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## Research Article



## Haruki Murakami's Spellbinding Embodiments: Decoding the Feline Mystique

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### Abstract

Being a vital spark in Japanese culture, cats made their way through Japanese Literature and became an imperative potion in the writings where they were often associated with mystery and incongruity owing to the rich symbolism and imagery. Murakami's writing is sequestered with cats that add an exorbitant richness to his works. They possess an eccentric demeanor and

play a vital role in his fiction, from their disappearance to the violence imposed on them, they open new pathways to enter the parallel worlds and allow the characters to enter the quest which ultimately leads them to search for their own identity. The present research work analyzes the representation of these cats in his three major novels of Haruki Murakami— *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, *Kafka on the Shore*, and *Wild Sheep Chase* to show how these cats are used as a medium to enter a parallel world and how they help characters in confronting their darkest fears in order to make them aware of their own existence. Murakami is a prolific Japanese author, known for his surreal, introspective works blending fantasy, reality, and metaphysical themes. His novels, such as *Norwegian Wood*, *Kafka on the Shore*, and *1Q84*, captivate readers with their poetic prose, symbolism, and enigmatic characters. These cats provide tenderness and warmth to the characters at their lowest and enables them to apprehend a sort of meaning to the relationships they possess. Due to their spellbinding eloquence, they prove to be therapeutic for the characters, aids them in attaining a subjective self and provide them solace in their darkest hours.

**Keywords:** Missing cats, Parallel worlds, Companionship; Mystery, Disappearance, Magic Realism, Metaphor, Identity, Social and Familial values

## Introduction

Japanese society witnessed major transitions throughout history, especially after the second world war. The widespread economic and political developments have both engendered and been accompanied by considerable social changes. The economic slump of 1990 created major drifts in society which led to the disintegration of social bonds and familial values because people avoided the potential efforts of social interaction and preferred compact nuclear families which exacerbated social issues of loneliness and isolation. In the race of gaining economic success, Japan couldn't endure the weight of its old traditions, as well as the long-enduring social and familial relationships. But one thing that never changed in Japanese society is the obsession with cats. Being an intrinsic part of society, they hold an intrigue position in Japanese society. Their origin is ambiguous, but the most conceded belief is that around the 6<sup>th</sup> century, cats were imported from China to Japan whose definite record was mentioned in the diary of emperor Uda (867-931). Since then, their domestication started and they evolved with the changing society and became a part of folklore, literature, and art. They were worshipped as a divine symbol of gods and often associated with good fortune, or the creatures that foresee a threat, or having some magical powers and spiritual vitality. Since modern eon, they are widely domesticated in Japan and are considered the best companion of humans. Maneki Neko or a (beckoning cat figurine) as we see in the commercial folklore is considered the lucky cat that brings fortune. Gotokuji temple is said to be the origin of Maneki Neko, which houses a huge statue of this cat. Moreover, the statues can be found everywhere in Japan from shops, offices, and homes to public places, their presence invigorates a sense of cheerfulness and positivity among the people. They also made their way into literature through various narratives, from Buddhist anecdotes, where they were capable of transmutation to Kyoto courts in *The Tale*

of *Genji*, in which the cat takes an eldritch avatar to attack kashiwaga in his nightmare. Modern writers also had a great affinity towards felines, Izumi Kyoka's *Kuroneko* (Black Cat) recounts the relationship between the female protagonist and her copulent black cat. Natsume Soseki's *I Am a Cat* portrays the cat as the narrator, who describes the family of his owner. Hiro Arikawa's *The Travelling Cat Chronicles* is yet another example where the story is entirely focused on a stray cat named Nana, who is embraced by Satoru after being hit by a car. They set out on a journey to find protective shelter for Nana, and in this process, they wade through the ideas of friendship, love, loss, and gratitude. The myriad of cat literature and influences imbibed Japanese literature and swayed various writers throughout Japan. Cats are widely employed both as images emblematic of characteristics and ideals, they became an interesting anecdote in various Japanese literature.

While growing up in Japan, Murakami also had a great inclination towards felines, which is manifested throughout his works. In *Abandoning a cat, what I talk About when I talk about my father*, he recounts a childhood memory when he along with his father went to a far-off place to get rid of their cat and when they reached back home, on their utter surprise they find the cat at home which left him puzzled and dumbfounded. Murakami always adored cats, since he didn't have any siblings, he would find his best friends in cats and share a great bond with them. "We always had cats at home, and we liked them. I didn't have any brothers or sisters, and cats and books were my best friends when I was growing up. I loved to sit on the veranda with a cat, sunning myself" (*Abandoning a cat*). They have an inscrutable appearance in almost all his novels which connects them with some sort of a mysterious force and become an interesting vehemence of the characters' feelings and actions. "Cat pictures and figurines are a prominent part of their domestic décor, and cats often appear in his fiction" (Rubin 27). Murakami's old pet, Peter Cat after whom he named his jazz bar remained an important part of his life, whose shadows can be found throughout his works. One cannot find a Murakami book without the shadows of cats; they play an important part in the story either explicitly as characters or by wheedling the plot of the story.

