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Inklings from the Past: Subtle Psychological Angst of Violence and Trauma in Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*

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Abstract:

Haruki Murakami's Kafka on the Shore is a powerful exploration of the psychological impact of violence and trauma. Throughout the novel, Murakami portrays a range of different forms of violence, including physical, sexual, and psychological violence. These depictions are often graphic and unsettling, highlighting the traumatic impact of violence on both the victims and perpetrators. The use of magical realism adds a surreal dimension to the violence, underlining the ways in which traumatic experiences can distort one's perception of reality. The novel follows two central characters, Kafka Tamura, and Satoru Nakata, as they navigate a world populated by a range of human and supernatural characters. The article explores the profound impact of violence and trauma on the lives of these two characters as their early traumatic experiences have shaped their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and their overall identity. The traumatic acts of violence in the novel have plunged both Nakata and Kafka into a state of emotional and psychological distress, causing them to experience dissociation from their own sense of self and from the society around them. This has led to significant challenges in forming trust, relationships, and connection with others, resulted in a profound impact on their overall mental and emotional well-being, affecting their ability to lead fulfilling lives.

Keywords: *Violence, Trauma, Dissociation, Psychological impact, Memory*

Introduction:

Kafka on the Shore has garnered widespread critical acclaim and has been translated into numerous languages, cementing its position as one of Murakami's most popular and influential works. The novel unearths themes of identity, fate, loneliness, the nature of consciousness, and the meaning of existence and offers valuable insights to readers. Murakami's imaginative storytelling and intricate symbolism make for a richly rewarding reading experience that challenges and inspires in equal measure. It is remarked for its surreal and dreamlike elements, including talking cats, ghosts,

and an enigmatic forest that serves as a gateway to another world. Murakami examines the deep recesses of human mind and explores the long-lasting effects of past trauma and the impact of violence on individuals and society in a subtle way by employing magical realist elements. The story follows two parallel narratives, one centered around a fifteen-year-old runaway named Kafka Tamura, who is on a quest to find his estranged mother and sister, and the other around an elderly man named Nakata, who possesses an unusual ability to communicate with cats and embarks on a journey to find a missing cat. Murakami's portrayal of these two characters is a powerful exploration of the ways in which violence can shape an individual's sense of self and their relationships with others.

Murakami's depictions of violence in his fiction are often understated and indirect, using a detached and matter-of-fact style that creates a sense of unease and disquiet in the reader. Rather than focusing on graphic descriptions of violence, Murakami tends to explore its psychological impact on his characters. He portrays violence as an inexplicable and arbitrary force that disrupts the stability of everyday life. His characters encounter violence unexpectedly and struggle to make sense of it. Despite the presence of violence in his narratives, Murakami's writing style is characterized by a calm and introspective tone. The characters in *Kafka on the Shore* often engage in introspection and contemplation, reflecting on their experiences and attempting to make sense of the world around them.

Kafka and Nakata are both deeply affected by violence and trauma in different ways. Kafka's past experiences of abuse and abandonment shape his identity and his relationship with those around him. Kafka's relationships with others are also deeply impacted by his experiences of violence. He struggles to connect with others, and his fear of being hurt or abandonment leads him to push away those who care about him. As he states that "I have built a wall around me, never letting anybody inside and trying not to venture outside myself. Who could like somebody like that? they all keep an eye on me, from a distance. They might hate me, or even be afraid of me, but I'm just-glad they didn't bother me" (*Kafka on the Shore* 07-8). His inability to trust others is a direct result of the violence he has experienced at an early age and the ways in which it has shaped his worldview. He experiences psychological trauma leading to alienation and detachment, stemming from his childhood, where he encountered instances of separation from his mother and endured his father's abusive behavior, all intersected in complex and intertwined ways, shaping his emotional and psychological state. Kafka experiences what Pierre Janet identifies as 'emotional dissociation', which involves a separation of emotional experiences from conscious awareness. Individuals feel emotionally numb or detached from their emotions as a way to protect themselves from the overwhelming distress associated with the trauma. At the beginning of novel, Kafka flees his home, driven by a prophecy that he will commit a heinous act: killing his father and committing incest with

his mother and sister. This curse is placed upon Kafka by his father at a young age, following his mother's departure with his sister, leaving Kafka without a mother figure and with only a single picture of his sister. Kafka's subsequent struggles with fear and desire are the result of the trauma inflicted upon him, as he is haunted by the possibility of encountering either his mother or sister, causing complex and conflicting feelings towards the women. This extreme form of self-distancing enables Kafka to create an alter ego, 'the boy named crow', who takes the physical form and becomes his only confidante on which he relies heavily for guidance. Crow encourages Kafka to embrace his true self and break free from the constraints that holds him back and the only way to confront and overcome one's own fate is to face it head-on, to walk through it step by step, even when the path seems unclear or daunting. As Crow says;

