



Construction of 'Limbo' as Resistance: A Reading of Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*

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Abstract: Young Adult (YA) fiction often depicts the interconnected themes of resistance towards authority and the expression of individuality arising from such a conflict. In some cases, this tussle does not yield a prominent resolution. Alternative narratives become difficult to construct in a hostile society, which alienates the YA subject. The protagonist then retreats to a strange alternate dimension to find solace. This dimension may appear fantastical, yet the question remains: if we can dissect the essence of such a space is this dimension simply a place of escape or does the construction of such a dimension represent an extension of the resistance towards authority? This paper seeks to analyse Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* to understand the psychological impetus propelling the construction of such a reality. The ideas of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan on the imaginary, symbolic, and real may help to unravel the nature of reality the YA seeks to secure through his construction of the alternate space. However, it must be considered that Murakami's construction of the text is not fuelled by Lacan; thus, he may deviate from him at certain instances. Hence, this paper shall also explore if there is anything added to Lacan's discourse by texts like Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*.

Keywords: *Social conformance, Resistance, Father-son relationship, Sexual identity, Alternate Realm, Belonging.*

"Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head? Of course it is happening in your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?" (Rowling, 2007, p. 723).

These lines from perhaps the most celebrated young adult (YA) speculative fiction of recent times are relevant to the dichotomy between what is considered to be real and imaginary that I will be discussing in my examination of Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*. Another word that Murakami uses to describe this alternate realm is "limbo", which he defines as "the neutral point between life and death. A kind of sad, gloomy place" (Murakami, 2005, p.403). The theme of limbo in speculative fiction is a popular one in the context of young adult fiction. This paper seeks to understand the psychosocial conditions which might result in the construction of a 'limbo' space. In the context of this research paper, the word limbo has been used to represent the alternate realm depicted in Murakami's novel.

The paper also seeks to study the narrative purpose served by such a space. Furthermore, the roles played by issues like resistance against authority-wielding figures and manifestations of

individuality in guiding the protagonist towards limbo will also be studied. Lastly, the paper aims to find out what constitutes 'reality' for the young adult subject.

The Questions raised by Murakami's Text

Kafka on the Shore charts the journey of the runaway who introduces himself as Kafka Tamura. He has an alter-ego, the boy named "Crow" and as per his suggestion, Kafka decides to quit school on his 15th birthday. His escape is motivated by his will to break free of an Oedipal curse. His mother along with his adopted sister left the household when he was young. Kafka had been living with his father (Koichi Tamura), who is a celebrated sculptor but an inadequate father. Kafka reveals to his newfound friend Sakura, whom he assumes to be his missing sister, that even though they lived in the same house, they hardly met, and in fact it is his father who hurled the Oedipal curse upon him. Kafka goes to a distant town and takes up an apprenticeship at the Komura Memorial Library, under the 40-year-old Miss Saeki. He befriends a slightly older individual, Oshima, at the library - they are united by their inability to conform to the socio-political grand narratives of urban Japanese society.



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At the library, Kafka is visited by the spirit of a 15-year-old Miss Saeki, and he is enchanted by such an otherworldly experience. He longs to meet her and simultaneously undergoes a sexual encounter with the present-day Miss Saeki. Kafka assumes that Miss Saeki is his missing mother, even though the available pieces of evidence indicate otherwise. With the sudden death of Miss Saeki, Kafka seems to lose his will to live. While staying at a log cabin in the woods, he journeys deep into the forest. This experience triggers his passage into limbo, the alternate realm. His psychological anxieties propel him to travel through the impenetrable forest. He reaches a small town, where time seems to have come to a halt, and there is only the bare minimum of technology. He meets the 15-year-old Miss Saeki once again in that town, and he considers that it would be better to stay in this realm of forgetfulness than to return to his world, where he does not have anyone or anything that could add significance to his life. The adult Miss Saeki visits him in that surreal setting and convinces him to return before the portal to his world is closed forever. Kafka returns to his world and decides to give it a chance even though his father has been murdered by unknown assailants and his mother/love interest remains dead. He decides to construct life according to his terms in the company of his friends.

The text also reveals in alternating fashion the parallel odyssey of an adult character, Nakata. It often appears that Nakata and Kafka are somehow connected. Nakata experiences the fantastic as the result of a childhood expedition in the forest, and his life is altered by his experiences forever. He loses his intellectual capacities as a promising student, yet he gains the ability to talk to cats. He kills Johnnie Walker, supposedly the alter-ego of Koichi Tamura, to protect the missing cats. Following this violent episode, Nakata's life is fuelled by the single-minded pursuit to find the entrance stone and stop the influence of the fantastic realm over the normal world. In this pursuit, he is accompanied by Hoshino whom Nakata befriends during their journey. However, the focus of this research paper shall primarily remain on Kafka and his escapades.

