

On Symbolism and Metaphor in Haruki Murakami's *Kino*

Zhang Jingyue

(University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, China)

ABSTRACT : *Haruki Murakami's short story Kino utilizes a complex system of symbols and metaphors to intertwine the protagonist's psychological landscape with his external environment, offering a profound exploration of modern loneliness, trauma, and the pursuit of self-redemption. This paper analyzes specific imagery and textual details to elucidate these themes.*

KEYWORDS - *Haruki Murakami, Kino, Metaphor, Trauma*

I. INTRODUCTION

Kino is part of Murakami's short story collection *Men Without Women*, which examines the varied states of men who have lost female partners. The male characters in these stories typically experience betrayal, alienation, or hurt from women, yet often respond with a characteristic detachment. This aligns with a persistent theme in Murakami's fiction: the intricate and often painful dynamics of relationships, suffused with a pervasive sense of loneliness. Like Kafuku in "Drive My Car," who silently endures his wife's infidelity without ever understanding its cause, the protagonist Kino chooses to leave and initiate divorce after discovering his wife's affair. The narrative is permeated by a powerlessness in the face of interpersonal alienation and the profound solitude of withdrawal from the world.

Metaphor is central to Murakami's narrative aesthetic. As noted by scholar and translator Jay Rubin, Murakami frequently employs symbols like "the well" to evoke "ancient things, things unseen on the earth, things hidden in the heart" (Rubin, 2012) [1]. This image, serving as a conduit between reality and the surreal, often reveals characters' unspoken fears and desires. In *Norwegian Wood*, for instance, the sanatorium and the imagery of the well reflect Naoko's enclosed world of psychological trauma.

Within its collection, *Kino* stands out for its engaging plot and readability, diverging from Murakami's sometimes lengthy recollections and dialogues. It constructs the protagonist's inner world through a rich tapestry of imagery. The bar "Kino" functions not merely as a physical location but as a highly symbolic psychological theater—where quarreling customers, a stray cat, a mysterious bald man, and a scarred woman collectively depict a metaphorical landscape of modern spiritual crisis. This paper examines how this symbolic system conveys Murakami's deep diagnosis of contemporary alienation.

II. THE BAR "KINO": VESSEL OF TRAUMATIC MEMORY

The protagonist, Kino, an employee of a sporting goods company, leads a life of routine business trips, seemingly secure in his marriage until he unexpectedly discovers his wife's infidelity. His response is not outburst but withdrawal and eventual divorce. This silence metaphorically represents a state of aphasia men can experience in emotional crises, fostering a deep-seated distrust of human connections.

Murakami's own experience running a jazz bar likely informs the frequent appearance of such spaces in his work. From "Jay's Bar" in his debut novel onward, these establishments often function as subterranean realms reflecting characters' inner worlds, frequently symbolizing the psyche (Liu Yiming, 2022)[2]. For Kino, the bar becomes a "refuge" from reality and a tangible manifestation of his internal state. Upon leaving his job, he inherits his aunt's tearoom but transforms it into a bar. This conversion signifies a dual severance from marital memories. The tea room's connotations of domesticity and "hospitality" are erased, replaced by the modern, impersonal atmosphere of whiskey, jazz records, and silent strangers—suggesting Kino's attempt to reset his life through spatial reinvention. The bar's lack of publicity, absence of familiar patrons, and poor business starkly contrast with his aunt's successfully run tearoom, noted for her "mysterious charm for attracting customers," symbolizing Kino's retreat from interpersonal engagement and his self-imposed isolation.

Murakami provides insight into the naming of the bar:

“The most he could do was create a place where his heart—devoid now of any depth or weight—could be tethered, to keep it from wandering aimlessly. This little bar, Kino, tucked into a backstreet, became that place. And it became, too—not by design, exactly—a strangely comfortable space.”

