

Self-Alienation and the Fragmented Self in Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* and *After Dark*: A Psychoanalytic and Existential Reading

Ms. P.M. Manjusha¹, Dr.S. Henry Kishore²

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sri Krishna Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India¹

Associate Professor, Department of English, Sri Krishna Arts and Science College Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India²

Abstract: This paper investigates the theme of self-alienation in Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* and *After Dark*. Murakami's fiction consistently portrays protagonists who struggle with fractured identities, emotional isolation, and existential uncertainty within postmodern society. While previous scholarship has extensively explored alienation in *Norwegian Wood* and *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*, comparatively less attention has been devoted to a comparative study of these two novels through the lens of self-alienation.

Using the theories of Erich Fromm, Karen Horney, and Jean-Paul Sartre, the study analyzes how Kafka Tamura, Nakata, Mari Asai, and Eri Asai negotiate fragmented identities, loneliness, memory, and interpersonal disconnection. The paper argues that Murakami presents self-alienation not merely as psychological suffering but as a transformative process through which characters reconstruct identity. Ultimately, the novels depict alienation as an unavoidable consequence of modern existence while simultaneously suggesting the possibility of healing through self-awareness and human connection.

Keywords: Self-alienation, identity, existentialism, psychoanalysis, postmodernism, Haruki Murakami

INTRODUCTION

Alienation is widely regarded as a defining feature of modern life. Urban growth, technological change, globalization, and shifting social structures have reshaped how people relate to one another, often leaving individuals isolated and uncertain of who they are. Self-alienation is a particularly important strand of this broader phenomenon: rather than mere physical solitude, it names a person's disconnection from their own authentic feelings, desires, and sense of purpose—a condition in which people become strangers to themselves, unable to form solid bonds either with the world or with their own inner lives. This has become a recurring concern of contemporary fiction as writers seek to capture the instability of identity in an uncertain age.

Murakami has built an international reputation on his ability to depict the inner lives of modern individuals by blending realism with surreal invention. Loneliness, memory, identity, grief, trauma, and existential doubt recur throughout his work, which places unremarkable characters amid extraordinary psychological situations. His protagonists tend to be emotionally guarded, socially withdrawn, and absorbed in an internal search for meaning. Through symbolic settings and encounters that verge on the metaphysical, he probes the hidden pressures that shape consciousness and reveals how easily identity can come apart—making his fiction rich material for studying self-alienation from psychological, existential, and postmodern angles at once.

Kafka on the Shore and *After Dark* are especially rewarding examples of this preoccupation. *Kafka on the Shore* follows the intertwined paths of Kafka Tamura and Nakata, whose experiences dissolve the line between waking life and the unconscious as each struggles to build a genuine self out of trauma, prophecy, and memory. *After Dark*, confined to a single Tokyo night, follows characters whose lives briefly touch while exposing considerable emotional distance beneath the ordinary surface of city life. Despite differing structures and tones, both novels track characters holding together broken identities amid uncertainty and isolation.

The concept of self-alienation used here draws on three theorists. Fromm treats alienation as the separation of individuals from their true selves under modern social pressure. Horney focuses on the "idealized self," an image that pulls people away from their genuine feelings. Sartre links alienation to existential anxiety and to the freedom and responsibility involved in generating one's own meaning in a world that offers none by default. Together these perspectives supply an interdisciplinary basis for reading the psychological and philosophical layers of Murakami's characters.

Existing scholarship on Murakami has concentrated more on magical realism, postmodern technique, memory, and trauma than on self-alienation as a distinct category, and comparative treatments of these two novels within an integrated psychoanalytic-existential frame remain scarce. This study addresses that gap through close reading informed by psychoanalytic criticism, existential philosophy, and postmodern literary theory, examining the psychological conflicts, symbols, and relationships that expose the protagonists' estrangement from themselves. The broader claim is that Murakami's fiction offers a sustained meditation on how selfhood can be preserved within the fractured conditions of contemporary life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Murakami's fiction has been approached through postmodernism, existentialism, psychoanalysis, magical realism, trauma studies, and memory, yet comparative work isolating self-alienation specifically in these two novels remains limited. Early criticism emphasized his postmodern technique and debts to Western philosophy, noting how his fiction departs from established Japanese conventions by placing characters within uncertain realities where dream and the unconscious blend with daily life—surrealism functioning less as decoration than as a device for exposing psychological reality.

