

Between East and West: Postmodern Selfhood and Cultural Mediation in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*

Tahmina Jarin Khanam^{1*}

¹Department of English, Varendra University, Rajshahi, Bangladesh,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2951-1125>

Keywords:

Postmodernism;
Cultural Hybridity;
Selfhood;
Globalization;
Cultural Mediation

Abstract

This paper explores how the postmodern sense of self is built and negotiated in *Norwegian Wood*, as Haruki Murakami engages in cultural mediation between Eastern and Western frameworks of self. It draws upon Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the Third Space, Stuart Hall's theories of cultural identity, and Fredric Jameson's postmodern critique to examine how protagonist Toru Watanabe's psychological fragmentation, his relationships with women who represent conflicting cultural logics, and Murakami's conscious literary technique all express a hybrid identity that is neither necessarily Japanese nor completely Western, but something that exists in between. The paper outlines several gaps in existing scholarship, including the lack of intersectional readings that consider the interplay between gender and class, and the under-explored potential for music and Western cultural signifiers as active mediators, not just decorative, in the construction of cultural hybridity. Using close textual analysis, cultural studies, and a postmodern theoretical approach, the paper demonstrates that *Norwegian Wood* represents a crisis of selfhood, an event which is inextricable from Japan's late 20th-century cultural moment and is therefore a highly political text in the guise of a sentimental coming-of-age novel.

1. Introduction

Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* is a realistic and emotionally charged novel about youth, love, and loss. But under the guise of this simplicity is a deep philosophical and cultural question of identity, meaning, and belonging in a globalized Japan. The main character of the novel, Toru Watanabe, dwells in the world of memory and modernity, a world where the foundations of Japanese collectivism and the charm of Western individualism collide. Murakami places this personal crisis in the context of the bigger picture of the postmodern consciousness, a fragmented, fluid, and alienated state of being that represents the cultural shift in Japan in the late twentieth century. Toru's character forms through fragmented memories rather than stable cultural anchors, revealing a postmodern sense of self.

*Corresponding author's E-mail address: tahminajks@gmail.com

Japan went through a period of rapid modernization, economic growth, and exposure to Western cultural products in the decades after World War II. These forces brought about a modern and melancholic society that was technologically developed and spiritually lost. In this manner, postmodernism is the result of these late-capitalist situations in which the commodification of consciousness and culture alike is redefined, as Jameson (1991) notes. Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* may therefore be interpreted as a postmodern text not due to the experimentation with style but to its thematic interest in disintegration, loss and the unsteadiness of character. The narrative of the novel is stated in the introspective memories of Toru, wherein time is lost, and individuality is a collage of memory, music, and feeling.

The main issue of *Norwegian Wood* is one of mediation: how can one balance the cultural oppositions of East and West, tradition and modernity, self and society? The characters in Murakami's novel live in this gray area, in which these binaries are indistinct and a hybrid character is formed by Japanese sensibilities and Western influences. The fact that Toru loves Naoko, his friendship with Midori, and his consumption of Western pop culture, especially The Beatles' music, is a sign of the generation that seeks meaning outside of strict national and cultural borders. According to Strecher (2002), the protagonists of Murakami usually symbolize a new type of Japanese subject: cosmopolitan, self-reflective, disconnected, and alienated by postmodern life.

The intertextual references and sophisticated imagery contribute to the fact that Murakami's style of narration makes *Norwegian Wood* a place of cultural translation. The Western representations like classical music, literature, sexuality, and existential introspection are not just imported portrayals but are reframed within the Japanese framework of emotions and morality. This is an illustration of what Bhabha (1994) refers to as cultural hybridity, in which the meaning is created not by means of assimilation but by negotiation. In this way, the novel turns out to be a discussion of the postmodern selfhood, a self built under the influence of the discourse between cultures, memories, and affective experiences.