This passage reveals Kino's attempt to re-anchor himself after the collapse of his marriage and career. The heart that has "lost its depth and weight" signifies his loss of stability and purpose. The bar becomes the space where he sheds his old identity and constructs a new one. Its description as a "strangely comfortable space" indicates its role as a site for self-healing. The quiet ambiance, vinyl records, and the stray cat create a domain that mirrors Kino's character. By naming the bar after himself, he attempts to process his trauma within a self-created realm of order and solitude. The daily operation of the bar becomes a ritual of self-repair. Through this act of naming, Murakami encapsulates the modern struggle to reconstruct identity and resist loneliness. The bar "Kino" is thus both a physical space and a mirror of the protagonist's soul, bearing witness to silent struggle and potential redemption.

III. KAMITA—THE BALD MAN: THE SILENT OBSERVER

A regular patron of Kino's bar is Kamita, a bald man who often wears a raincoat regardless of the weather and prefers inconspicuous seats. While sharing Kino's quiet disposition, Kamita demonstrates a different mode of engagement with the world.

Kamita drinks beer or whiskey while reading quietly, seldom speaking except to order. He serves as a mirror to the taciturn Kino: both seek order through solitude, but their approaches differ. Kino's solitude is largely reactive, following his wife's betrayal; Kamita's seems a consciously chosen alienation, a silent resistance to

worldly noise. Crucially, Kamita also assumes the role of an observer. His position in an inconspicuous corner grants him a panoramic view of the bar, a passive vantage point that implies a latent power. This becomes evident when he intervenes in a dispute between two customers who break a glass and disturb his reading. After a brief discussion, the three men step outside. Kamita returns shortly, announcing the troublemakers will not be back. The text states:

“There was no sign of any new customers. It was oddly still outside, and he couldn’t hear a thing. Kamita’s book lay open on the counter, like a well-trained dog waiting for its master.”

“One day when Kino was in college, he was walking the backstreets of Shinjuku when he came across a man, a yakuza by the look of him, quarreling with two young company employees. The yakuza was a shabby-looking and middle-aged man and the two company men were well built and also a little drunk, so they underestimated their opponent. The yakuza must have had some boxing skills, for at a certain point he made a fist and, without a word, knocked them down with lightning-quick blows. Once they were down, he kicked them hard, over and over, with the soles of his leather shoes.”

Though not explicitly detailed, the "heart-pounding stillness" and Kamita's evasive response to Kino's query about his methods strongly suggest he used physical force to resolve the situation. His bald head and the recalled image of the silent, effective fighter reinforce this inference.

Kamita symbolizes a lucid, observant figure who contrasts with Kino's passive acceptance. While the male protagonists in *Men Without Women* often remain detached after being hurt by women, Kamita demonstrates that one can maintain observational distance while still exercising decisive agency when necessary. He represents the potential for active engagement with adversity, even from a position of solitude.

IV. THE EXISTENTIAL DILEMMA: THE CAT-SNAKE DICHOTOMY

The story prominently features a cat and snakes, forming a significant symbolic dichotomy.

Cats hold a unique place in Japanese culture, historically associated with mystery and sanctity, as seen in their early appearance in Heian-period texts like *Nihon Ryōiki* (Wu Yuemei, 2018) [3]. In modern literature, they are often anthropomorphized as observers, exemplified by the feline narrator in Natsume Soseki's *I Am a Cat*. In *Kino*, the cat shares a symbiotic relationship with the protagonist. It arrives as a stray gray cat just as the bar, initially devoid of customers, begins to attract them.

“He was fond of the cat, and the cat seemed to trust him. He fed it, provided it a place to sleep, but otherwise let it be. The cat rewarded him by being friendly, or at least not hostile, to him. It was also like a good-luck charm for the bar. Kino had the distinct impression that as long as it was asleep in a corner nothing bad would happen.”

Their relationship is one of tacit understanding and mutual non-interference. The cat's presence fills Kino's emotional void post-divorce and symbolizes the fragile, temporary order he has constructed—his refuge. However, its freedom to come and go hints at this order's instability, foreshadowing its eventual disruption by the disappearance of the cat and the appearance of snakes.

