

Always Sensual, But Never The Self  
Beyond the Objectification of Haruki Murakami's Female Characters  
by  
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*To Nick*

*Thanks for keeping me an English nerd since high school. I kept the book you gave me and wrote my thesis on it, so really, this is all your fault.*

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## Abstract

Japanese author Haruki Murakami, known for his novels dealing with identity, existentialism, and magical realism, is also notorious for his exaggerated sexualization of his female characters. Although female characters are narratively essential parts to most of his works, many of them, regardless of age, personality, or role, are subjected to gratuitous sex scenes and objectification. This thesis examines the complexity of these female characters in relation to and beyond their sexualization, focusing on several female characters across a variety of Murakami's works and breaking down how Murakami gives them agency, develops them as proper characters, and also how he constantly returns to sexualization despite all that. The primary subject works examined are *Norwegian Wood*, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, *Kafka on the Shore*, and *Men Without Women*.

Using tropes and archetypes from Western literature, psychoanalysis, and Japanese literature, this thesis explores how Murakami disrupts and subverts certain expectations of women in literature, creating female characters that rival the male protagonists in intrigue, power, and personality, but it also examines the inseparability of the female body from sexual pleasure, regardless of the character. The theory of male gaze and voyeurism serves as a useful tool in determining the agency and objectification of the female characters, especially when female characters occupy more active roles and male characters occupy more passive ones. This thesis also brings Japanese author Mieko Kawakami into conversation in order to compare the construction of female characters by a male author in a male-centric narrative with those written by a female author in a female-centric narrative.

In this discussion, I hope to explain what makes Murakami's writing so intriguing yet simultaneously frustrating from a feminist perspective. Although Murakami writes female characters beyond strict trope and archetype, the persistent sexualization for the sake of pure gratification makes his writing feel like "two steps forward, one step back" in terms of the progress and potential these characters could be making.

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## Introduction

**Mieko Kawakami:** On the one hand, your work is boundlessly imaginative when it comes to plots, to wells, and to men, but the same can't be said for their *relationships with women*. It's not possible for these women to exist on their own. While female protagonists, or even supporting characters, may enjoy a moderate degree of self-expression, thanks to their relative independence, there's a persistent tendency for women to be sacrificed for the sake of the male leads. So the question is, why is it that women are so often called upon to play this role in Murakami novels?

**Haruki Murakami:** This may not be the most satisfying explanation, but I don't think any of my characters are that complex. The focus is on the interface, or how these people, both men and women, engage with the world they're living in.

*From the interview "A Feminist Critique of Murakami Novels, with Murakami Himself"*  
(Murakami)

The protagonist: an aimless college student with a bland and quiet personality. His love interests: two completely different women, one shy, quiet, and self-committed to a sanitarium in an attempt to work through her trauma, the other boisterous, vivacious, and sexually open. Another story, another narrator: this time, a middle aged, married man, whose story begins with the death of an old lover and mourns his life without her, without women. Yet another story, the protagonist a middle-aged, married, unemployed man. He is surrounded by several exceedingly eccentric women: a vanished wife with a questionable family history, a teenage girl who discusses death with utter nonchalance, and a medium dressed in 1960's clothing, to name just a few. Although there are exceptions to the pattern, Japanese author Haruki Murakami often writes his female characters with far more interesting backstories, skills, and personalities than those of his male characters, even though almost all of his protagonists are men. Even if the male protagonist is written to be more dynamic and compelling than Murakami's typical humdrum

main character, the women in his stories match them in intrigue and uniqueness, and practically every single one of Murakami's stories contains a vital female character that serves as either the focus of the plot, as an important plot device, or both. Personally, I adore Murakami's style of writing outlandish female characters: it is a refreshing and relieving break from many other male writers, as I find many of them write their female characters as one-dimensional objects of romantic or sexual desire. To me, the way Murakami grants his female characters complexity and forgoes restraint while keeping his male characters flatter and less exciting in comparison feels like a fascinating upheaval of the aforementioned norm.