Scholarship on *Kafka on the Shore* has mainly addressed identity formation, myth, memory, and the unconscious. Many critics read Kafka's flight from home as an existential search for selfhood shaped by inherited trauma and prophecy, while Nakata's lost memory and speech are often read psychoanalytically as signs of a fractured identity that unsettles ordinary notions of selfhood. Other work reads the novel's dreams, alternate worlds, and forests as externalizations of inner conflict. Work on *After Dark* has centered on urban alienation and interpersonal distance, with its compressed timeframe and nocturnal setting read as a figure for psychological liminality. Scholars have compared Mari and Eri Asai to raise broader questions about technology and the erosion of genuine relationship, while feminist critics have examined how social expectation and repression shape the female characters' alienation.

Theoretically, Marx tied alienation to labor and capitalism; Fromm broadened it to psychological life, arguing that conformity separates individuals from authentic selfhood; Horney's idealized self explains how internal conflict drives people toward unreachable ideals; and Sartre's existentialism treats alienation as an outgrowth of freedom itself. Jungian readings of Murakami interpret recurring images—forests, wells, cats, parallel worlds—as expressions of the unconscious and of individuation, though such work often treats individual novels in isolation. Existentialist readings stress absurdity and the pursuit of authenticity but often stop short of incorporating psychoanalytic explanations of fragmentation. Existing scholarship therefore has clear gaps: the two novels are rarely treated together, postmodern and psychoanalytic approaches are often favored over existential ones, and self-alienation as distinct from ordinary loneliness has received little sustained comparative attention. This study responds by combining Fromm, Horney, and Sartre to analyze self-alienation as both a condition of fragmentation and a route toward self-awareness across both novels.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study combines psychoanalytic and existential thought drawn from Fromm, Horney, and Sartre, each offering a distinct but compatible account of psychological estrangement and the pursuit of authenticity.

Fromm. In *Escape from Freedom* (1941) and *The Sane Society* (1955), Fromm argues that industrial society produces individuals estranged from themselves, from others, and from their own lives. Where Marx located alienation in economic relations, Fromm extends it into psychological territory: self-alienation occurs when people lose touch with genuine feeling and instead conform to external expectation, producing inner emptiness and a weakened sense of identity, since socially constructed roles offer only temporary security. Genuine freedom requires recovering the capacity for self-awareness and love—a framework that fits Kafka Tamura's search for identity and Mari Asai's struggle to form real relationships.

Horney. In *Neurosis and Human Growth* (1950), Horney explains that anxiety and insecurity lead individuals to construct an "idealized self" that gradually displaces authentic personality, producing inadequacy and fragmentation. Her defensive strategies—moving toward, against, or away from others—reduce anxiety short-term but deepen alienation by preventing people from acknowledging real feeling. Murakami's characters display comparable patterns of withdrawal and silence that distance them from their true selves.

Sartre. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre denies any fixed human nature, holding that "existence precedes essence": people define themselves through action, not predetermined identity. This freedom generates anxiety, since individuals must face uncertainty without built-in meaning, and his concept of "bad faith" describes the self-deception of adopting a prescribed role instead of accepting responsibility for one's existence—a denial that produces existential alienation. Murakami's protagonists inhabit worlds of ambiguity in which conventional explanation fails, making Sartre central to reading their identity formation as existential self-discovery.

Integration. Psychoanalysis traces the unconscious roots of conflict, while existentialism examines the conscious struggle for authenticity; in Murakami's fiction the two coexist, with dreams and surreal episodes functioning simultaneously as expressions of unconscious conflict and sites of existential reckoning. Applying all three theorists together—Fromm to identify estrangement, Horney to analyze the defenses that sustain it, Sartre to interpret the search for meaning—captures dimensions of self-alienation no single theory addresses alone.