The paper enquires how *Norwegian Wood* builds postmodern selfhood by means of cultural mediation between the subjectivity frameworks of the East and the West. At its heart, it asks why Toru cannot find a place to belong in either the Japanese or the Western cultural sphere and how Murakami's literary devices dramatize his sense of dislocation. But the issue is not simply that of a confused young man, but rather what kind of selfhood is possible, or even necessary, when a society is experiencing rapid cultural change and the previous structures of individuality have ceased to function. This paper aims to fill these gaps. It suggests that *Norwegian Wood* uses music as a technology of self-fashioning to create a 'Third Space' of enunciation, a hybrid space in which conformity is negotiated rather than inherited from purely Japanese structures. The novel is also read from this perspective, and the paper claims that such an interpretation brings into light the novel's strong connection with the political and cultural concerns of late

twentieth-century Japan, a society that was fascinated with and suspicious of the modernity of the West.

This paper aims to analyze *Norwegian Wood* as a cultural mediation between Eastern and Western societies and explore how Murakami expresses postmodern subjectivity in the crosscurrents of proliferation. It claims that the way Murakami presents the selfhood, manifested through the ambivalence of emotional proximity and existential alienation, is the postmodern situation of the global subject. The paper uses postmodern and cultural studies theories to explain how the various characters in this novel exemplify the fragmented, fluid nature of late-capitalist Japan. Finally, it argues that the novel represents a generation that is in between East and West, trying to negotiate itself in the face of the deconstruction of grand narratives and the emerging consumer culture of the world. Murakami expresses the emotional texture of postmodern selfhood through Toru Watanabe, a self who is constantly trying to find some sense in a world that is fragmented and disconnected.

2. Literature Review

Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* is an expression of the depth of its themes: alienation, memory, love, and identity in the fast-globalizing cultural environment of Japan. Scholars have approached Murakami's fiction in a variety of theoretical terms: postmodernism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, and cultural hybridity. This section is a review of some of the major critical views that are pertinent to this paper, the way *Norwegian Wood* has been viewed as a cultural mediating site between East and West, and as an exploration of postmodern selfhood.

Murakami's status as a postmodern writer is one of the most enduring critical assessments of his work; at the same time, it is one of the most disputed. Initial critics, who were writing immediately after Murakami's success at home, typically read his fiction in terms of Japanese literary history and placed him as a carrier of, and sometimes as a betrayal of, pure literary fiction. This is set against the backdrop of an influential interpretation of the "origins" of modern Japanese literature by Karatani Kōjin, which attributes the modern Japanese novel to a certain arrangement of interiority, confession, and landscape that came into being in the late nineteenth century when modern Japanese people were deeply involved in the encounter with modern Western literary models (Karatani, 1993). In this perspective, Murakami's fiction is not a rejection of this tradition, but it is inevitable and sometimes disturbing: a step in the extensive evolution of Japanese literature's relation with foreign styles.

In an extensive study of Japan and the "high postmodern," Yomota *et al.* (2005) argue that the use of Western postmodern theory in Japanese cultural production could lead to a kind of theoretical imperialism, where Japanese texts are made readable to Westerners through their assimilation into a theory developed to describe Western cultural conditions. What appears to be postmodern fragmentation in Murakami's writing may instead be a reflection of Japanese

structures of feeling, the aesthetics of 'mono no aware', the long tradition of diary-novel, and the cultural valorization of ephemerality that predate the Western postmodernism Murakami is often associated with. Kelts (2006) places Murakami in a larger narrative of the global dissemination of Japanese popular culture, suggesting that Murakami's novels are part of a similar process of cultural export as Japanese anime, manga, and video games, in which culturally specific signs are strategically minimized to ensure the product's global dissemination. The cosmopolitanism of Murakami's fiction is a double-edged sword, as it allows for an extraordinary global audience, while at the same time creating an oddly denationalized version of 'Japan' – one that is, in a sense, merely a setting for narratives that might almost be set anywhere.

In response to this, other critics have challenged this interpretation, suggesting that the apparent denationalization of Murakami's fiction is quite a culturally specific phenomenon: that the de-Japanization of his work is not an abdication of Japanese identity, but rather a specific and historically particular way of being Japanese in the context of the post-war Americanization and globalization of consumer culture. Snyder's (2011) account of Murakami's "aesthetics of absence" extends this argument by pointing to the wider history of Japanese cultural responses to trauma in the aftermath of war and livelihood, and the characteristic ways in which Murakami's emotional understatement and his fiction's pervasive sense of loss draw on distinctly Japanese structures of mourning, despite being expressed in an idiom saturated with American popular culture.

