect the human experiences of postwar Japan. However, Murakami emphasises that wars are not, in any way, a solution to the rise of various socio-political ideologies. Wars significantly affect both individual and collective lives. The parallel journeys of Kafka and Nakata explore themes of personal and collective trauma. "More specifically, *Kafka on the Shore*, by reconfiguring 'detachment' as an index of the traumas that linger in the wake of the history-as-she-hardens-into-text, it offers up to readers a history composed of war, violence, conflict." (Kim) Additionally, both characters are driven by an unknown force of fate and, in turn, become more accepting of it after navigating a whirlwind of shadowy events. They opt for resistance and acceptance by pursuing self-identity. The novel depicts a coming-of-age generation set against Japan's postwar socio-political backdrop. It also explores the characters' struggles in detail and examines their efforts to overcome these hardships. Murakami illustrates the lingering negative effects of the World Wars on Japan, which have impacted it in complex and traumatic ways.

Research studies have analysed *Kafka on the Shore* as a novel with postmodern structures and compared it with Murakami's other novels, such as *Sputnik Sweetheart*, examining themes of violence and escapism, realistic and speculative elements, imagery, and characterisation. The themes of intertextuality, existentialism, and identity are widely examined in the novel. However, there is limited focus on the characters' traumatic lives and on resistance studies. "Trauma studies explore the impact of trauma in literature and society by analysing its psychological, cultural, and rhetorical significance." (Tiwari and Binnor) Therefore, there is clear potential to clarify

the link between individual trauma and the novel's socio-political issues. Understanding the purpose of trauma and the characters' subsequent actions helps to comprehend the novel better. The novel illustrates the enduring traumatic effects of war on individual lives and their interrelated consequences for families, societies, and Japanese humanity. Studying the underlying role of relationships in the characters' lives can help explain the causes of their trauma. In this context, although the present study superficially focuses on the parallel narratives of trauma, resistance, and resilience, it aims to illuminate the ambiguities and complexities of post-war life in Japan and the national socio-political landscape.

Trauma and Resistance by Kafka Tamura

Kafka on the Shore centres on the bildungsroman journey of one of the protagonists, Kafka Tamura. His coming-of-age journey leads to psychological growth following his 15-year tribulation. The novel opens with Kafka's anguish, mediated by Murakami's philosophical reflections on fate. Murakami foreshadows Kafka's helplessness, highlighting his internal anguish. Kafka carries a storm of fate, torture of the past, and fears for the future, and is in constant search for explanations of the internal conflicts as described by the Boy named Crow: "Sometimes fate is like a small sandstorm that keeps changing direction. You change direction, but the sandstorm chases you. You turn again, but the storm adjusts.... something that has nothing to do with you. This storm is you. Something inside you." (Murakami 4) Kafka suffers a prolonged and non-healing psychological storm within himself due to abandonment by his mother and sister at a fragile age of four, causing him great loss. He becomes so shy and introverted that he experiences loneliness and isolation. The feelings of being unwanted, unloved, and unworthy are developed in him at a very early age. The absence of maternal love and sisterly affection also poses challenges, such as nightmares and dreams that he is unable to cope with. "No matter how much time passes, no matter what takes place in the interim, there are some things we can never assign to oblivion, memories we can never rub away." (Murakami 06) The haunting memories of these close family members intensify his sense of being left alone, which has persisted since childhood. He puts his isolation, loneliness, and seclusion as the deeply affected traumatic effects as: "My eyes in the mirror are as cold as a lizard, my expression fixed and unreadable. I cannot remember the last time I laughed or even showed a hint of a smile to another person. Let alone myself." (Murakami 10)