In *the Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, the disappearance of the cat leads Toru into a series of bizarre events. His wife, Kumiko also ceases to be visible after the cat goes missing. The cat symbolized their union as it was given to the couple as a wedding gift and represented their marriage in many ways. Moreover, it was one of the few responsibilities that provided meaning to their relationship.

So now I had to go cat hunting. I had always liked cats. And I liked this particular cat. But cats have their own way of living. They're not stupid. If a cat stopped living where you happened to be, that means it had decided to go somewhere else. If it got tired and hungry, it would come back. Finally, though, to keep Kumiko happy, I would have to go looking for our cat. I had nothing better to do. (*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* 09)

The disappearance of cats and their search helps the characters to reacclimate to their own self and the relationships they hold. Toru reevaluates his relationship with Kumiko only when he is unable to hunt down his cat. The search is intertwined with the fate of the characters which leads to the exploration of their true self on one hand. On the other hand, it leads to the exploration of the past especially the violence committed during the war as narrated by Mr.

Honda and lieutenant Mamiya during his sessions with Kumiko and Toru. Similarly, on the insistence of Kumiko when Toru meets the clairvoyant Malta Kano to help him find the cat who in turn entrusts the task to his sister Creta Kano. She also unveils his buried memories of the past, where she was raped by Kumiko's brother, Noboru Wataya to fulfill his power of lust. The cats' sudden appearance at Toru's home after one year of missing warms his cold heart and as if he got back a detached part of his self. He perceives the cat as a blessing, "holding this soft, small creature in my lap this way, though, ... I felt a warm rush in my chest. I put my hand on the cat's chest and felt his heart beating. The pulse was faint and fast, but his heart, like mine, was tickling off the time allotted to his small body with all the restless earnestness of my own". (*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* 378)

Murakami employs cats as emblematic of suppressed emotions that lead to an unraveling of the deep recesses of human consciousness and an entry into the new dimensions of a mysterious world. Their presence epitomizes a different realm of existence; Nakata in *Kafka on the shore* after coming out from a coma gains this uncanny ability to talk to cats. Initially, the cat is astonished to see that a man can converse with him, "The cat hesitated for a time, then plunged ahead and spoke. "Hmm...so you're able to speak." (*Kafka on the shore* 47) It is only through this ability that he is able to access the world. Ever since he lost the ability to read and write after a mysterious incident at Rice Bowl Hill, leading to the loss of his "self" or a detachment of his head from his body.

It might sound strange to put it this way, but it seemed like the real Nakata had gone off somewhere, leaving behind for a time the fleshy container, which in his absence kept all his bodily functions going at the minimum level needed to preserve itself. The term "spirit projection" sprang to mind. (*Kafka on the Shore* 70)

Nakata is considered dumb and unfit in society, which isolates him from the rest of society. In his conversation with the cat, he names Otsuka, Nakata reveals the sufferings of being different in society.

There's so much we have to remember, it is a pain.... In the cat world that's to be expected, Nakata said. But in the human world if you can't read or write you're considered dumb. Nakata's father was a famous professor in a university... I have two younger brothers, they're both very bright...they live in huge houses and eat eel. Nakata's the only one who isn't bright. (*Kafka on the Shore* 49)

Nakata realizes that in order to secure himself in this hostile world he has to use his special ability to communicate with cats. Thus, he takes the responsibility of hunting down the lost cats in the neighborhood in order to earn some money. The search for cats leads him to enter into a parallel world and that wells up the impulses of violence. While searching for the tortoiseshell cat, Goma, Nakata comes across a brown-striped cat Kawamura, Nakata had a hard time connecting with this one, but he still remains patient and tries to decipher his words in order to collect information about Goma but when he fails, a Siamese cat, Mimi joins in to help Nakata. Mimi is a smart, self-reliant, and educated cat who listens to opera and knows car models as well. They learn that in an empty plot, a tall man, who wears a strange hat and long boots lured many cats and then captures them, he might have taken Goma as well. Before leaving Mimi warns him of the possible dangers of encountering this cat catcher as he seems