The application of Western cultural motifs, especially The Beatles, Fitzgerald, and Western cinema, is extensively discussed as both a tribute to and an attack on Western culture. Rubin (2005) believes that these references are not imitation but translation. Murakami applies the Japanese prism to global culture, forming what he calls the international vernacular. In *Norwegian Wood*, the eponymous Beatles song serves as a device of nostalgia and displacement, implying how Western culture turns into an emotional language for Japanese youth. This point of view is in line with Iwabuchi's (2002) concept of cultural originality, which explains that global cultural products are disseminated beyond their origin, which makes them subject to hybrid reinterpretation.

Seats (2006) examines gender and argues that Murakami's female characters are always built as subjects of male fantasy and cultural projection, not as subjects in their own right. For Seats, the novel indicates a general pattern in Murakami's writing to subject women to cultural projection. Though this is a valid criticism, it may lead to the dehumanization of these female characters, and in the case of Naoko and Midori, to their minimization as characters who are psychologically complex and actively move the novel's cultural logic. Ochi (2009) provides one of the most elaborate theoretical analyses of Murakami's cultural positioning, which is based on Bhabha's understanding of mimicry that claims Murakami's appropriation of Western cultural forms is not passive mimicry, but

rather a critical estrangement. In reproducing Western cultural materials in the Japanese context, Ochi argues, Murakami creates a productive “slippage” which reveals the artificiality of cultural authenticity claims in both the Western and Japanese cultural worlds (2009).

In Japan, Murakami has had a mixed reception. As international critics cherish his cosmopolitan style, Japanese critics have criticized him as being culturally detached or un-Japanese. A critic like Miyoshi (1991) suggests that Murakami owes his worldwide popularity to his renunciation of the traditions of Japanese literature, adopting the alienation and irony of Western postmodernism. But this detachment, which is, paradoxically enough, an imitation of Japanese modernity as such a society negotiates its location in global capitalism, is in fact its own. According to Suter (2008), Murakami’s work exposes the cultural logic of late-modern Japan in which the traditional pursuit of belonging is replaced with existential uncertainties. Though the literature has already addressed the subject of postmodern style and the global persona of Murakami in detail, less is discussed about the motif of *Norwegian Wood* as a cultural mediator, a place where East and West meet to create a new and hybrid form of postmodern selfhood. This study aims to fill this gap by addressing how Murakami balances between the Japanese emotional tradition and Western existential motifs. It is to demonstrate that Murakami does not just alienate the self, but mediates its sense of self, a compromised negotiation between inherited cultural memory and global modern experience.

3. Methodology

The approach of this study is qualitative, which includes close reading of the text and theoretical interpretation. The methodological approach is based on cultural literary criticism, which examines literary works as cultural practices rather than aesthetic objects. Thus, the study shifts from the specifics of Murakami's prose to the theoretical and cultural issues involved. The main text is the English translation of Haruki Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood* (2000) by Jay Rubin, the most widely available version of the novel around the world that has established its global acceptance. The analytical approach involves a number of steps. This study first traces the key scenes in which cultural mediation is explicitly staged in the novel, such as those in which characters explicitly refer to Western cultural references, describe their relationship to Japanese cultural norms, or undergo the kind of affective dislocation that cultural in-betweenness affliction entails. Secondly, it analyses the formal aspects of the narrative voice, imagery, and rhythm of the text to obtain an understanding of how style contributes to the creation of cultural meaning. Finally, it places these textual observations within the theoretical framework of Bhabha, Hall, and Jameson to advance a reading of the novel's postmodern selfhood that is both textually informed and theoretically grounded.