That is not to say, however, that Murakami's female characters are not sexualized, the fact of the matter is far from it. Despite the depth of character granted to the women in his stories, Murakami is still notorious for the blatant, explicit, and often outright fantastical sexualization of his female characters. In the same manner that he does not shy away from a more realistic, complex characterization of women, he embraces the objectification of the female body and has often been accused of being a prime example of 'writing for the male gaze'. Many of his stories feature sex scenes that spare no detail on describing the lusciousness of women's breasts, the wetness of her nether regions, and above all, the pleasure that can be derived from the female body. When it comes to Murakami's female characters, it seems like a frustrating case of 'one step forward, one step back.' The women in Murakami's stories are often much more fascinating than the men, and even without that gender comparison in mind, they prove themselves as highly intriguing characters in general. Mieko Kawakami, the author of *Breasts and Eggs*, said in an interview with Murakami about a female character in his short story 'Sleep', "I've really never read a woman like this before. As a woman, it was such a joy to encounter a "new woman" in a text. All the more surprising because she was written by a man." Although



Kawakami was referring to one specific character here, I find that her comment can be applied to many other female characters written by Murakami, in the sense that they far surpass what is typically expected of a woman in literature, especially in literature by men. In a way, I find Murakami's writing freeing: the women are allowed to be strange, in the most far reaching sense of the word, hence the 'step forward'. Still, the constant sexualization is jarring and discomforting at times, as though despite all other conventions that these characters escape, they still cannot escape the male desire that surrounds their bodies, thus the 'step back'.

What, then, makes a female character a "good" female character, regardless of if they were written by a man or a woman? Would it be a woman in absolute defiance of the conventional gender role, acting entirely outside of the traditional definition of the female gender? Would it be a woman whose narrative and description avoids all mentions of sexuality and male gaze? Would it be a character written purely with feminist intent, or would it be an utterly realistic character? These neat questions invite messy answers, and to venture through Murakami to arrive at an answer might be one of the messiest paths possible. However, the depth of a human character, regardless of gender, is never straightforward, so why should the exploration of characterization itself be? Hardly any of Murakami's female characters, young, old, attractive, unattractive, from wife to mother to girlfriend's best friend, escapes sexualization. Still, most female characters play a vital role in the outcome of their respective stories. Outside of their sexuality, they prove to be multifaceted, with a range of personalities and motivations that often outdo those of the male characters, as well as powerful, given their abilities to influence the narrative and other characters via economic, emotional, and supernatural means. Though not written in neat political correctness or perfect feminist ideals, the complexity of their characterization leaves little to be desired. It would be complicated to attempt to describe

Murakami as any kind of feminist, whether good or bad, but that is also what makes it interesting. Murakami's works have elements of typical sexist writing tropes yet almost every female character has undeniable dynamism, and the unsteady blend of empowering writing versus the demeaning sexual indulgence is what this thesis intends to explore. Basically, I would like to follow fascinating inextricability of sexuality from female characters in Murakami's writing and how he both upsets and challenges what exactly a female character can be.

My methodology for this exploration consists of direct literary analysis of the female characters in Murakami's stories, both as individuals and within their dynamics with the male characters, in the context of critical and scholarly essays about female tropes in both Western and Japanese literature. It also consists of a comparison between two somewhat contemporary authors, Haruki Murakami and Mieko Kawakami. The close reading and literary analysis is the beginning of the work that needs to be done, and to add to and develop my arguments, I will also do readings interpreted within a feminist context. This context is achieved both by academic exploration and by example, the example being a comparable modern novel by a female author. The academic papers offer context in which to inlay and interpret Murakami's work, as well as a basic outline of feminine tropes in all their one-dimensionality. Seeing where Murakami does and does not fit in provides a stepping stone for further conversation on the respect and agency Murakami grants his female characters.

In the first section of the thesis, I will explore the blatant objectification of Haruki Murakami's female characters. The primary sources to be covered in this chapter is *Norwegian Wood*, while *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, *Men Without Women*, and *Kafka on the Shore* will be mentioned. I will introduce the concept male gaze, which will be brought back throughout the paper, and I will outline where certain characters fall into common tropes as outlined by Pearson

and Pope's *Toward a Typology of Female Portraits in Literature*. Because of the frequent sexualization of these characters, as well as their supporting roles to the male protagonists, at first glance these characters can easily be categorized as either sexually and spiritually pure, sexually active and shamed, or helpfully subordinate<sup>1</sup>. However, I will argue that Murakami does try to shift or subvert these roles, disrupting the strict subject-object power dynamic that comes from Murakami's excessive sexualization of female characters. Essentially, although female characters are denigrated through male fantasy and common, rigid tropes, women in Murakami's stories are still granted agency and power by upsetting tropes.