Kafka's tale plays with traditional tropes of young adult fiction like the themes of love, friendship, resistance, and father-son relationship, yet the challenge arises with the portrayal of limbo in the final act. Although adult characters like Miss Saeki and Nakata decide to choose forgetfulness and movement away from human society, the young adult protagonist is made to choose the opposite direction. It seems that Murakami's narrative is almost keen to give this message to its young adult readers that hopefulness is integral if one decides to shape life according to his terms. But questions remain - what factors lead to the construction of the alternate realm? What purpose does it serve in reflecting and shaping the personality of the YA protagonist? Why is it only the young adult who can escape it?

An Ill-Fitting Cog: Juxtaposition of Fantasy and Lacanian Framework

The conception of this research paper began with the aim of exploring the conventional young adult themes like resistance to authority, father-son relationship and construction of individuality within a society that demands conformation. However, as briefly stated earlier, Murakami's narrative threads these conventional concerns through a fantastic setting. The text heavily employs fantastical and metaphorical images and spaces to put forward its message, if there is any. Hence, coming up with a methodology that may help to unravel these evident complexities is a challenge.

The immediate challenge the text hurls at the reader is how to categorise the fantastical elements in it. Tzvetan Todorov classifies fantasy into the uncanny and marvellous - if "the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described . . . the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary . . . new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvellous". (Todorov, 1973, p. 41). Farah Mendelsohn has taken this further in identifying four categories of fantasy, depending on how magic enters the tale: "the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive, and the liminal (where neither the reader nor the story characters are sure that the fantasy exists)" (Mendlesohn, 2008, p. 14). She stresses the importance of adhering to specific stylistic traits for a



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work of literature to qualify as fantasy.

Her definition of liminal fantasy seems to best capture the essence of Murakami's narrative. The fantastical elements are present in the text, but the attitudes of characters towards the fantastic appears to vary. The sense of wonder seems to be missing from the characters; instead, there is malaise. Mendlesohn highlights that the 'blasé' undertone evident in certain fantasy narratives qualifies them as a liminal fantasy. Also, as the story ends the readers seems to encounter a particular dilemma - they are unsure whether the fantasy was even there or was it perhaps an extension of the imaginary. This subversion of expectations of the readers is a characteristic trait of liminal fantasy (Mendlesohn 2008). Mendlesohn also explains how liminal fantasy may alienate the readers by normalising the magical (Mendlesohn, 2008, p.226). However, a problem seems to emerge at this point - the existing discourse on fantasy seems to rely solely on the formal aspects of the narrative. In other words, it does not seem to consider the fantastical to be related to the characters in the tale.

Thus, Murakami's narrative contains fantastical elements and it resembles a liminal fantasy in which magic exists simultaneously with the real. It is unclear for the readers when the boundaries between the real and the fantastical are blurred. However, Murakami's narrative seems to resist structural straightjacketing. The way in which magic enters the lives of the characters seems to vary greatly from one character to another. For instance, the narrative showcases elements of the portal-quest when Kafka is accompanied by two soldiers through the dense forest. However, the narrative also seems to resemble an intrusion fantasy at certain junctures, such as when Colonel Sanders, a self-proclaimed metaphysical being, persuades Hoshino to take the entrance stone. Murakami's narrative also resembles an immersive fantasy when the readers witness the likes of Nakata and Miss Saeki - they only possess half of their shadows

(Murakami, 2005, p 364). In other words, parts of them are trapped in the fantastical realm and they can never return to the 'real' world. Thus, it seems that *Kafka on the Shore* invokes all the categories of fantasy literature that have been discussed by Farah Mendlesohn. Now, the latter does mention the possibility of texts which may resist categorisation - "while many books move internally from one category to another, very few authors produce a single text that exists simultaneously within multiple categories" (Mendlesohn, 2008, p.15). However, it remains a relatively less explored area. A strictly structural approach does not seem to explain how the fantastical may evolve with characterisation within the span of one narrative.

Therefore, questions arise - is the fantastical even there within the text? Alternatively, could it be merely an extension of the character's psychological state? In the course of *Kafka on the Shore*, Hoshino never meets Kafka, yet they both experience the fantastical. So, perhaps the fantasy is not purely speculative, it exists within the reality of the narrative. However, the differential experiences of the same fantastical reality may be due to the differing psychological realities of the characters. In other words, it seems that a character's approach and reaction to the magical elements around him seem to be greatly influenced by his psychological state. Thus, if Kafka Tamura as a young adult reacts to the apparently fantastical reality in a different way than Hoshino, or Miss Saeki, perhaps it is because his mind is coming to terms with its position within the society. Hence, I believe an extensive study of the interrelation between the different 'selves' (individual, social, and the "unfathomable self") is necessary to interpret the slippery depiction of reality and fantasy in Murakami's narrative.

Jacques Lacan is perhaps the most influential psychoanalyst thinker of the latter half of the 20th century. His works attempt to explore how the individual self of the human being reconciles with the imaginary, symbolic and the real. As discussed earlier, the problem of interpretation encountered in *Kafka on the Shore* is not merely formal, instead it also appears to be psychological. Hence, Lacan's ideas on the nature



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of reality seem to be helpful in unravelling the nuances of the text to fathom the mind of the young adult protagonist, Kafka Tamura, who resists his society and escapes from it into an alternate realm, only to return once again.