4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is based on three interconnected streams of research: Homi K. Bhabha's theory of the Third Space, Stuart Hall's account of cultural identity, and Fredric Jameson's postmodern critique. These frameworks collectively shed light on the nature of selfhood in *Norwegian Wood* as an unstable, culturally mediated, and historically constructed formation that exists in between the Japanese tradition and Western modernity.

The most obvious theoretical tool for understanding Murakami's cultural positioning is Bhabha's (1994) notion of the 'Third Space'. Cultural meaning is never readily handed down from one tradition to another; it is always "negotiated" in the "Third Space of enunciation," as Bhabha calls it. This space belongs equally to both the source and the receiving culture, yet it also represents a space of difference that is articulated, contested, and transformed. What is important is that the 'Third Space' is not a stable place or synthesis, but a dynamic discursive process that challenges the authority of any claim to cultural purity or origin. It is the 'inter' or the 'cutting edge', the 'in-between' space, that bears the weight of the meaning of culture, writes Bhabha (1994). The way in which *Norwegian Wood* manifests this condition is exactly as Murakami makes use of Western literary intertexts and Japanese cultural codes: there is no coherent fusion, but an ongoing negotiation. In this 'Third Space', Toru's subjectivity exists, always and everywhere, between cultural formations that he can call on but never fully claim as his own. The idea also helps to clarify how the novel was received: its status as an outsider in Japan is due to its unwillingness to fit into the national traditions, thus revealing the constructed and contingent nature of the national literary identity.

There is a complementary framework in the work of Hall (1990), who theorizes cultural identity. Hall differentiates between two notions of identity: one is a shared identity, a stable, shared essence based on a common history, and the other is a strategic, positional "production" of identity, one that is never complete, always in process, and is produced within representation, but not limited by it. On this account, identity is not a possession, but an enactment or a result of negotiation, which occurs in a specific historical context. Cultural identities "come from somewhere, 'have histories', but at the same time, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (Hall, 1990, p. 225). This formulation directly affects *Norwegian Wood*. Toru's identity is neither Japanese nor Western, but is constructed from conflicting cultural elements, jazz records, American novels, and Japanese social practices, none of which offer a secure base. His retrospective narration is a formal gesture that echoes Hall's insight that subjectivity is a representation of the past from a perspective of an unstable present.

The novel is positioned within the broader context of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson, 1991). Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Hall's concept of identity politics also fit into this framework. The historical

depth of culture is lost, subjectivity is fragmented, affect is diminished, and cultural styles are endlessly recycled as pastiches, Jameson argues. For [Jameson \(1991\)](#), these characteristics are not simply aesthetic but rather are symptoms of the late-capitalist breakdown of stable social formations. *Norwegian Wood* possesses each of these characteristics: the affectively flattened narrator, the eclectic consumption of cultural texts across national boundaries, and its failure to situate grief within a coherent historical narrative, which are postmodern in nature according to Jameson. The novel also complicates his account: Toru's culture of bricolage leaves unresolved, affectively charged mourning that implies that the postmodern "waning of affect" is not a baseline condition but a symptomatic reaction to the absence of the proper cultural form of mourning.

These three frameworks together constitute a definition of selfhood as a culturally, historically, and discursively produced formation, one that is unstable because of the structural conditions of postmodernity and cross-cultural mediation.

5. Critical Analysis and Discussion

Norwegian Wood is set in Tokyo, Japan, in an era of extraordinary cultural and political turbulence: roughly from 1967 to 1970. Toru comes to his anonymous university in Tokyo at a time when the student movement is at its peak, when campuses are regularly seized and closed, and the postwar consensus is created under American occupation and postwar economic reconstruction is beginning to crack along with deep ideological fault lines. However, Murakami's involvement in this political landscape is rather tangential. Murakami's Japan, in the sense of what has been described as the "political novel" in the country, might have provided a more continuous examination of the ideology behind the student movement; instead, he treats it as an atmospheric disturbance rather than a plot element.