In the second section, I will move beyond tropes and discuss archetypes, both psychoanalytic and from Japanese literature. Murakami is heavily influenced by psychoanalysis, so I will elaborate on how he plays with a spectrum of psychoanalytic archetypes and how he both deviates from sexist iterations of said archetypes but also returns to them. After moving slightly from the lens of Western feminism to interpret Murakami's female characters in the context of Japanese feminism, I will do similar work involving Japanese archetypes concerning female characters, once again exploring how Murakami builds his characters beyond archetype but also fails to move past it entirely. This section broadens the first section, showing how Murakami does and does not fit in with common depictions of women in literature, from both the Western and Japanese perspective.

The third section will describe the relationships between men and women in Murakami's work. I'll elaborate on the general formula that emerges from Murakami's writing, in which a male protagonist, typically middle-aged, average, and above all, lonely, encounters an extraordinary or compelling woman, at which point the story begins to move forward. There are

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<sup>1</sup> In order to avoid perpetuating harmful language, this paper avoids the original terms used in Pearson and Pope's paper, as well as censors when necessary.

exceptions in the details to this formula, but I will explore the central, indispensable role that women play in Murakami's stories and how this both is and isn't a representation of feminine agency. All four primary sources will be analyzed. Rather than performing a close character analysis as offered in the first section, the purpose of this work is to reach a bigger picture of overarching patterns in Murakami's writing, as each story has similar and repetitive plot beats in terms of the female character roles. Additionally, building on this male character/female character dynamic, I will discuss typical tropes of Japanese romance, particularly the roles of 'possessor' versus 'possessed', and how Murakami overturns this specific gender dynamic by making the male love interest the 'possessed' instead of the 'possessor'.

In the fourth and final chapter, I will once more talk about how Murakami's formulaic relationships between men and women constructs notions of gender, and this discussion will be guided by an interview between author Mieko Kawakami and Murakami. Following this, I will also make a comparison between Murakami's writing and Mieko Kawakami's *Breasts and Eggs* by analyzing both authors' portrayals of the female body, including breasts, periods, and childbearing, as Kawakami's much more brutal, realistic description as opposed to Murakami's almost strictly sexual descriptions of the same topics. I will also examine how both Murakami and Kawakami's narratives are negatively restricted by notions of the female body, especially within the lines of objectification and gaze once more.

As a content warning, many of the text examples within this thesis contain explicit language and graphic depictions of sex.

## Section I: Touring Murakami's Objectification of Women Via Gaze and Trope

Consider, if you will, the most disrespectful way to write a woman. What probably first comes to mind would be the complete reduction of a female character to a sexual object. What is understandably off putting about Murakami's writing to many readers is the abundant explicit detail he puts into sexually describing his female characters. The first few pages of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* open with a phone sex scene from a mysterious woman: "'Oh, I'm so wet! Warm and moist. And soft. Wonderfully soft and black. Touch me'" (*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*<sup>2</sup> 11). In *Kafka on the Shore*, a young schoolteacher recalls a vivid sex dream she had about her late husband: "All I had to do was close my eyes and I could feel my husband coming inside me, his semen against the wall of my womb. I'd clung to him for all I was worth, my legs spread as wide as possible, my ankles entangled with his thighs" (*Kafka on the Shore*<sup>3</sup> 99). In "Men Without Women," the unnamed narrator describes, a bit ridiculously, his arousal in response to his first love: "I was a healthy young fourteen year old boy. All it took was a warm west wind for my cock to snap to attention. Not that she gave me an erection. In the face of such an amazing girl how could I even think of having a sordid hard-on?" (*Men Without Women*<sup>4</sup> 216). Through the blunt and sensual language and the sheer abundance of similar examples throughout most of his work, Murakami's objectification of the female body knows few bounds.

This blatant sexualization of female characters can easily be attributed to the male gaze. As extensively described by Laura Mulvey, in film, here is a voyeuristic pleasure to be derived by the male reader by gazing upon the female characters as sexual objects. The power dynamic of observer versus observed lends to the observed becoming a passive character, deprived of identity and agency, while the observer maintains their own identity by spectating through the

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<sup>2</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Wind-Up* in in-text citations and body.

<sup>3</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Kafka* in in-text citations and body.