Lacan explains that his goal is to comprehend reality. He notes that reality appears “tangible” when proved by physical sciences, but there are experiences that cannot be explained by the physical sciences, thereby enhancing the scope of psychoanalytic analysis (Lacan, 2006, p. 63). This perspective becomes relevant as this paper attempts to explore how Kafka Tamura’s experience of the fantastical varies from those of other characters. To be more precise, Lacan’s account of the ‘mirror stage’ in infants become paramount in framing the methodology of this paper. He identifies the symbolic, imaginary, and real as parameters guiding one’s comprehension of reality. The assumption of the ‘self’ occurs as the child encounters his image on the mirror. It is the juncture where the ‘self’ constructs an ‘imaginary identity’ while being unaware of societal filters. This is what Lacan refers to as the ‘ideal I’ state. However, as he grows up, he is culturally conditioned, and his assumption of the ‘self’ transforms into the symbolic. The imaginary construct of the self and the socially constructed understanding of the self are at conflict with each other, and this conflict crystallizes the personality of the human being (Lacan, 2006). However, perhaps the real is that which remains on the other side of the mirror, - unseen forever, only realized in abstractions. In other words, the ‘symbolic’ is the societal filter that shapes reality; the ‘imaginary’ is the perception constructed by the self apart from the symbolic. What eludes both ‘symbolic’ and ‘imaginary’ comprises the real. Human identity formation is a dialectical process - it considers all these contradictory abstractions of reality, and out of this conflict results the understanding of the self and the other. If psychoanalytic theorisation seems to place an immense faith in the libidinal energies dictating a text, or a subject, it is because the origin of the libido is the ‘real’, that is beyond the imaginary and

symbolic aspects of reality. Thus, Kafka Tamura’s Oedipal struggle can perhaps be interpreted as his quest to fathom reality. His rejection of physical reality and the ‘symbolic’ reality is followed by his journey into the alternate realm, which seems to be an amalgamation of the imaginary and unfathomable aspect of the real. *Kafka on the Shore* then appears to resist structural definitions of the different categories of fantasy. Instead, it seems to expand the liminal fantasy genre by incorporating the psychoanalytic aspects. In other words, the question of how magic enters the text (Mendlesohn, 2008) undergoes slight modification. Instead, the question becomes - can ‘magic’ be used as a tool to understand reality as presented in the text?

Evidence for this interrelationship between fantasy and psychological frameworks can be found in the text. Murakami’s text operates within the Japanese fantastic literary tradition, and it cites Murasaki Shikibu’s 11th century fantasy *The Tale of Genji* through a casual conversation between Oshima and Kafka. It seems to me that this interaction may add to the psychosocial repertoire of the narrative. Oshima refers to the epic tale when he explains to Kafka the concept of the ‘living spirit’, or *ikiryō*. He mentions an episode in which Genji’s pregnant wife Lady Aoi is repeatedly attacked by the living spirit of Lady Rokujo out of jealousy. However, the latter had no idea of this ghastly event. She woke up time and again mistaking the faint memories as nightmares (Murakami, 2005). Oshima further remarks how the Japanese literary tradition acknowledges the blurring of the physical and the subconscious. He says

The world of the grotesque is the darkness within us. Well before Freud and Jung shined a light on the workings of the subconscious, this correlation between darkness and our subconscious, these two forms of darkness, was obvious to people In Murasaki Shikibu’s time living spirits were both a grotesque phenomenon and a natural condition of the human heart that was right there with them But today things are different. The darkness in the outside world has vanished, but the darkness in our hearts remains, virtually unchanged. Just like an iceberg, what we label the ego or consciousness is, for the most part, sunk in darkness. And that estrangement sometimes creates a



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deep contradiction or confusion within us. (Murakami 2005, p. 208).

Oshima here is attempting to answer Kafka's query about living spirits. But Murakami employs this trope perhaps to situate the existence of Miss Saeki's teenage spirit haunting the library and Kafka's hypothesis of his soul leaving his body and murdering his father within the discourse of Japanese fantasy. Hence, it appears that psychology and Japanese literary tradition are working together in weaving the fabric of the narrative.

Kafka Tamura Versus his Society and Education System

Kafka is a 15-year-old high school teenager. He seems dedicated to his life as a student in his studies and duties. However, Murakami's narrative appears to prepare him as a foil to the grand narrative of the post-World War II education system of Japan. The devastation of World War II and the state of the country following it resembled a dystopia. Schools resembled centres for the mass production of capable workforces. Murakami's narrative seems to ask whether such a system can nurture individuality in its ever-present demand for efficiency. People were conditioned since their youth to work towards building a better nation, and most of them comprised the "middle class" (Varley, 2000, p. 335). It appears that the resurrection of the national economy, therefore, stands on repressed individuality.

The above assumption may be true if one considers the 'madness' of Kafka's father, Koichi Tamura. He is a successful sculptor, but also an accomplished investor in the stock market. Yet, in a state of frenzy, he supposedly assumes the identity of Johnnie Walker, a serial killer slaughtering cats hoping to collect their souls, thereby enabling him to control the world. Kafka's desperate attempt to distance himself from his father is perhaps motivated by his desire to not turn out like his father, a possible victim of the state's grand narrative as

propagated through the education system. Kafka does not wish to repress his individuality, but he is unsure how to reconcile contradictory impulses.