It does not mean that he is evading; rather, he is being strategic. Toru's detachment toward the student movement is itself an ideological statement: "I had no particular interest in the student movement and was disinclined to become involved in it in any way. The movement seemed to me a crusade with no more substance than the ghost that was supposed to have haunted the old dormitory" ([Murakami, 2000, p. 35](#)). What is revealed here is the conflation of the student movement with a ghost story, both of which are, for Toru, examples of collective narratives that he cannot inhabit constitutionally. It is not a simple political cynicism, but rather the deeper structure of his subjectivity, one that [Lyotard \(1984\)](#) describes as the postmodern incredulity towards grand 'récits': the metanarratives of political liberation, historical progress, or collective emancipation that dominated the political imagination of the 1960s left. What happens to Toru is the very absence of collective political narratives, the space in which his individual selfhood can emerge.

The 1960s were also the decade of Japan's final step toward the global capitalist order and the emergence of a distinctly Japanese modernity that

combines rapid economic growth with the reinvention or preservation of traditional cultural forms. Here, Marilyn Ivy's discussion of Japanese modernity as structured around the basic "discourse of the vanishing" is insightful: modernity in Japan, Ivy (1995) claims, is marked by a simultaneous embrace of technological and economic globalization and the anxious preservation of cultural particularity. Tokyo is already a globalized city, one that is suffused with Western cultural products, from record shops to coffee houses playing jazz and Western music.

Thus, the historical setting of the novel is not only the period background of the narrative, but also an inevitable condition of the thematic preoccupation in the central theme. The late 1960s were the watershed in Japanese cultural history, where the postwar consensus split, the political narratives of the left and the restorationist right grew increasingly disgraced, and a generation was born into a liminal space, existing somewhere between the culturally inherited past and the globalized present that was rapidly transforming the country. The novel suggests that this historical moment develops Watanabe's peculiar mode of selfhood; a self that is detached, bookish, emotionally guarded, and, in general, not inclined toward any collective narrative. He has a selfhood formed in the absence of certainties, and a subjectivity composed in the vacuum of the lost or discredited metanarratives.

The novel begins with the thirty-seven-year-old Toru Watanabe listening to the song of The Beatles on a flight to Hamburg titled "Norwegian Wood". This act is a catalyst for the involuntary deluge of memories of his years as a student in Tokyo in the late 1960s. Murakami's choice of retrospective consciousness in telling the story determines a postmodern temporality, one that disintegrates linear time into an art mosaic of recalled pieces. The song "Norwegian Wood" is not simply the title or a background sound of the novel, but the organizing symbol around which the entire economy of cultural desires and displacements of the novel is organized. The first time after eighteen years, Toru listens to the song and contemplates: "...all I had lost in the course of my life; times gone forever, friends who had died or disappeared, feelings I would never know again" (Murakami, 2000, p. 3). This is the style of Murakami's prose: there is a strong emotion that can be recognized, but not fully described, linked to a Western cultural reference. The song evokes the memory and emotion. Toru knows the song, knows what it sounds like, maybe even knows the lyrics, but the meaning it has to him is very personal, and not bound up in the cultural context in which it was created.

The Beatles' song is a "sign of cultural difference" (Bhabha 1994) that is also "a process of signification"; not a fixed cultural product carried across the rift from West to East, but a place where cultural products are being created in the encounter. Toru's affectivity is the constant condition of being present in the events of his life but not fully absorbed into them, being able to watch himself experience them from a narrative distance, a distance that is echoed at the textual level in Murakami's style. Postmodern subjectivity is defined by a "breakdown of the signifying chain", Jameson (1991) writes, meaning a breakdown in the sense of

temporal continuity, in the way in which past, present, and future are linked together to create an identity narrative. The narrative he is presenting here, eighteen years after the events he recounts, is an effort to piece it together, to make the memory make sense. However, there is an explicit lack of reconstruction. The novel starts with his loss of memory for the details of Naoko's appearance:

I realize that all the details I can remember about Naoko have become increasingly indistinct. The more my memory fades, the more deeply I understand her. I understand why she asked me never to forget her. Naoko knew, of course. She knew that my memories of her would fade. Which is precisely why she begged me never to forget her, to remember that she had existed."(Murakami, 2000, p. 4).