Identity Crisis in *Kafka on the Shore*

Identity in this novel is never fixed but continually renegotiated through memory, trauma, and relationship. Kafka Tamura runs away at fifteen to escape his father's oppressive control and a prophecy that he will kill his father and sleep with his mother and sister—a prophecy that immediately unsettles his sense of self and leaves him unsure whether his future is determined or chosen. His chosen name, "Kafka" (Czech for "crow"), signals a deliberate attempt to build an identity independent of his family, though it cannot fully free him from the psychological weight he carries. The mysterious figure "Crow" acts as an internal voice dramatizing a conflict between fear and resolve, suggesting his identity is composed of competing forces rather than one coherent self. Nakata's parallel storyline, in which lost childhood memory leaves him without a conventional sense of history yet able to communicate with cats and bridge physical and metaphysical worlds, offers a second route to the same condition: where Kafka's identity is disturbed by traumatic memory, Nakata's is disturbed by memory's absence—both, in Fromm's terms, separated from authentic self-awareness.

Father-son conflict. The relationship with Kafka's emotionally distant, manipulative father sits at the novel's psychological center; his prophecy functions less as prediction than as a tool of control, generating guilt rather than security. Kafka's flight is both literal escape and resistance to paternal authority, though the father's influence persists internally. Murakami evokes the Oedipus myth to explore inherited psychological burden rather than fate itself, leaving Kafka to wonder whether he might unconsciously fulfill the prophecy—raising questions of free will and responsibility. The symbolic killing of the father represents the necessity of overcoming oppressive authority to achieve independence. Horney's account of childhood anxiety explains Kafka's withdrawal as a defense that, while protective, deepens his isolation—illustrating how survival strategies can increase distance from self and others alike.

Dreams and the unconscious. The novel blurs sleep and waking life to suggest unconscious experience shapes identity as much as conscious event. Encounters with Miss Saeki, surreal forests, falling fish, and talking cats challenge realism while symbolizing unresolved conflict; Jung's collective unconscious helps explain the forest as an archetype into which Kafka descends, and Miss Saeki becomes a figure suspended between memory and grief, showing how trauma disturbs one's sense of time. A Freudian reading treats Kafka's dreams as expressions of repressed fear around guilt and abandonment, granting access to emotion rational thought cannot reach.

Loneliness. Nearly every character lives in isolation despite occasional contact—Kafka finds no intimacy at home, Nakata exists outside ordinary society, Miss Saeki remains bound to a dead lover's memory, and Oshima wrestles with questions of gender and acceptance. This collective isolation supports Fromm's claim that modern individuals can be alienated even while surrounded by others, since real communication is blocked by the private nature of emotional experience—reinforced by settings like libraries, forests, and empty roads where silence often communicates more than dialogue. Still, brief moments of kindness keep alive the possibility of connection and mark steps away from self-alienation.

Self-discovery. Kafka's arc does not resolve every mystery but moves toward accepting responsibility through confrontation rather than avoidance, gradually folding grief, fear, and guilt into a more coherent self—a process resembling Jungian individuation. Nakata finds meaning through compassion and moral action despite lacking memory, his identity defined by ethical integrity rather than knowledge. Existentially, Kafka comes to recognize that identity must be built through choice rather than inherited or predicted, echoing Sartre's claim that people define themselves through action. Murakami leaves mysteries unresolved deliberately, suggesting self-discovery is ongoing and that accepting ambiguity is itself wisdom; Kafka's return marks not the end of alienation but the start of authentic selfhood.

Urban Alienation in *After Dark*

Confined to a single Tokyo night, *After Dark* presents the city as a paradox—crowded and active yet emotionally hollow. Mari Asai reads alone in a family restaurant while others drift without fixed destination, and the nighttime setting exposes lives ordinarily invisible by day, with Tokyo itself figuring the fragmented modern consciousness. Fromm's account applies directly: modern society turns individuals into isolated beings who conform to external structure while losing touch with authentic feeling, and the city's constant motion contrasts with its inhabitants' emotional stagnation, so that urban life intensifies rather than eases alienation. Murakami also critiques consumer capitalism's round-the-clock rhythms, which create an illusion of ceaseless activity leaving little room for reflection or authentic relationship.