Sometimes fate is like a small sandstorm that keeps changing directions. You change direction but the sandstorm chases you. You turn again, but the storm adjusts. Over and over you play this out, like some ominous dance with death just before dawn. Why? Because this storm isn't something that blew in from far away, something that has nothing to do with you. This storm is you. Something inside of you. So all you can do is give in to it, step right inside the storm, closing your eyes and plugging up your ears so the sand doesn't get in, and walk through it, step by step. (Kafka on the Shore 03)

When Koichi Tamura is found stabbed to death in his home, police open a murder investigation. Kafka himself feels that he must be responsible, even though he was nowhere near the scene of the crime. Kafka tells Oshima, "maybe I murdered him through a dream...Maybe I went through some special dream circuit or something and killed him" (219). He has entertained thoughts of killing his father so frequently that they now pervade his mind. Despite having no recollection of the murder and being in a different location at the time of the incident, Kafka experiences an unwavering conviction that he is culpable for his father's death. "I do the maths and work out that he was murdered the same night I woke up with my shirt covered in blood" (213). This conviction stems from Kafka's belief that his intense desires and dreams have the power to shape reality, a concept that highlights the depth of Kafka's psychological turmoil and trauma.

The novel delves into Japan's wartime past with a focus on the experiences of its civilians during World War II. Murakami employs embedded narratives to explore the historical trauma and complex emotions surrounding this tumultuous time in Japan's history. Rather than focusing on Japan's overseas involvement, the novel places an emphasis on the internal conflicts and struggles of everyday people living through the war. Through the intricate weaving of personal stories and historical events, *Kafka on the Shore* offers a unique perspective on the impact of war on individual lives and the broader societal implications of conflict. The novel portrays the normalization of violence during this time in Japanese history, as seen in the nonchalant attitude of Nakata's school

teacher towards the military plane flying overhead before the children's collapse. The teacher casually speculates that the plane was headed to bomb a large city or returning from a raid, illustrating how violence was a common occurrence during the war. Despite the ease with which the teacher discusses bombs and raids, she also expresses a sense of detachment from the war, viewing it as something distant and unrelated to their lives. However, the novel's exploration of the war's impact suggests that it cannot be dismissed as a mere setting or inconsequential detail. Rather, Murakami's portrayal of the war and its normalization within Japanese society underscores the need to reckon with the traumatic effects of violence and its lasting consequences on individuals and communities. The mysterious 'Rice Bowl Hill Incident' during the World War II rendered Nakata in a deep coma for several weeks, after regaining consciousness, he found himself without any memories or sense of his former identity. "Nakata can't really remember...My head was completely empty, like a bathtub after you pull the plug" (Kafka on the Shore 53). He experienced an inexplicable loss of his memories and reading skills. This violence of war left him with a lifelong disability, causing him to struggle with comprehending abstract concepts and speaking in a disconcerting third person. This violence had a profound impact on him, shaping the entire course of his life. The aftermath of the illness that left him in a coma for several weeks further exacerbated the situation, leaving him to lead a solitary life in the bustling city of Tokyo.