In Japanese culture, snakes possess a complex duality, embodying both sacred and dangerous attributes (Liu Kehua, 2005) [4]. Kino encounters three snakes—light brown, bluish-green, and black—with the sensation that "the snake knew him." This signifies the surfacing of his unprocessed trauma, the dark undercurrents of pain and desire he has suppressed. The snakes' appearance, particularly the potentially venomous black one, represents an assault on his carefully maintained "façade of calm." Their escalating threat suggests his predicament is nearing a crisis. Like an unwelcome oracle, they force a confrontation with issues he has avoided, echoing Kamita's admonition that "not doing the wrong thing doesn't mean you're doing the right thing." The snake's "knowledge" is an inverted form of self-awareness; repressed pain returns symbolically to consume the self. Kamita's advice to keep moving reflects the notion that only constant motion might offer temporary respite from such unresolved inner conflicts.

Thus, the cat-snake dichotomy not only drives the narrative but also metaphorically represents the modern individual's oscillation between fragile order and threatening chaos, between existence and the void.

V. THE POSTCARD AND THE KNOCKING: THE THRESHOLD OF SUFFERING AND REDEMPTION

The story's climax revolves around a postcard and a knocking sound. Following Kamita's advice after the snake appearances, Kino closes his bar and travels, staying first near Takamatsu Station, then near Kumamoto Station. Kamita instructs him to send blank picture postcards twice a week, bearing only the address. Initially compliant, Kino eventually breaks the rule: he stays in Kumamoto and writes a message, including his name, on a postcard to his aunt. Shortly after, he hears a knock at his door.

"Kino knew who was knocking. The knocking wanted him to get out of bed and open the door. Forcefully, persistently. The person didn't have the strength to open the door from the outside. The door had to be opened by Kino's own hand, from the inside."

The blank postcards were a mechanical ritual, a minimal proof of existence maintaining a tenuous link to the world. By writing his name and a message, Kino attempts to reassert his identity and forge a more meaningful connection, but in doing so, he exposes his struggle with isolation and his whereabouts, potentially inviting danger. This transgression reveals his internal conflict: the desire to escape his fate warring with an inability to fully relinquish his humanity.

The ensuing knocking symbolizes the inevitable confrontation with his repressed inner world. His long-standing emotional suppression has created a void. The crucial detail that the door "could only be opened by Kino's own hand, from the inside" signifies that redemption hinges on his voluntary decision to face his pain. The

"firm, persistent" demand indicates he must choose: succumb completely to the inner emptiness or achieve wholeness by acknowledging and integrating his suffering.

Together, the postcard and the knocking represent the core of Kino's dilemma: the futile attempt to grasp at human connection while in flight, and the imperative to confront the inner trauma that haunts him. The story suggests that only by facing this void can one escape a half-lived existence and rediscover authentic meaning.

VI. CONCLUSION

Kino creates a richly metaphorical world through symbols like the bar, the observer Kamita, and the symbolic animals. These elements not only illuminate the protagonist's psychological struggle but also reflect broader modern themes of loneliness, identity fragmentation, and the search for meaning amidst traumas. With his characteristically restrained and poetic style, Murakami Haruki transforms individual loneliness into an aestheticized state of being, ultimately offering a profound commentary on the spiritual dilemmas of contemporary life through his masterful use of symbolism and metaphor.

REFERENCES

Journal Papers:

- [1]. J. Rubin, *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words*, (F. Tao, Trans.), Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2012.
- [2]. Y. Liu, "*J's Bar*" in *Murakami Haruki's Youth Trilogy*, master's thesis, Beijing Foreign Studies University, 2022.
- [3]. Y. Wu, *The Characteristics of Japanese Culture from the Perspective of Cat Culture*, master's thesis, Xiamen University, 2018.
- [4]. K. Liu, Snakes and Japanese Culture, *Reports of Aichi Institute of Technology*, 40, 2005, 79-82.

Books:

- [5]. Haruki. Murakami, *Men Without Women*, (P. Gabriel, Trans.), New York: Vintage, 2017.