Isolation. Nearly every character is lonely despite the crowded city, and Murakami distinguishes physical solitude from psychological isolation. Mari seems independent yet stays emotionally distant from her family; her silence with her sister Eri reflects unresolved tension. Eri represents a deeper isolation still—asleep for the entire novel, trapped in a dreamlike world, her prolonged sleep symbolizing withdrawal from both social and emotional life, arguably an extreme form of self-alienation separating her from conscious awareness itself. Takahashi struggles to voice deeper feeling, and Kaoru carries the weight of protecting vulnerable people in a harsh setting. Horney's theory frames such behavior as anxious defense—emotional distance feels safer than vulnerability, yet reinforces the very isolation it manages.

Fragmented consciousness. The novel's structure drifts between characters and states of awareness rather than following one continuous line, with narration behaving almost like a moving camera. Eri's dream world is the clearest symbol of divided consciousness: her body sleeps while another version of her appears trapped in a room containing only a television, dramatizing the split between outward identity and inner experience. Mari undergoes a quieter fragmentation, confronting long-avoided feelings through encounters with Takahashi, Kaoru, and an abused Chinese sex worker—suggesting identity is made of multiple layers rather than one unified self. Read through Jung, the television room and the shifting line between dream and reality represent aspects of the psyche beyond ordinary consciousness, and the fragmented narrative form itself mirrors the instability of memory and perception the characters face.

Technology and emotional distance. Televisions, phones, and city lighting saturate the novel's world, typically widening emotional distance rather than closing it. The screen through which Eri is observed stands for mediated existence, and mobile phones keep people in constant contact without producing real intimacy, so that characters exchange information efficiently but struggle to express vulnerability. Fromm's critique of technological modernity applies here too: contemporary society prioritizes efficiency over authentic relationship, and technological settings encourage functional exchange while discouraging emotional depth. Still, Murakami does not treat technology as inherently destructive—alienation arises specifically when mediation substitutes for authentic presence.

Female identity. Through Mari, Eri, Kaoru, and the Chinese sex worker, the novel presents varied experiences of womanhood shaped by social expectation and vulnerability. Mari gains confidence through encounters that challenge her detachment, moving toward authentic selfhood through empathy rather than dramatic change. Eri, celebrated for her beauty, grows increasingly detached from reality, suggesting that external ideals of femininity can themselves fragment identity; Horney's idealized self clarifies how the pressure to maintain a public image distances her from real emotional experience. Kaoru, managing a love hotel, occupies a marginal position yet shows compassion and practical judgment that challenge conventional notions of female strength, while the Chinese sex worker, though a minor presence, exposes the vulnerabilities women face within systems of exploitation. Murakami avoids simple portraits here, presenting female identity as fluid and continually negotiated rather than fixed as victimhood or ideal.

Where *Kafka on the Shore* favors symbolic journeys through myth, *After Dark* situates self-alienation within the ordinary spaces of city life, showing that profound psychological conflict can unfold beneath routine surfaces and that self-discovery begins when characters risk vulnerability and acknowledge their own fragmentation.

Comparative Analysis

Though differing in structure and tone, both novels examine psychological fragmentation and the struggle for authentic identity, arguing that alienation is inevitable in modern life while self-understanding remains achievable through introspection and connection.

Forms of alienation. In *Kafka on the Shore*, alienation begins within the family—Kafka's estrangement from an oppressive father and absent mother and sister, Nakata's from lost memory. *After Dark* locates alienation instead in urban

modernity and superficial interaction, so that Mari, Eri, and Takahashi remain isolated despite being surrounded by others. Fromm's framework highlights both similarity and difference: both novels depict people cut off from authentic selfhood, but one emphasizes inherited trauma and destiny, the other social structure—alienation proving internal rather than merely imposed in both.

Psychological trauma. Trauma anchors identity differently in each novel: mythic and childhood-rooted in *Kafka on the Shore*, quieter and everyday in *After Dark*, where Mari's reserve reflects family silence and Eri's sleep signals withdrawal. Horney's model explains the resulting withdrawal and repression in both as protective strategies that deepen self-alienation over time.