Murakami's narrative also explores the follies of the society that regulate the education system. More precisely, the text seems to address how society manipulates young adults under the guises of ideology and allegiance. 1970s Japan witnessed violent student riots like those occurring in many other parts of the world. However, Wesley Sasaki-Uemura writes that, "[after the tragic and shocking death of student leader Kamba Michiko at the hand of the riot police] . . . The Liberal Democratic Party had to turn from its confrontational political agenda to a low-key approach emphasizing programmes to promote economic prosperity" (Sasaki-Uemura, 2002, p. 20). This shift from an ideological battle against oppressive politics to financial evolution is seen as problematic in Murakami's narrative. The young adults, brimming with energy and fighting to champion a more democratic vision of their society, are made to conform to the politically motivated vision of economic prosperity. Koichi Tamura had been a student during the 1970s and even though the text hardly talks about his past, yet one is perhaps right to imagine that he knew about the student riots. His later obsession with consumerism, as described by Kafka Tamura in the opening chapter, further strengthens Sasaki-Uemura's observation. Thus, Guy Yasko writes how Japanese authors like Yasuo Tanaka blamed the students as "brand obsessed consumers" (Yasko, 2002, p. 482).

It follows that Kafka's escape from his father's house is not just personal, it is political. He does not wish to be like his father. He does not identify with the grand narratives of consumerism and economic prosperity that his older generation has accepted. He pursues education, not as a path to something else, but simply because he likes to know. He takes shelter in the Komura Memorial Library, which contains books pertaining to Haiku poets and ancient Japanese culture and literature. Kafka does not run away from education, but he chooses to do away with the education system around him. He feels that there is a gap between what is taught and what is "really out there". He constantly mentions that the adult world is a dangerous, rough place. He lets the readers know in the



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opening chapter:

Let's face it, teachers are basically a bunch of morons. But you've got to remember this: you're running away from home. You probably won't have any chance to go to school anymore, so like it or not you'd better absorb whatever you can while you've got the chance. Become like a sheet of blotting paper and soak it all in. Later on you can figure out what to keep and what to unload. (Murakami 2005, p.9).

His perception of the teachers as 'morons' being representatives of the education system does not exist in isolation. He mentions elsewhere that he studies in a school that caters to the rich upper classes of his society (Murakami 2005). It is a comfortable place, different from the world around him. Hence, the teachers who make these students feel accustomed to their make-believe surroundings are perhaps doing a disservice to the students by not exposing the artificiality of their class privileges. This contradiction between the 'innenwelt' (the inner world of a human being) and the 'umwelt' (the inhabited environment) is what Lacan calls identifies as alienation, or a "fragmented body" (Lacan, 2006, p. 78). Hence, Kafka yearns to fathom the reality of his society and is constantly working to discern his place within the same.

A contemporary YA Oedipus

Kafka, like a quintessential postmodern protagonist, appears to know that society can be an ominous presence, with its incessant demands for conformance. His disillusionment with the education system perhaps stems from his home. He belongs to a dysfunctional family. His mother had left their household when he was quite young. She took his adopted sister with her but did not take him. Kafka's father is sceptical of him and believes that, like Oedipus, Kafka will murder him and sleep with his mother and sister.

The disconnect with society becomes apparent through the understanding of the Oedipus myth itself. Oedipus's struggle as described by

Sophocles in the translation by Watling was motivated by a desire to rescue his kingdom from the plague (Sophocles and Watling 1947). Kafka, however, is motivated by a desire to escape from his immediate society. In other words, society in Murakami's narrative may be the plague that leads Kafka to commit the violent, metaphorical murder of his father. Sakura sums up the estranged relationship between Kafka and his father:

Your father sounds like an alien from outer space or something," Sakura says. "Like he came from some far-off planet, took on human form, kidnapped an Earth woman, and then had you. Just so he could have more descendants. Your mother found out, got frightened, and ran away. Like in some film noir science-fiction flick. (Murakami 2005, p. 83).

The problematic father-son relationship in this narrative wields a profound metaphorical significance. When Koichi Tamura curses Kafka that someday he will murder his father and sleep with his mother and sister, the narrative appears to highlight the animosity of one generation towards the other. The older generation seems to accept the woman being confined to the domestic sphere, however, as the Japanese society underwent several economic changes, women ventured into the working space. A sharp decline in marriage and birth rates in the 1980s (Broadbent, 2002) may suggest the disconnect between men and women. Susan Napier writes, "[T]he post war fantasies of male writers are notable for the absence of women characters. Women are no longer part of wish-fulfilment fantasies. Instead, they are part of the reality which the male protagonist longs to escape" (Napier, 1996, p. 54). Perhaps in Koichi Tamura's understanding, the Japanese woman can be a lover, but not a caring wife. Hence, the Oedipal curse that he hurls at his son (who embodies individuality and scepticism towards convention) is essentially the angst of one generation towards the other.