hideous and dangerous. “If it were me I’d never go near that plot. But you’re a human, and it’s your job, after all, but I hope you’ll take every precaution. Mr. Nakata, this world is a terribly violent place. And nobody can escape the violence. Please keep that in mind. You can’t be too cautious. The same holds true for cats as for human beings.” (Kafka on the Shore 88) Several days after waiting at the vacant plot, he meets another cat named Okawa, who also warns him of the possible dangers which lie ahead. these cats paved a path for him to enter a surrealist world where he meets the enigmatic cat-catcher, who introduces himself as Johnnie Walker. Nakata is perplexed to see a freezer full of cats’ heads. He kills cats to make a special kind of flute from their souls. He kills many cats and Kawamura as well right in front of Nakata by ripping open their chests and popping out their hearts and chewing them slowly. He offers Nakata a choice either to see him continue these horrendous acts of violence or stop immediately by killing him. For the very first time, Nakata feels a rage inside him, “please, stop it. If you don’t, Nakata’s going to go crazy. I don’t feel myself anymore” (Kafka on the Shore 159). The search ultimately incited his inner impulses towards violence which were buried deep into the cerebral depths. Despite Nakata’s resistance to violence, his inner being doesn’t co-exist with his mind. Nakata finally commits violence. Jay Rubin argues that using Cats, Murakami “makes us feel the dilemma faced by those who want peace but also human justice” (Rubin 282).

In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, when the wife of the protagonist leaves him after a divorce, she grabs everything she possessed, leaving behind only the cat. She disappears, leaving absolutely no trace behind. The protagonist however feels her absence and in fact wishes that she should at least have left some things that could remain with the protagonist. over the course of many years, the cat remains with the protagonist, even though “He’s old and frail. A month in a cage would do him in for sure.” When he is about to leave for the sheep chase the only concern, he has is that of the cat, “So unless I can leave the cat with someone, I can’t go anywhere.” (A Wild Sheep Chase 145) Cat is only the connection that he has with his wife. Even though his wife is not with him, it somehow secures the connection and is the only remnant of his wife, the way the cat used to “sprang into her lap” and how “she scratched him behind the ears”, makes the protagonist cherish the essence of his wife. Murakami’s characters are always craving for connections and had a great yearning for them and cats act as an emblem through which they are able to reacclimate to the relationships they hold.

Murakami has used cats to represent the past crimes inflicted upon the voiceless or the marginalized by the imperial state system in Japan, like cats they can’t speak for themselves and are therefore easy targets to manipulate. The violence on cats in the novels is inferential to the violence committed against innocent people for their selfish motives. Johnny walker is the embodiment of such vicious force, who inflicts unreasonable pain upon cats. He catches every cat on the vacant plot while catnapping and then unrelentingly slits open their chests with a sharp scalpel and then pulls out their still pounding bloody hearts and chews them slowly with a satisfying smile, he then stocks their heads in a deep freezer.

Moreover, the narrator in *Hear the Wind Sing* recounts one such incident of violence upon cats. when he tells his girlfriend about experiments with cats in biology class and hides the fact that the experiment took the lives of thirty-six cats and kittens. Instead, he tells her that



a leopard killed 350 Indians over three years. The Englishman who rescued the natives killed 124 innocent cats. “I told her about the cat experiments we carried out. (of course), I lied that we never killed them. That we were just testing their brain function. In fact, over the course of a mere two months, I was solely responsible for snuffing out the lives of thirty-six cats of all sizes and shapes” (Hear the Wind Sing 82). Such gruesome acts of violence upon cats insinuate the inhumane war crimes against the voiceless by the imperial Japanese soldiers, which was concealed from history for a long period of time and brought the shame of guilt to Japan.

Murakami's fictional realm is incomplete without the presence of feline companionship that adds an enigmatic and distinctive charm throughout his narratives, completing the intricate tapestry of his imaginative worlds. These felines possess distinctive personalities and influence the plot lines. The characters are always in a deeper search for something that is lost, and cats act as an opening to the pathways to travel between the parallel worlds and simultaneously help the characters in achieving those greater depths of understanding of the things around them. Murakami uses cats as a medium to dig out the hidden impulses of his characters in oblivion. which contrives them to confront their darkest inner fears. Furthermore, the cats serve as a symbol of the world that Murakami tries to create; on the surface, they appear to be simple, adorable pets, but upon closer examination, they reveal themselves to be spiritual beings that hold a sense of mystery and fantastical elements with them which leads to the enrichment of surrealism to his novels.

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