Symbolism and surrealism. *Kafka on the Shore* offers a dense symbolic world—forests as passages into the unconscious, cats as intuition, the crow as evolving inner voice—dominated throughout by surrealism used to reveal psychological truth. *After Dark* favors quieter symbols—the television screen, the sleeping city, darkness and approaching dawn—with surrealism more restrained, surfacing mainly through Eri's dream world. Jung's archetypes help explain both sets of imagery as expressions of unconscious process, and in both cases surrealism represents fragmented consciousness rather than fantasy for its own sake.

Search for identity and resolution. Kafka consciously redefines himself after confronting fear and memory; Mari does so more quietly through conversation and openness. Sartre's philosophy applies to both: identity is continuously created through choice and responsibility rather than predetermined. Both novels also avoid conventional closure—Kafka gains self-awareness without certainty, and Mari grows emotionally while Eri's condition remains unresolved—reflecting an existentialist view of self-discovery as ongoing rather than final.

Together, the two novels offer complementary treatments of self-alienation—one through myth and family trauma, the other through urban modernity and technology—suggesting through Fromm, Horney, and Sartre alike that self-alienation is simultaneously a source of suffering and a catalyst for transformation, and that identity is never complete but continually rebuilt through memory, choice, and connection.

CONCLUSION

This study has traced self-alienation and fractured identity across *Kafka on the Shore* and *After Dark* using the combined frameworks of Fromm, Horney, and Sartre, treating Murakami's protagonists not simply as isolated individuals but as people estranged from their own emotions and relationships—an alienation extending beyond social withdrawal into an internal crisis of self-understanding. In *Kafka on the Shore*, self-alienation grows from childhood trauma and the tension between destiny and freedom; in *After Dark*, from contemporary city life, technological mediation, and social anonymity. Despite their differences, both novels converge on a shared claim: psychological trauma, isolation, symbolism, and existential uncertainty are interconnected aspects of identity formation, and Murakami consistently resists simple resolution in favor of selfhood as an ongoing negotiation. Combining psychoanalytic and existential theory proves productive here—Fromm accounts for estrangement, Horney for the defenses that sustain it, and Sartre for the search for meaning—together revealing Murakami's fiction as philosophical inquiry as much as narrative art.

1) Findings

Self-alienation operates as the central psychological condition in both novels, arising from internal fragmentation rather than external circumstance alone. Childhood trauma and family conflict drive identity formation in *Kafka on the Shore*, while urban life and technology dominate in *After Dark*. Symbolism and surrealism function as psychological rather than purely aesthetic devices throughout. The protagonists' arcs show that self-discovery requires confronting psychological pain rather than avoiding it, and Murakami consistently blurs the line between reality and imagination, treating psychological experience as no less significant than external event. Combining psychoanalytic and existential theory yields a richer account of Murakami's treatment of identity than either approach alone. This research contributes to Murakami scholarship by uniting these two novels under one theoretical framework, centering self-alienation as an organizing concept, and showing that his characters require multiple theoretical lenses at once—unconscious conflict, existential anxiety, and social estrangement operating simultaneously.

2) Directions for Future Research

Comparative work might set Murakami alongside writers such as Kazuo Ishiguro, Banana Yoshimoto, Franz Kafka, or

Albert Camus. Additional theoretical lenses—trauma theory, ecocriticism, feminist criticism, posthumanism, affect theory, or digital humanities methods—could open new dimensions of his fiction, as could tracing identity and alienation across his broader body of work, including *Norwegian Wood*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, *1Q84*, and *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*. Given the growing significance of globalization, artificial intelligence, and digital communication, future work might examine how these forces shape Murakami's representation of relationships and identity, while reader-response research across cultural contexts could clarify which aspects of his treatment of alienation are broadly shared and which are culturally specific.

In closing, *Kafka on the Shore* and *After Dark* show that self-alienation is not merely a symptom of psychological distress but a complex, transformative process through which individuals confront trauma, negotiate identity, and pursue authentic existence. Combining psychoanalytic insight with existential philosophy, this study argues that Murakami's fiction offers a sustained literary meditation on the fragmented self in the contemporary world—affirming that while alienation may be unavoidable in modern life, the possibility of self-discovery persists through introspection, ethical responsibility, and meaningful human connection.

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