That is, the act of narration does not give the identity back to itself; rather, it makes the person self-constitutive and incomplete.

This structure is seen as an example of Lyotard's (1984) concept of postmodernity as an incredulity toward metanarratives. The narrative of Toru does not lend itself to closure and coherence; it is presented not in chronological order but in an emotional one. The discontinuity of time in the novel reflects the discontinuity of identity in the postmodern culture, where the self has lost its basis in historical endurance and has taken its foundation in subjective experience. According to Jameson (1991), postmodern fiction tends to substitute historical richness with intensities of experience. Nostalgia, or the poignant consciousness of loss, of which Toru is so painfully aware, serves as one such potency, substituting narrative connection with resonance.

In addition, the very concept of memory is portrayed as unreliable, mediated by emotion and cultural imagery. To Toru, "Memory is a funny thing" (Murakami, 2000, p. 3). The past becomes an aestheticized reconstruction rather than a real recollection. In *Norwegian Wood*, the past is never recovered but recreated through narration. Therefore, Toru's remembering of Naoko is both an expression of his love and a simulation of the experience: he writes her into being with nostalgia, making lived experience a textual artifice. Toru's consciousness is marked by an attraction to Western modernity. He listens to Western recordings, reads Western literature, especially Fitzgerald and Mann, and quantifies his feelings in Western idioms.

The title song itself is a case study of cultural translation and its discontents, theorized by Bhabha (1994). "Norwegian Wood" (This Bird Has Flown) is a Beatles' song about a fleeting and vague sexual encounter; the title, according to John Lennon, is a reference to cheap wood paneling in 1960s British flats. The novel's overall atmosphere of sadness and despair is echoed in the Japanese context of the novel, where "Norwegian Wood" becomes a symbol of the distant and unattainable northern romanticism- a place of beauty and emotional coldness. Its translation from the British cultural context to the Japanese cultural context is not an exact copy of the British original, but a creative translation that

creates something new; something that is neither British nor Japanese, but emerges in between them. This is Bhabha's third space, neither an original nor a copy can be satisfactory, and the process of translation creates new cultural meaning and new possibilities for identity (Bhabha, 1994).

Toru's exposure to Western literature, such as The Beatles, Salinger, and Fitzgerald, anchors his emotional vocabulary in Western modernity. Toru's subjectivity does not grow out of East and West; rather exists as a process of negotiation between the two. He inhabits both a hybrid world in which cultural lines are drawn blurred, a Western song is consumed as a kind of vessel of Japanese memory, and a modern love is demeaned by traditional concepts of purity and loss. This hybridity appears in Toru's behavior as well as in the language of Murakami. Japanese cultural references are not used as resources for self-construction like Western cultural references. The novel mentions Japanese literature and music, but these are usually as part of an older generation, as parts of Watanabe's professors, or as part of a cultural mainstream that Watanabe and his peers feel excluded from. In contrast, Western culture is encoded as contemporary, progressive, and emotionally sophisticated. This imbalance is not just Murakami's own taste, but a reality of the 1960s Japanese youth culture when Western popular music and literature were indeed perceived as a means of breaking free from a social structure rooted in pre-war values (Igarashi, 2000).

The novel, however, is conscious of the constraints of this cultural change. Nagasawa, perhaps the most obviously Westernized character in the novel, is Watanabe's fellow student, and his character, like others, suggests the inability of Western cultural reference to produce selfhood. Nagasawa only reads books published over 30 years ago (excluding most of contemporary Japanese literature), has sex with several women without any emotional attachment, and intends to work for the Japanese foreign ministry. He is well educated in Western culture, but lacks knowledge of contemporary Japanese culture. Watanabe notes,

The better I got to know Nagasawa, the stranger he seemed. I had met a lot of strange people in my day, but none as strange as Nagasawa. He was a far more voracious reader than I, but he made it a rule never to touch a book by any author who had not been dead at least thirty years. (Murakami, 2000, p. 37).