Murakami's subversive narratives insinuate that Japan experiences a collective amnesia regarding the brutal atrocities perpetrated by the Japanese government against innocent civilians. Nakata is portrayed as a product of the violent World War II era. This is evident from the documents that surround Nakata's prolonged period of unconsciousness, which shed light on the traumatic experiences he endured during his formative years. This incident during the war conveys the challenges associated with staying alive amidst the conflict, which affected both juveniles and adults. This event created a dissociation between the children's mental and physical states, wherein their thoughts appear to operate autonomously from their bodily functions. According to Pierre Janet, during traumatic events, the mind can become overwhelmed by the intensity of the experience, leading to a dissociation, or splitting of consciousness. Janet theorizes dissociation as a process through which mental functions that are usually integrated and cohesive become separated or fragmented. Janet argues that dissociation serves as a defense mechanism, allowing individuals to compartmentalize and distance themselves from the overwhelming aspects of the trauma. Nakata exhibits cognitive dissociation which refers to disruptions in cognitive processes, such as attention, memory, and perception leading to amnesia or gaps in recall. The occurrence of trauma reinforces a pervasive theme in the book, where characters often grapple with a sense of detachment between their consciousness and physicality, perceiving their awareness to transcend their corporeal actions and inclinations. When Dr. Shigenori Tsukayama evaluated the children embroiled in the Rice Bowl

Hill Incident, he assesses Nakata's condition;

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)

The novel thus explores the impact of historical violence on individuals and the profound psychological effects that such events can have on their lives. Nakata's personality seems to have permanently suffered due to the traumatic event he endured during his childhood, leaving him with an enduring sense of emptiness that he repeatedly alludes to as the story unfolds. Despite recovering fragments of his memory and recalling some aspects of his past life before the fugue state, Nakata confesses to Hoshino, the truck driver, that he has not regained his complete former self. This suggests that certain aspects of Nakata's character were lost forever due to the childhood trauma he experienced.

Nakata's empty inside...Nakata's like a library without a single book. It wasn't always like that. I used to have books inside me. For a long time I couldn't remember, but now I can. I used to be normal, just like everybody else. But something happened and I ended up like a container with nothing inside. (Kafka on the Shore 329)

Nakata's traumatic encounter with a serial killer has left him with a range of cognitive and physical impairments. Nakata starts to perceive his own tendency towards violence and aggression as an external force, hinting at a sense of detachment between his thoughts and actions. This suggests that Nakata's mind and behavior may not be entirely under his control. Nakata is besieged by impulses and cravings that seem to emanate from an external source. He perceives himself as being compelled towards violent behavior by forces beyond his control, and uncovers hitherto unknown desires that emerge to the surface and manifest in his physical actions. The enigmatic and ominous figure, Johnnie Walker is characterized by his excessive brutality and savagery, particularly towards cats, which he believes are necessary to collect souls "to create a special kind of flute" (151). Johnnie perpetuates violence by taking the lives of cats and persuades Nakata to commit violence too by killing him in order to spare Goma's life in return, "Either I kill cats or you kill me. One or the other. You need to make a choice" (153). The dissociation of Nakata's 'self' since the childhood acts as a coping mechanism in response to the violence surrounding him and when he witnesses violence, he pleads Johnnie Walker, "Please, stop it. If you don't, Nakata's going to go crazy. I don't feel like myself anymore" (Kafka on the Shore 159). He experiences an internal fury for the first time and the deeply-buried impulses towards violence are awakened, prompting an internal struggle against his natural resistance to it. His inner self seems to be at odds with his conscious mind, eventually leading him to commit an act of violence by killing Johnnie Walker. Mathew Strecher asserts, "His darker

inner self rises to the surface, forcing his surface persona into a subordinate position, and let loose its destructive urges”(Strecher103).Murakami's approach to depicting violence is nuanced and thought-provoking, focusing on its emotional and psychological impact rather than its physical manifestations.

Murakami's portrayal of the characters of Kafka and Nakata underscores the profound and long-lasting impact of violence and trauma on individuals, regardless of their ages. Throughout the novel, Kafka struggles to come to terms with the violence that has marked his life. His deep-seated trauma leads him to engage in self-destructive behaviors, such as running away from home and seeking out dangerous experiences. Kafka's inner turmoil is mirrored in his outer world, as the violence he has experienced is echoed in the people and situations he encounters. Nakata, on the other hand, navigates life's labyrinth with a unique perspective, embracing the challenges and triumphs of his disabled existence. Despite its grim subject matter, *Kafka on the Shore* offers a nuanced and complex exploration of the ways in which violence and trauma can shape human experience. Through its vivid depiction of characters who are struggling to make sense of their past, the novel highlights the importance of understanding and addressing the traumatic impact of the violence and the need for compassion and support for those who have experienced it.

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