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Men* in in-text citations and body.

male characters, as well as maintaining power by being able to take pleasure from looking. This film concept can well be applied to literature, especially here in Murakami's work. The previous passages are textbook examples of misogyny and the male gaze: as the narrators for all these stories are male, the male reader can identify with the narrators and find pleasure in the graphic sexual depictions of the female characters. As such, the subject-object power dynamics and their subversions will be useful tools for analyzing Murakami's female characters throughout this paper. So, unsettling as they are, those above examples provide a useful starting point for exploring how else Murakami constructs his female characters, moving beyond outrageous and frequent objectification. In tandem with the gaze, trope also serves as a restrictive measure on female characters, as traditional, Western tropes of female characters define what women can and cannot do, of what they can be and cannot be. Tropes as another starting measure is another useful tool of exploration because playing with tropes is where Murakami's strength as a writer begins to shine through. By subverting tropes or integrating different tropes into one another, Murakami starts to build his striking female characters so they challenge existing as only a sexual object, or a set of expectations, that serve the male protagonist.

*Toward a Typology of Female Portraits in Literature* by Pearson and Pope outlines a list of common tropes of females in literature, arranging them in categories such as passive heroine and active hero, and some tropes describe how the sexuality of the female characters and how it serves the male characters. Of interest here is two common tropes of female heroine: the 'virgin/w\*\*\*\*' dichotomy. Pearson and Pope argue that "no female type - virgin, mistress, or mother - escapes some form of rejection or condemnation," and furthermore, "the three additional heroine roles of passive virgin, active sexual partner, and selfless helpmate are also mutually exclusive because the major qualities praised in one role are condemned in another"

(Pearson 12). At first glance, the two main love interests in *Norwegian Wood*, Naoko and Midori, embody the trope commonly termed the ‘virgin/w---- dichotomy’ respectively. Murakami, however, defies the impossibility outlined in this typology and does not strictly adhere to these narrow tropes, adding a degree of dimension and depth to the female characters.

Naoko starts the narrative as a virgin, and at the beginning her role as the protagonist’s best friend’s girlfriend exempts her from sexual desire; Toru Watanabe<sup>5</sup> and Naoko act strictly as friends, with supposedly no sense of sexual attraction between them. Watanabe and Naoko’s initial lack of sexual interaction allows them to find solace in each other, grieving over their mutual loss of Kizuki, Watanabe’s late best friend and Naoko’s boyfriend. In the beginning of the novel, Watanabe and Naoko develop a strictly emotional and rather purehearted attraction, motivated by the desire to find emotional connection rather than the raw pleasure of a physical one. In this manner, Naoko’s status as sexually unavailable benefits Watanabe and the narrative as it allows the characters to explore the depth of their grief and build a burgeoning, faithful type of love. Their relationship does not remain static, however, and Naoko eventually loses her virginity to Watanabe, but in doing so falls mentally unwell and commits herself to a sanatorium, marking the end of the trope of the chaste, pure woman. It is interesting to note that it is at this point, after Naoko’s loss of virginity and temporary disappearance from the story, that the plot and tone begins to shift. The major shifts in Watanabe’s life throughout the novel in some way involve Naoko; in a sense, the driving force of the narrative is Naoko and not Watanabe himself. According to Matthew Strecher, “it would not be inaccurate to say that the principal goal of the narrative is to examine the trials of Naoko through the eyes of the hero/narrator.” If interpreted through this lens, Naoko’s loss of virginity is not just the natural, archetypal progression of virgin

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<sup>5</sup> Hereafter referred to by the Japanese family name Watanabe, as to not be confused with Toru Okada from *A Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*.

to wife to old maid, it is also a transition from heroine to active hero, a path implied from the very beginning of the story.

In turn, this shift also disrupts the subject-object dynamic between Naoko and Watanabe. Watanabe takes on the more passive role as a good portion of the action of the story occurs through Naoko's perspective. Through letters and visits, Naoko attempts to improve her mental health at a sanatorium, and although most of her journey is offscreen, her struggles are implied to be intense and taxing, and the very thought of Naoko's battles in declining health occupy Watanabe's thoughts, perhaps more so than the life he has in front of him. Although technically still the observer, Watanabe's perspective emphasizes Naoko's development and progress rather than her body. So, it is when Naoko defies a trope related to her sexual status that her story becomes the focus, rather than her existence as a love interest being Watanabe's focus.