Another storm Kafka carries within him stems from his father's strict upbringing. He lacks paternal support and develops a troubled relationship with his father. This is evidence of the family's devastated state. Kafka recounts his father's

arbitrary and despotic treatment. "We live under the same roof, but our schedules are totally different. He spends most of his time in his studio, far away, and I do my best to avoid him." (Murakami 9) Moreover, Kafka is unable to handle feminine affection due to his teenage years and an unknown fear of a curse imposed by his father. His father prophesies, "Someday you will murder your father and be with your mother," and "you will sleep with your sister." (Murakami 265) It amplifies the effects of the trauma Kafka experienced. He is haunted by this premonition all the way. A researcher explains the father-son relationship as: "The relation between the father and son is rather distant due to two reasons: Kafka considers himself as a forsaken child by love and motherhood; his father set an oedipal curse in his conscious mind." (Yu) A researcher explains how Kafka addresses psychological trauma at three levels, drawing on the concepts of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's anti-Oedipalism. "Kafka can transfer from the first level as an oedipalized individual under the control of his father's power to level two, in which he becomes an anti-oedipal revolutionist who fights with the pre-programmed ideologies of society. The results show that, in the third level, Kafka can become a freethinker who decides independently in an an-oedipal world." (Maryam H Shandiz)

The feelings of deprivation of love and care from family members gradually led him to lose faith in society. Kafka adopts a self-distance that culminates in the creation of his alter ego in the physical form of his ally, the boy named Crow. Crow serves as Kafka's confidant, guiding his escape and journey to a distant library. Crow encourages Kafka to break the constraints that bind him and set him free by overcoming fate's clutches. It is described as: "To protect himself, Kafka built a network of protection in the heart and created a teenager named Crow. That is to say, the protagonist Kafka is a 15-year-old teenager with a dual personality." (Zhu) Crow reflects his 'other self', giving Kafka the confidence to explore and understand his psychological battlefield. Crow promotes Kafka for choosing the path of internal and external wars: "Listen up—there is no war that will end all wars,' Crow tells me. "War breeds war." (Murakami 507) The 'self' in the form of the Crow guides Kafka to the realisation that he is surrounded by psychological and external wars that he cannot avoid.

Kafka's resistance to the trauma is evident in the multiple ways he adopted to overcome emotional and psychological traumas. His sense of loneliness and isolation, feelings of fear and anxiety, are ways to avoid the strange prophecy, nightmares, and memories. They lead him to embark on a quest for self-identity, seeking to understand the meaning of his life and to uncover the events unfolding within it. "It's like my identity is an orbit that I've strayed far away from." (Murakami 262) He changes his

name to that of his favourite author, Kafka, to conceal his original identity. Metaphorically, he seeks to become a different person, taking charge of his own life because he is dissatisfied with his current existence.

Even after spending ample time reading books and listening to music, Kafka struggles to resist his father's tyrannical treatment. He trains himself for approximately two years to escape. He practices judo, jogs on the school grounds, swims, goes to the local gym, and plans every small detail, like what to carry on the go. Initially, there are thoughts in his mind about killing his father. "I could probably kill him if I wanted to - I am definitely strong enough - and I can erase my mother from memory. However, there is no way to erase the DNA they passed down to me. If I want to drive that away, I would have to get rid of myself." (Murakami 11)

All that Kafka wants is a permanent healing from the past and current events. Kafka endures significant suffering throughout his journey, despite his attempts to escape and resist it. However, he is driven by unknown forces, including fate, past experiences, present worries, and future fears. He traverses emblematic dreams, labyrinths, and forests. Kafka's development toward acceptance is one of the positive aspects of Murakami's fiction. "Things outside you are projections of what's inside you, and what's inside you is a projection of what's outside. So when you step into the labyrinth outside you, at the same time you're stepping into the labyrinth inside." (Murakami 461)

Kafka is emotionally guided and supported by the other characters, including the library assistant Oshima, the girl he meets on the bus, Sakura, and the library owner, Miss Saeki. Understanding life through their experiences and perspectives becomes easy for Kafka, and he becomes resilient in the face of trauma. It further takes Kafka to the resolution and acceptance of the situation. He can meet the desired output of being free from all the psychological compulsions endowed upon him. This purgation through the indirect murder of his father and incest with Miss Saeki and Sakura, his imagined mother and sister, respectively. He symbolically emerges from the dreams, forests, and labyrinths and decides not to look back.