Kafka's vulnerable state, eagerness to understand the other, and honesty allow him to befriend Miss Saeki and Sakura. He ends up romancing the 15-year-old spirit of Miss Saeki and experiences a sexual encounter with the grown-up, sleep-walking Miss Saeki. He also shares a



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brief sexual episode with Sakura. His father's prophecy seems to contain some truth. Kafka has slept with Miss

Saeki and Sakura, whom he thought to be his missing mother and sister. Now the question arises, how can Koichi Tamura's murder be associated with Kafka, as the latter was miles away from him physically. As Kafka wonders whether it is he who had killed his father in a dream, Oshima reminds him - "On the day of the murder you were here at the library, reading until evening. You wouldn't have had enough time to go back to Tokyo, murder your father, and then get back to Takamatsu. It's impossible" (Murakami 2005, p. 183).

Yet the liminal fantastic mode of storytelling gives Kafka some supernatural abilities present in Shinto lore. The soul, also known as *tama* in Shintoism, is said to possess the power to leave the body momentarily when someone is ill, but it finally departs the body only after death. The *tama*'s journey outside the body may work to alleviate any "curse that might be endangering the ill person" (Buckley, 2002, p. 103). It may have been possible for Kafka then to murder his father even in his dreams in order to destroy or even execute the Oedipal curse. This episode in the narrative can be interpreted to place Kafka as the murderer if Lacan's framework is considered. Lacan mentions that the conflict between the inner world of a subject and the external influences guiding that subject not only alienates that subject but also fragments him. Hence, dreams may become a viable medium where these fragments revisit the subject (Lacan, 2006). Thus, it is possible that the narrative allows Kafka Tamura's fragmented self to possess Nakata who murders Johnnie Walker, the assumed alter-ego of Koichi Tamura. Thus, Nakata's final words before the murder carries more weight if one considers the above perspective - "'Please, stop it. If you don't, Nakata's going to go crazy. I don't feel like myself anymore" (Murakami, 2005, p.136).

Kafka's metaphorical murder of his father seems to be a commentary on father-son relationships. He

rebels against the authority of his father because Kafka did not identify with the grand narratives guiding him. His father did not treat him as a son, instead, he thought of him as a property. Even when Kafka runs away from his home, the narrative does not offer any insight into whether his father even noticed his absence. There is hardly any worthwhile memory shared between them. Instead, it is the curse that dictates their attitude towards one another. In other words, the young adult is hardly seen as a companion, and Kafka's search for his mother and sister is essentially a search for belonging. If one approaches the text from this angle, then Kafka's sexual interactions with the women he encounters are essentially promises of fulfilment and chance at constructing meaningful relationships.

Also, Kafka's single-minded pursuit of his mother and sister can be interpreted as his search for the elusive reality. For Lacan, the mirror stage marks the construction of the imaginary and symbolic identities, thereby, removing man from reality (Lacan, 2006). So, Kafka's relentless attempt to do away with the symbolic and imaginary may be his endeavour to reach the pre-mirror stage. Elsewhere, Adrian Johnston mentions that Lacan's idea of the 'real' can be traced back to the courtly love tradition in English literature, in which the ideal and elusive figure of the 'lady' represents the 'real' for the poet (Johnston, 2018). This understanding of the 'real' indeed becomes interesting while reading *Kafka on the Shore*, the story of a young adult protagonist in search of his missing mother, who happens to fall in love with the 'teenage spirit' of the same person whom he believes to be his mother. The sexual episode between Kafka and Miss Saeki, the presumed mother figure is meaningful. It reflects the understanding of reality, which is associated with sexual desires and biological functions of man, removed from the symbolic perception of reality. Lacan mentions that such an understanding of reality has been popularised by Freudian psychology, in which interpersonal relations come under the cultural domain and biological functions are taken to be their substratum. Even though Lacan emphasizes the 'recklessness' of such a hypothesis (Lacan, 2006, p. 73), Murakami's narrative seems to play with this idea in its attempt to explore what constitutes reality for Kafka Tamura as a young adult.



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Kafka's struggle to construct a dialectical understanding of his reality through equating the 'fragments' of the imaginary, symbolic, and real transcends the personal domain and becomes universal. However, although Murakami's narrative seems to put immense faith in the capacity of the young adult to construct meaning, thereby replacing the language of the previous generations, it is simultaneously sceptical of his ability to do so. The following section, therefore, explores the relationship between resistance and the young adult.

Rebellion and its Aftermath

Rebellion comes with a promise of replacing the status quo with something better, although, there is no guarantee whether such an outcome may happen. Japan witnessed such incidents in the 1960s and onwards, and Murakami's work utilizes this backdrop to give depth to some of the characters. Koichi Tamura and Miss Saeki, who are in their 40s as Kafka encounters them, reflect two possible outcomes of the student riots in Japan.

The student movement can be said to have had three distinct phases in the Japanese political climate. First, students associated themselves with the growing influence of the Japanese Communist Party. They often staged protests challenging the policies of the government as well as the university administration. The second phase appears in the 1980s when students are disillusioned with politics and are presented as materialistic. The third phase represents the post-1990s students who are absorbed within the individualistic consumerist society, and student activism becomes an illusory dream and social coherence is hardly present.