As a complete narrative foil to Naoko, *Norwegian Wood* presents Midori, Watanabe's other love interest. Midori is a character equal in complexity to Naoko and serves as another example of Murakami's disruption of trope. From the get-go, Midori is introduced as a vivacious and sexually open young woman, much unlike the shy and conservative Naoko. She speaks brazenly of sexual acts, both performed by herself and other women, and drags Watanabe into unconventional situations, such taking him to watch a porno flick as part of a date or inviting him into her home after visiting her sick father. Had Midori been written completely within the trope of the sexually active woman, one would expect the narrative or Watanabe to condemn or punish her for her open sexuality. Watanabe's description of Midori, however, does no such thing. Although he occasionally expresses surprise at her transparency on sexual subjects, he rarely asks her to stop talking and he does not consider it unbecoming or improper of her; instead, he treats her weird conversational topics like any other interaction, engaging her with respect and



without patronization. Despite this, one could still expect that Midori's talkativeness might make her an easy sexual target for Watanabe: if she is so willing to talk about sex, surely she would be willing to have sex with anyone. Midori, however, remains sexually unavailable for the entirety of the novel. In this respect, among others, Midori is the complete opposite of Naoko; as open as she is about sexual topics, she has a boyfriend who she is unwilling to be unfaithful to even for Watanabe. Watanabe, on his part, does not ask for any sexual favors from Midori, and they do not physically engage with each other beyond a single kiss. Lastly, although a low bar, no harm comes to Midori for being a sexually open woman. Her almost-happy ending with Watanabe suggests that her honest sexuality does not disqualify her from receiving satisfaction, and also suggests that she is no less worthy of any other woman than being a proper candidate for genuine, emotional romance.

The dichotomy of Naoko and Midori is a primary example of Murakami's ability to write beyond the rudimentary, reductive trope. They act as something outside of the binary of chastity and open sexuality: they are complex characters who are not reduced to their status of sexual activity, and both develop beyond the pitfalls of the tropes one would immediately associate with them. In regards to the Pearson and Pope quote about the condemnation of certain traits from one trope being condemned in another, Naoko and Midori act in defiance of this idea. Neither woman is strictly a virgin or "w\*\*\*\*," as they develop into more fleshed characters they take on both flaws and strengths from either trope and are not shamed by the narrative for containing multitudes. With Naoko and Midori, Murakami displays an ability to create complex female characters that grow far beyond the flatness of trope. Of course, the two women are still subject to Murakami's characteristic objectification, but in breaking said tropes, these two female characters introduce another pattern that Murakami often exhibits in his writing:

multidimensional women that direct the narrative, having goals that focus on themselves or something other than the male protagonist. Although the limiting tropes outlined by Pearson and Pope would suggest that Naoko and Midori can only occupy passive heroine roles, the character journeys of these two women guide Watanabe's journey, and not vice versa: Murakami's shifting of tropes exhibits his capabilities of writing dynamic women. No matter how different Naoko and Midori may be, and even though they are still objects of desire, the narrative revolves around not just their bodies, but who they are as unique, motivated, and unfixed characters.

## Section II: Archetype, and Defying Typology

Moving away from literary tropes and on to more psychological ones, it is vital to acknowledge that Murakami is no stranger to Jungian and Freudian psychology, since many of his works deal with the subconscious and the unconscious. In more obvious examples unrelated to gender, namely in *Kafka on the Shore* and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, several characters embody a version of themselves similar to the psychoanalytic id, which is a part of the unconscious mind that embodies gratification, pleasure, and, base desires, even those that oppose societal boundaries and expectations. In *Kafka*, Kafka possesses an alter ego named Crow, who he uses as an emotional crutch and as an outlet for his violent tendencies, and similarly in *Wind-Up Bird*, Toru Okada<sup>6</sup> assaults his abusive brother-in-law in a dreamlike sequence that bears only coincidental consequence in reality. For Murakami, the subconscious serves as a powerful fuel for the action in his stories. Although less explicit than these examples, Murakami's interpretations of gender can also be read as Jungian references, particularly the archetypes of anima and animus.