Nakata's Unknown Quest as Trauma and Resistance

Murakami juxtaposes Kafka's story with that of Nakata Satoru. It begins with an excerpt from an interview with a teacher, documented as a wartime report of the US Army Intelligence Section (MIS), that investigates the 1944 accident in which school students were on an outdoor study session. Against the backdrop of the world wars, Japan prepared its students for any situation in which survival was important. "So the

children were encouraged to hunt for food wherever they could find it. The country was at war, after all, and food took priority over studying." (Murakami 17) This setting of violence in Nakata's childhood is therefore deliberate and reflects Murakami's "interest in Japan's role in World War II and the capacity for violence it evokes." (Buruma) This childhood incident results in Nakata's state of comatose for a week, and the American military psychiatrist says, "It seemed like the real Nakata had gone off somewhere, leaving behind for a time the fleshly container, which in his absence kept all his bodily functions going at the minimum level needed to preserve itself." (Murakami 67)

The governor funds Nakata because he was affected by the wartime accident. He only remembers that his father used to hit him in childhood, and his mother was not there to love and care for him. He, like Kafka, lacked emotional support, which left him feeling isolated from his family and, eventually, from society. He addresses himself in the third person when speaking to cats, forgetting his identity. Nakata replies to the cat named Otsuka with his odd way of talking, "But this is the only way Nakata can speak. I try to talk normally, but this is what happens. Nakata is not very bright, you see. I was always this way, but when I was in an accident, I have been dumb ever since." (Murakami 59) He finds solace talking with cats and finding lost cats for people. According to Mathew Stretcher Nakata has "entered the 'other world' as a child," perhaps in order "to escape the rampant violence that surrounded him in his own world." (Stretcher 51) He is aware of his own trauma, ironically, though he is not a normal person to suit society. Strangely, Nakata is aware of his 'empty' state, which he confides to Hoshino as "a container with nothing inside" and "like a library without a single book." (Murakami 400)

Although Nakata worked at a furniture shop for almost 37 years without taking a single day off, he is unable to grasp abstract concepts and to experience strong emotions, including loneliness or desire. "No dissatisfactions, no anger at anything. No feelings of loveliness, anxieties about the future, or worries that his life was difficult or inconvenient." (Murakami 283) Nakata's life becomes isolated, mundane, and abnormal. A sense of something missing and emptiness grew in him due to his father's harsh treatment, the absence of his mother's love and affection, and the lack of emotional support from his siblings. This emptiness is symbolised in the form of his half shadow, "on the ground is only half as dark as that of ordinary people" (Murakami 51). Nakata harbours an unknown fear of war constantly.

Nakata's encounter with a strange figure, who introduces himself as Johnny Walker, is significant. By referring to wars, Johnny Walker talks with Nakata about

World War and reveals his plan to kill cats to eat their souls and make a big flute out of them. Mathew Stretcher describes a split in Nakata's personality: "His darker inner self rises to the surface, forcing his surface persona into a subordinate position, and let loose its destructive urges." (Strecher)

Nakata, who possesses special powers, such as speaking with cats, predicts a rain of fish and mackerel over the town. The next day, it rained as Nakata had foretold. However, the violence and brutality of the Johnny Walker incident affect him so severely that he loses the ability to understand and talk with cats. After stabbing Johnny Walker, Nakata misses his half shadow, considering that Johnny Walker was his alter ego. Furthermore, Nakata predicts, "There will be a lot of thunder soon," and this prediction is subsequently fulfilled. The brutality and violence of the world, which have affected Nakata throughout his life, are described by a cat named Mimi to Nakata as "This world is a terribly violent place. Moreover, nobody can escape the violence." (Murakami 83) By contrast, his childhood memories of war are vivid. He tells Hoshino that American soldiers occupied Japan and that America had B-29 planes. Nakata considers himself responsible for finding and moving the mysterious 'entrance stone.' When things are out of alignment, Nakata can set them right. He states that the connection and purpose of the entrance stone are to return him the 'container without anything inside,' thereby establishing his identity.