Koichi Tamura and Miss Saeki represent the 1980s phase - Koichi's study room is laden with branded products originating from across the world, while Saeki's beloved dies during one such violent student protest and her world shatters overnight. The death of a young adult who was brimming with potential reflects the scepticism towards such

movements. Murakami's narrative attempts to strip the halo associated with student resistance. It shows how students can be manipulated by political parties in power, causing damage to life and property. This is perhaps a homage on Murakami's part to commemorate the death of Tokyo University student leader Kamba Michiko during clashes between riot police and student protestors in 1960 (Sasaki-Uemura, 2002).

However, if Murakami's narrative is sceptical of the fruitfulness of students' resistance, it is not negating its democratising capabilities. It is simultaneously doubtful of power structures regulating society. Hence, the narrative does not celebrate the failure of the students' movement either. The hollowness of Koichi's life, his obsession with commodities appears to cause a breach in the relationship with his son and possibly wife and daughter. He meets a horrific and lonely end.

The narrative seems to dissect the idea of resistance - if student rebellion seems to question the symbolic order shaping society, it should also be perhaps considered, what does such an act yield? The rebellion may be considered successful if the symbolic is amended to incorporate the ideal-I, that is the 'imaginary reality' envisioned by the students. However, if such an outcome does not happen, then malaise and resignation prevail. Murakami's narrative presents this vision of Japan - an urban space harbouring a hoard of alienated individuals, resigned to existence without purpose. The adult characters in Murakami's narrative then are nothing but alienated young adults who have grown up, having tried to change the symbolic order and failed.

Even though the adults seem to give in to this despondent life, the young adults seem to have a choice. This ambiguous feeling which the reader experiences, seems to get manifested in the form of the alternate realm. It appears to be less of a place, but more of a space created by the mind in constant conflict with civilisation. Murakami's work seems to hint at the possibility that maybe resistance on part of the young adult, or even the adult, is futile. However, it does not offer a clarification on this issue. Instead, the narrative seeps into the alternate realm. This transition is almost similar to Christopher Nolan's film "Inception" - where questions are not directly



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answered, but are dealt within constructions of the mind.

The Other-Realm

Murakami's narrative, unlike conventional young adult fiction, does not seem to advocate rebellion. There is an air of passivity lurking in the borders of the text. It offers an interesting choice to the young protagonist - he can either continue trying relentlessly like Sisyphus to change the dystopian elements within his society, or he may retire into the monotonous yet peaceful alternate realm.

This alternate realm is accessed in a surreal manner, with the help of an 'entrance stone'. The narrative reveals this alternate realm to resemble a small, desolate suburb. It has a library, but the people living there are bereft of their memories. Characters like Miss Saeki prefer to be here as their memories hunt them every waking moment. The young adult with dreams grows up only to realize that he cannot seize what he wants from the world. This constant need to adjust to a life that is hardly desired gradually becomes wearisome. Resignation seems to be the easier option in such a circumstance and the alternate realm is the site of resigned sustenance.

Lacan states that conflict between the imaginary self and symbolic self leads to fragmentation of the psyche, and "[t]his fragmented body...is regularly manifested in dreams when the movement of an analysis reaches a certain level of aggressive disintegration of the individual" (Lacan, 2006, p.78). If this understanding is accurate, then the surreal, dream-like alternate realm in *Kafka on the Shore* may actually be projection of Kafka's inner turmoil. Therefore, Kafka's journey through the deep woods which takes him to the alternate realm is suggestive. He is going away from civilisation for he has seen its limits as a young adult. He wonders earlier how the world of grownups has such a wide range of emotions and experiences, which perplexes the young adult. He reaches the secluded place and stays for a while. He meets the 15-year-

old Miss Saeki and they share a conversation, and her departure puts forward certain pertinent questions:

I'm alone again in the little cabin, inside a closed circle. Time isn't a factor here. Nobody here has a name. She'll be here as long as I need her. She's fifteen here. Eternally fifteen, I imagine. But what's going to happen to me? Am I going to stay fifteen here? Is age, too, not a factor here? I stand in the doorway long after she's disappeared, gazing vacantly at the scenery outside. There's no moon or stars in the sky. Lights are on in a few other buildings, spilling out of the windows. The same antique, yellowish light that illuminates this room. But I still can't see anybody else. Just the lights. Dark shadows widen their grip on the world outside. Farther in the distance, blacker than the darkness, the ridge rises up, and the forest surrounding this town like a wall. (Murakami 2005, p. 394).