Amidst many other modern criticisms of Jung's archetypes, the anima/animus archetypes are subject to feminist critique, given their rather reductionist and patriarchal view on gender. According to Jung, Logos is the paternal principle of logic and rationality that men operate on, while Eros is the maternal principle of emotion and connectivity that women operate on. As such, the archetype of anima is the aspect of Eros that exists within men that acts as the feminine image within the male psyche, encompassing tendencies towards femininity within men. The respective archetype within women is the animus; the animus encompasses the Logos-like, masculine qualities that exist within women. To expand on this already overtly binary and strict

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<sup>6</sup> Hereafter referred to by the Japanese family name Okada, as to not be confused with Toru Watanabe from *Norwegian Wood*.

take on gender, Jung also stresses that ““In men, Eros [...] is usually less developed than Logos. In women, on the other hand, Eros is an expression of their true nature, while their Logos is often only a regrettable accident”” (Goldenberg 445).

In “A Feminist Critique of Jung,” Naomi Goldenberg criticizes Jung’s gender archetypes, pointing out that Jung operates on the rather archaic idea that men’s thoughts and actions are dominated by logic while women are dominated by emotion. Of note, the manifestation of Logos being a ‘regrettable accident’ within women implies that an ounce of intellect within a woman is rare and undesirable. Furthermore, Goldenberg points out the inequity of the anima/animus between men and women. Jung asserts the anima as a given figure in men, but according to Goldenberg, the animus is more of a second thought on Jung’s part, acting as a mirror image that Jung does not as strongly ascribe to and simply created to balance out the binary views of gender. Jung’s followers implicated that the masculine personality is “completed and fulfilled” by the minor feminine components, but say nothing of the reverse. Goldenberg criticizes this imbalance, saying “While men can keep control of all Logos activities and appropriate just whatever Eros they need as a kind of psychological hobby, women are by no means encouraged to develop Logos, since they are thought of as handicapped by nature in all Logos arenas” (Goldenberg 447).

Though not explicitly stated, Murakami’s characters can be defined by anima/animus archetypes, but the way they fulfill those archetypes is not strictly confined to Jung’s idea of gender. At the same time, these characters are still somewhat restrained by sexist notions. In other words, Murakami starts to write in agreement with Goldenberg’s more feminist critical view of Jungian archetypes, only to return somewhat to Jung’s more traditional one. Through the lens of Goldenberg’s take on Jungian archetypes, we can identify a recurring implication in

Murakami's writing: that any aspect of a woman's character, especially intellect, is inextricable from her sexuality. While not nearly as extreme as Jung's take on gender, many of Murakami's female characters fall into some versions of the Eros/Logos and anima/animus pitfalls. Given the aforementioned examples of Murakami's usage of Jungian archetypes, the direct influence of Jung on Murakami's construction of gender is far from improbable. Basically, using the Jungian and Goldenberg framework, I will break down how Murakami, usually sexist in his depictions of women, uses Jungian archetypes to create a strong female character. Unlike Jung's more disparaging ideas, Murakami's writing features a good number of witty female characters, many of whom are well-read, well-educated, and often not shamed for their pursuit of higher education or the possession of a high level of intellect. In Jungian terms, and in contrast to what Jung posits, they operate comfortably within the realm of Logos. Similar to Jung, however, these women, no matter how intelligent, independent, or typically masculine, always revert to some form of Eros, whether through sexualization, or when their functional role in the narrative is as an emotional turning point or stepping stone for the male characters. I've noticed two general patterns in which the inseparability of intellect and sexuality within women is presented: either a woman is initially presented as a sexually desirable object and is then contrasted with a reveal on how smart she is, or the reverse, in which a woman is introduced as a rational, upstanding character and then revealed to have a wildly sexual side. This dichotomy is often depicted as arousing to the male narrators; arguably, this contrast of intellectual/sexual becomes a point of intense sexual fascination within Murakami's writing.

A prominent example of the former pattern appears in *Kafka on the Shore*. Hoshino, a side character, spends the night with a prostitute for very necessary and very plot-relevant reasons. Given her occupation, the prostitute is an absolute knockout, and in true Murakami