The use of Western popular music as a motif and a structure is one of the most peculiar methods of cultural mediation used by Murakami. The song by The Beatles is called "Norwegian Wood", and it is also the title of the novel, the emotional stimulus, and the theme of the novel. With its eerie tune and mysterious words, the song encapsulates the contradiction of contemporary love, one which is intimate but fleeting, beautiful yet sad. The song serves as an emotional compass that helps Toru connect his inner world with the global culture. In contrast to Western music that Rubin (2005) notes as exotic ornamentation, Murakami employs Western music as a language of mutual feeling. In this regard, music is a form of what Hall (1990) regards as a cultural translation, a medium through

which local identities express themselves in global forms. Thus, Western cultural products are introduced into the inner world of Toru, representing how global media access personal experiences.

Nonetheless, this appropriation is not a mere imitation: Murakami reinterprets Western pop music in the context of Japanese sensibility, creating a hybrid emotional vocabulary to be heard by the people of other cultures. In *Norwegian Wood*, then, music plays an intermediary role between East and West, authenticity and simulation. It reflects the emotional universality of human desire and shows the cultural peculiarities that determine it. The fact that Toru identifies with the song highlights his alienation: he never interacts with the song; he feels it through the mediated sound. Yet, Murakami's gentle depiction of this mediation does not imply cynicism, but rather emotional adaptation- a manner in which the contemporary subject experiences the increasingly mediated world.

Naoko and Midori are read, at least somewhat stereotypically, as representing opposing orientations: Naoko as a "traditional" Japanese, whereas Midori as a "modern," westernized Japanese. There is a grain of truth here, but it is not nearly as complicated as the characters themselves are drawn, and the opposition between them is more interesting as a cultural logic. Withdrawal, silence, and psychological fragmentation are all Naoko's characteristics throughout the novel. She is troubled by the suicide of her young lover, Kizuki, and gradually withdraws from the social world into the sanatorium, where she eventually commits suicide. Her presence is interpreted psychoanalytically as a figure of melancholia (Suter, 2008), in cultural terms as a figure of the repressed Japanese unconscious (Kawamoto, 2012), and in feminist terms as yet another sacrificed woman in the Murakami canon (Seats, 2006).

Naoko's words do not seem to be sufficient enough to express her thoughts. Her dialogues with Toru are filled with awkward pauses, unfinished sentences, and mispronunciations. However, she tries to explain it, but she can never get it quite right. She tells him, "No matter how I try to explain it, I can never quite get it right; things get all twisted around when I say them out loud. It's the only thing I can do—to feel stuck like this" (Murakami, 2000, p. 11). In this respect, the novel's linguistic failure is important in the context of the cultural dynamics of the novel. For Murakami's characters, the vocabulary of Western culture is the language of selfhood; a language in the sense that it is a system of symbols by which the experience of the self can be named and communicated. For Naoko, however, this language is unavailable; she is unable to speak through traditional Japanese vocabulary and Western cultural forms as well.

Midori, on the other hand, is constantly babbling. She gives long, detailed, sometimes shocking speeches on death, family, desire, and everyday life. Her language is modern, informal, and humorous. She is very Japanese in her cultural allusions and social universe. She is working in her family's bookshop, taking care of her ailing father, and dealing with the social rules of the university world, but with an ironic distance that distinguishes her as a distinctly modern woman.

Midori does not feel trapped between East and West since she does not define herself in terms of the two. She is just there, in the flesh, here, in the world, in a way that Toru, with his cultural in-betweenness, cannot quite do. What is tragic about Naoko's situation is that she is "too Japanese" to be part of either system of culture; she is in the Third Space, the most terrifying of spaces, where she cannot speak in either cultural language. The relative health of Midori is a consequence of her lack of concern over cultural positioning; her inclination to fashion a self from whatever materials are on hand, regardless of their cultural origin.

Western music, literature, and urban images are not the rejection of Japanese culture, but rather a redefinition of it, a means of telling the emotional truth in a universal language. Such integration of aesthetic forms makes the novel an abode of cultural negotiation, a third space where conflicting traditions co-exist and redefine each other. Meanwhile, Murakami's fiction maintains the moral and emotional richness of the Japanese literary tradition. The melancholy note, the thematic obsession with death and recollection, and the silence of the commonplace moments allude to the classical sensibility of 'mono no aware'. Taking all these sensibilities as threads in the fabric of a Westernized narrative paradigm, Murakami attains what may be termed transcultural humanism, a vision of the self as both local and universal, fragmented and capable of tenderness.