After his successful journey to find the lost cats by killing Johnny Walker Nakata, he undertakes to find the strange entrance stone, open it, and close it after the mysterious evil is killed. Nakata sets Miss Saeki's soul free by assuring her that she will burn her secret documents. Though Murakami does not clearly establish the relation between Nakata's journey and Miss Saeki's narrative, Nakata is resilient enough to help her by opening the entrance stone. The mystery of the strange creature coming out of his mouth, which Hoshino killed, remains unsolved as he dies at the end. Nakata's death insists that the inevitable end of any war is suffering and the death of innocent people like Nakata himself.

Miss Saeki is another character who suffers due to the death of her lover at the age of 20 in a student movement upheaval. Miss Saeki tells Kafka, "Time's rules do not apply here. Time expands, then contracts, all in tune with the stirrings of the heart." (Murakami 219) She, along with her small daughter, leaves her husband and a four-year-old child, Kafka. About abandoning Kafka, she says, "Something I loved more than anything else...But the whole thing was a huge mistake. I should never have thrown it away." (Murakami 581) Like Nakata, she remains stuck in her early twenties and sometimes appears to Kafka as a ghost in dreams. Kafka believes she must be his

mother, but he cannot determine whether she is. She meets Kafka, and her search likely ends when he forgives her for abandoning him.

Conclusion

In view of their traumatic pasts and present sufferings, Kafka, Nakata, and Miss Saeki exhibit dissociation from reality and attempt to escape it. They refuse the world outside their real or physical world. The novel presents a journey into the unknown labyrinth undertaken by both Kafka and Nakata. They firmly believe that, to overcome the trauma and its effects, they must step out of the situation to identify enduring solutions for resilience. Through Kafka and Nakata, Murakami seems to set right what has gone wrong, however it occurred. When asked about the chance of righting humanity, Murakami answers in an interview, "I want to believe so. Since it is also the reason that stories exist." Kafka accepts the events that happened, like the murder of his father, his encounter with the motherly character, Miss Saeki, or her ghostly presence, the death of Miss Saeki, or setting her soul free, etc. Finally, they achieve by being resilient, as Oshima tells Kafka, "You have grown up." (Murakami 463) And Kafka, too, feels that he has entered "a brand-new world," (Murakami 467) Moreover, he finally becomes "part of a brand-new world." (Murakami 615)

These characters are ready to accept the challenges, knowing that the journey will not be easy. They take shelter in dreams searching for meaning and purpose in their lives, yet they are also aware of their responsibilities. As Yeats' poem quoted by Kafka states, "In dreams begin responsibilities." (Murakami 172) Murakami highlights the uncertainty about the future through Nakata. He strongly believes that he should understand his path and circumstances as they unfold, underscoring the unpredictability of his journey. The characters continue to heal, grow, and accept their existence.

The ways used to present these characters by Murakami are unique, as noted in a paper, "In order to present the stories of ordinary characters who are entangled in the post-modern metropolitan life and are suffering traumas like self-identity, sense of missing something, and personal loss, etc. Murakami has used a variety of complex tapestries of interconnected characters and woven a cob-web of compact linear narrative techniques and elements of storytelling as well." (Kshirsagar and Binnor) Murakami does not present any clear-cut ending to his novels, as observed by William Rhys Tyers, as "Murakami's reluctance to offer clear-cut solutions has a tremendous effect on the reader." (Tyers)

Murakami attempts to uncover the characters' traumatic lives through their suffering, resistance, resilience, acceptance, and, ultimately, their return to normality. While the characters underscore the importance of their growth as human beings by repeatedly referring to the aftermath of war, they demonstrate resilience in overcoming their suffering. The characters are assured of returning to a new world. As a Murakami signature style, *Kafka on the Shore* ends abruptly, without any specific conclusions from the writer, but readers are assured of the protagonists' resilience and their moving on.

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