Kafka feels that in this reality, he will arrest the moment and everything he is will slowly come to a halt. In other words, one's identity is not rigid but always in flux. Every moment adds to the development of one's self, and if one manages to stop that process, then one's personality comes to a pause. The dilemma is almost reminiscent of Keats' pair of lovers in his poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" - they have gained permanence by forsaking humanity. In the poem, the couple has successfully gained permanence as they are etched on stone. Yet, Keats's speaker is also aware that their love cannot be consummated (White, 2010). Likewise, Kafka Tamura realizes that he will never feel the range of experiences that an adult does. Yet he wonders that life does not have any meaning for him, for there is no one who truly cares about his existence. However, he returns to the familiar reality as he comprehends that life breeds memories, and memories shape one's existence. Murakami's narrative offers hope, but the promise is personal and not socio-political as has been the trend in other popular young adult texts depicting the theme of resistance. For instance, if J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series depicts how the young adult acts as the fulcrum of the rebellion which uproots the dystopian tendencies in society and establishes an egalitarian premise, then Murakami's narrative tends to question rebellion and celebrates co-existence of the individual and society. Like the adult figure, Kafka does



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not resign if his 'imaginary' understanding of reality does not coincide with the 'symbolic' understanding of reality. He remains hopeful and tries to reconcile the two.

Questions may arise - Are the people he meets in the alternate world real? Or, is the alternate world real itself? But such questions become redundant if one considers what it is to be real. Reality in Murakami's narrative seems to be anything that leaves an impact in one's life. Even dreams and thoughts become real if they shape one's personality and determine one's perspectives. So, the narrative seems to deconstruct this idea of reality altogether. Nevertheless, this alternate realm seems to have been constructed by borrowing minimal images from Kafka's familiar world. It appears that the symbolic does leave an impression even deep within the 'imaginary' reality inhabited by Kafka. Perhaps this liminal zone between the imaginary and symbolic is what Murakami's narrative refers to as 'limbo' - a place of resignation - where the symbolic gradually gets discarded and the imaginary self is relieved of its expectations. What remains is perhaps but a lingering presence of what had been. If such a realm comes under the category of fantastical, then the fantastic can perhaps be defined as that which is bereft of the symbolic and imaginary.

However, Kafka's eventual return to his known reality does not mean he will happily unite with the world that he had been keen to escape. Instead, he opts for a brand of resistance that is small-scale, perhaps limited to the individual level. He constructs relationships with people who seem to matter to him, Oshima and Sakura. He refuses to follow in the footsteps of his father, and the final showdown between "the boy named Crow" and "Johnnie Walker", possible alter egos of Kafka and Koichi Tamura, is pertinent. Johnnie Walker desired totalitarian control over the world, whereas the boy named Crow always tried to shield Kafka from the world and his father. The latter's victory over Johnnie Walker gives momentum to the

interpretation that Kafka would find a way to exist in society, without necessarily conforming to its grand narratives. He would construct his own meaning and exist in a pocket of society. Kafka Tamura steps into the shoes of Nietzsche's superman. If the adult characters seek to resign from the world in search of forgetfulness and tranquillity, the young adult character hopes to construct meaning in an absurd universe.

Construction of the Real

Kafka's struggle to come to terms with his individuality through resistance and eventual acceptance of societal norms, to discover the identity of his mother and to escape his ominous father can be thus perceived as the young adult protagonist's encounter with the 'imaginary', 'symbolic' and 'real'. But what stands out, refusing to be pinned down through literary analysis, is the existence of the alternate realm where Kafka finds himself towards the final chapters of the novel. Questions arise about the possibility and utility of such a realm in shaping the psyche of the YA mind.

Kafka's journey into the alternate realm through the forest is symbolic. He is moving away from human civilisation into something more primal. To take a cue from the philosophical understanding of reality, it can be said that "reality is independent of our experience and judgement" (Luntley, 1995, p. 38). In other words, reality is something that exists 'a priori' of humans - it is anything that retains its characteristics even after the intrusion of human culture. So, Kafka's search for truth allows him to bypass the artifice which he had known to be real. However, as he reaches the alternate realm, he understands its limitations. He feels reality is not something to be reached; instead, reality must be constructed with the help of one's experiences. The nature of this reality is not pure, it is tainted by one's expectations and flawed understanding, yet it appeals to him more than the truth that remains before the dawn of civilisation.

Murakami's narrative does not seem to declare any winner in the tussle between manmade versions of truth and a priori perceptions of reality. It simply appears to highlight the necessity of belonging to a reality that makes



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life liveable. Kafka's bildungsroman essentially speaks of his education, where he learns how to construct meaning in life as a young adult. Borrowing Lacan's framework of the imaginary, symbolic, and real may help the readers to fathom Kafka's passage.

Kafka's understanding of his father as an embodiment of authority in his life is 'imaginary'. Hence, the first-person narrative of 15-year-old Kafka Tamura never allows us to meet Koichi Tamura. The readers learn about him and interpret him through Johnnie Walker. But the text does not even offer one word being shared between the father and son in real-time. Also, the social identity of Koichi Tamura is 'symbolic' - a renowned sculptor and a successful investor. The 'real' Koichi Tamura remains elusive. Even Nakata's understanding of Koichi Tamura as possibly Johnnie Walker, the serial killer who murders cats, is his version of the 'imaginary'. The imaginary and symbolic identities of the father shape Kafka's resistance towards authority, that is, he is resisting something that is not 'real' but comprises the real for him. For instance, his refusal to study in a private, upper-class school is also his attempt to challenge his father's 'symbolic' social identity. The murder of his father by an 'unknown assailant' destroys the imaginary and symbolic identities of his father. What he had been resisting till now suddenly ceases to exist. The showdown between Johnnie Walker and the boy named Crow in the forest obliterates the last remaining 'imaginary' version of his father. All that remains is the 'real', which cannot be pinned down.