There are some constraints that are recognized in this study. Translating from Japanese is problematic because important Japanese-specific registers and stylistic features may be lost that directly impact the argument. Bhabha, Hall, and Jameson's theoretical arsenal was developed for the Western and South Asian contexts, and it inevitably brings friction when it is applied to a Japanese literary context. Furthermore, the study is limited to the text; it cannot inform us about how the novel's cultural dynamics have actually been experienced by readers from different cultures and generations. All these restrictions implicitly suggest areas for future research that may further elaborate and challenge the arguments of this paper. The intersectional nature of this reading could usefully be explored in future research, with the possible addition of a discussion of gender, class, and cultural positioning, and with the comparative project across Murakami's work that this paper cannot attempt.

6. Conclusion

Norwegian Wood is a more political and richer text than is implied by its reputation as a sentimental coming-of-age novel. When read in the light of Bhabha's Third Space theory, Hall's cultural positioning framework, and Jameson's postmodern critique, the novel is a powerful interrogation of the processes of self-formation in the era of cultural displacement and late-capitalist fragmentation. The fact that Toru never fully embraced either the Japanese or the Western cultural context is not his fault, but a structural problem of subjectivity, as a society rapidly subjected to the modernity of the West. The novel's mediation of Western music, its portrayal of different female figures' relation to cultural temperament, and its formal approach of detaching from the narrative are all linked in a unified

discussion of postmodern selfhood. This argument does not get settled at the end of the novel. Toru dials a number in an anonymous phone booth, but he is unable to answer Midori's question about where he is, because postmodern selfhood has no tenacity.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no potential conflict of interest regarding the publication of this work.

References

- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Hall, S. (1990). *Cultural identity and diaspora*. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.
- Igarashi, Y. (2000). *Bodies of memory: Narratives of war in postwar Japanese culture, 1945–1970*. Princeton University Press.
- Ivy, M. (1995). *Discourses of the vanishing: Modernity, phantasm, Japan*. University of Chicago Press.
- Iwabuchi, K. (2002). *Recentering globalization: Popular culture and Japanese transnationalism*. Duke University Press.
- Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. Duke University Press.
- Karatani, K. (1993). *Origins of modern Japanese literature* (B. de Bary, Trans.). Duke University Press.
- Kawamoto, S. (2012). Late capitalism and the crisis of self: Murakami, Yoshimoto, and the literature of the 1980s. *Japanese Studies*, 32(3), 301–318.
- Kelts, R. (2006). *Japanamerica: How Japanese pop culture has invaded the U.S.* Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (G. Bennington & B. Massumi, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.
- Miyoshi, M. (1991). *Off-center: Power and culture relations between Japan and the United States*. Harvard University Press.
- Murakami, H. (2000). *Norwegian wood* (J. Rubin, Trans.). Vintage International.
- Ochi, H. (2009). Japanese literary identity and Western influence in Haruki Murakami. *Mechademia*, 4, 180–193.
- Rubin, J. (2005). *Haruki Murakami and the music of words*. Harvill Press.

- Seas, M. (2006). *Murakami Haruki: The simulacrum in contemporary Japanese culture*. Lexington Books.
- Snyder, S. (2011). Murakami Haruki and the aesthetics of absence. *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 37(1), 1–29.
- Strecher, M. C. (2002). *Dances with sheep: The quest for identity in the fiction of Murakami Haruki*. University of Michigan Press.
- Suter, R. (2008). *The Japanization of modernity: Murakami Haruki between Japan and the United States*. Harvard University Asia Center.
- Yomota, I., Shibata, M., & Numano, M. (2005). Murakami Haruki and the spirit of the age. In M. Tsurumi (Ed.), *Japan and the high postmodern* (pp. 44–68). University of Hawaii Press.