Johnnie Walker, even though defeated, cannot be destroyed, because the real is out there somewhere. His final words become relevant in this context -

See, what'd I tell you? Don't make me laugh. You can try all you want, but it's not going to hurt me. You're not qualified to do that. You're just a flimsy illusion, a cheap echo. It's useless, no matter what you do. Don't you get it? (Murakami 2005, p. 403)

It is this showdown and the experience of the alternate realm which perhaps make Kafka understand that he is trapped like Sisyphus to continue this never-ending pursuit of the 'real'. The narrative through Kafka's tale seems to put forward this notion that even if there is any reality outside human construction, it may not be fulfilling. The readers are not even sure if Kafka had met Saeki in the alternate realm, or if she was a figment of his mind. Yet, it is Saeki who convinces him that he must forgive his mother for abandoning him, and he must return to his reality. Thus, the pursuit of 'real' gets manifested through uncovering the identity of his absent mother, and the conflict with imaginary and symbolic reality as embodied by his father, are finally resolved at the end of the narrative. The alternate realm acts as a cocoon that shields him from his world and provides him with a space to contemplate his place within it. It becomes the site of the ritual that allows the young adult protagonist to reconcile the imaginary and symbolic understanding of his reality. Unlike the grown-up characters, he fathoms the necessity of reconciliation to have a chance at a life that is not marked by passivity and forgetfulness.

Kafka's journey, and the resultant ambiguous attitude of the readers towards this fantastic narrative, may identify Murakami's narrative as a 'liminal fantasy' as had been suggested by Mendlesohn (Mendlesohn, 2008, p. 14). However, as stated earlier, the text seems to showcase multiple instances that resist such easy categorisation. The alternate realm acts as a plane of forgetful existence for characters who prefer resignation over life. However, for the young adult Kafka Tamura, it acts as a site of maturation. The nature of the place adds to the aura of the text, it captures the fancy of the readers and gives a glimpse of reality stripped from its symbolic appendages. However, at times, the utility of the space seems to become more important than its structure in Murakami's narrative. It will be erroneous to assume that one does not influence the other. Instead, form and philosophy appear to come together to concoct a unique dialectical relationship - if existing scholarship on the topic has been keen to comprehend the structural intricacies, Murakami's narrative seems to explore the philosophical and psychological repercussions of the tale. The synthesis is the text in which both interact and ensure the maturation of the coming-of-age Kafka Tamura.



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Arriving at a Conclusion

This enquiry began with the aim to investigate the nature of the alternate realm in Murakami's work, and the factors leading to the experience of such a space. Even though the narrative appears in the mould of a liminal fantasy, yet a closer inspection reveals that within the scope of the narrative several fantasy genres fuse, separate, and merge again. Perhaps, it can even be argued that the fantasy in Murakami's narrative transforms into a separate entity that reflects and explores the inner psyche of the young adult protagonist. Hence, even though Murakami's narrative apparently depicts conventional young adult themes like resistance against convention, sexual awakening, belonging, individuality and hope, yet one may feel that Murakami's narrative transcends these themes.

In a surreal manner, the narrative seems to suggest that the young adult can never possibly fathom society. Kafka, however, identifies his father as the epicentre of the conventional socio-political machinery. In other words, Kafka Tamura's reaction against the limitations of his education system becomes a reaction against the privilege guaranteed to him through his father's societal status. Thus, his rebellion is less directed towards the external world; instead, it is more personal. Such a conflict appears to enhance his uneasiness rather than alleviate it. A sense of futility pervades the young adult protagonist, and he seeks to escape into a space that is removed from his familiar reality.

This alternate realm is defined as 'limbo' in Murakami's narrative. The narrative also appears to focus less on establishing this space as a fantastical structure; it is more eager to use it as a metaphor that reflects the passivity experienced by the young adult protagonist. The experienced reality of Kafka Tamura, which is but a labyrinth of the 'imaginary' and 'symbolic', is left behind through this escape into the alternate space. It provides respite to the adult characters like Miss Saeki, who embrace this realm and its forgetfulness-inducing quality, but resignation does not appear to be an appealing

option to the young adult. The young adult conceives the possibilities he can still revisit in his flawed society. He recognizes that he can only grow through experiencing what society throws at him, and the alternate realm takes away such an opportunity. The alternate realm is then perhaps like a cocoon in which the young adult is educated until he can make his own decision.

Nevertheless, the aspect of being hopeful seems to differentiate the adult from the young adult. The former sees hope as futile and prefers forgetfulness, while the latter is courageous enough to give hope another chance, despite knowing how it may end. This courage perhaps stems from the third aspect of reality according to the Lacanian framework - the incomprehensibility of reality. Murakami's narrative seems to celebrate this infiniteness of the 'real', and associates with it the ability to generate hope.

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