fashion, the descriptions about her appearance and performance spare no details on emphasizing this. ““Luscious breasts, skin like silk. A nice, curvy waist, hot and wet right where you like it, a regular sex machine,”” her pimp Colonel Sanders advertises (*Kafka* 272). Her services prove to be just as alluring as her appearance: ““She washed him carefully all over, then commenced to lick him, sliding into a totally artistic act of fellatio, doing things to him he’d never seen or heard of in his life”” (*Kafka* 273). Her overexaggerated, borderline unrealistic amount of sex appeal roughly equates to Jung’s expected Eros in women: the sexual objectification is clearly evident, as she is a tool for Hoshino’s pleasure and, as a prostitute, her occupation is one associated mostly with women, and there is also the necessary emotional component that the act of sex fulfills. The constant emphasis on her sexiness sets her up as a purely sexual object, or in other words, one of pure Eros. The tone of the passage then changes, blindsidingly, when she starts to quote French philosophers while still fully in the throes of sex. ““The pure present is an ungraspable advance of the past devouring the truth, all sensation is already memory,”” (*Kafka* 273) she says suddenly, quoting Henri Bergson. While Hoshino stares at her in awe, she reveals that she is college student majoring in philosophy and that prostitution is merely her part-time job. At Hoshino’s request, she also quotes German philosopher Hegel, to which he replies ““I still don’t get it, but it sure feels good”” (*Kafka* 274).

Here, Murakami writes a rather interesting twist on Jung’s conception that women cannot possess Logos, or at the very least, do so poorly and accidentally. The prostitute exudes no shortage of sexual desire, a typically feminine aspect. The emotional aspect of Eros is also present in her characterization, as the intercourse serves as a bridge between the novel’s supernatural and real worlds as well as a source of emotional fulfillment and satisfaction. Murakami then adds an extra dimension to her clear Eros aspect by proving herself to be smart,

more so than her client, thus embodying the masculine, logical, and rational Logos. What's more, not only does she exhibit Logos, she apparently does it very well, possessing a undeniable, inquisitive intellect while simultaneously being an object of extreme sexual and emotional desire. This is quite a contrast to Jung's take on the animus: while only men could indulge in the anima and thus fulfill their characters with it, Murakami writes women who express the Logos-driven animus far beyond what Jung could have imagined, all while distinctly maintaining recognizable traits of traditional femininity and Eros.

Still, this contrast acts towards a male character's benefit and ultimately the male gaze by fulfilling some sort of fantasy. Hoshino, and by extent readers, are meant to take sexual pleasure from her intellect. The stark contrast between sexy and smart is a source of sexual fascination for Hoshino, as he derives even more gratification out of his experience when the prostitute starts to quote philosophy to him. What Jung would have referred to as a "regrettable accident" instead becomes a 'pleasurable accident,' but what remains the same between both Jung's posit and Murakami's scene is that the appearance of intellect in an extremely sexual woman is still presented as an accident. To have a woman who is simultaneously brilliant and beautiful is treated as such a rare occurrence that the shock factor becomes a source of sexual arousal. What this particular passage does is exhibit one direction of the entanglement of intellect and sexuality within Murakami's female characters: in this case, intellect cannot merely exist as intellect, it must be also sexy. Murakami certainly moves away in *a* direction from Jung's binary ideas of Eros and Logos, but is it in a direction that feminist readers and writers, or perhaps any one person with a healthy respect for the female body want to see? Perhaps not.

Another similar example of a female character running the line of Eros and Logo is Creta Kano from *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. Like the woman from *Kafka*, Creta is also a prostitute,

but she is a “prostitute of the mind”. Okada has sexual intercourse with her in his mind, but this progresses to sex with her in real life. Creta’s Eros lies in this sexual connection as well as the emotional relief she gives to Okada in the absence of his wife Kumiko, all the more so since she bears a strong physical resemblance to Kumiko (the story goes as far as to imply that Kumiko and Creta are the same person at several points). Her Logos derives from her role as a problem solver for Okada, as the Kano family is hired to help find the Okada’s lost cat and by extension repair Kumiko and Okada’s marriage. Furthermore, the very term “prostitute of the mind” incorporates both Eros and Logos, Eros as the prostitute and Logos as the mind. Once again, the sexuality of prostitution is viewed as inextricable with the logic or rationale when it comes to female characters. Creta is a vital source of help for Okada, but she is still an incredibly sexual object. For instance, she appears in front of Okada during his intense stint on the bottom of the well, eventually taking his place and walking him through what he experienced down there, and the two consummate their emotional connection the next day through intercourse. Additionally, when Okada asks her why she does what she does, she says “To know. To know more—and more deeply” (*Wind-up* 212). In this instance, the sex seems necessary for the plot: Okada and Creta must have sex with one another to know each other better, and ostensibly solve their problems through highly detailed sex. The point is hammered in with this quote by Creta: “I used to be a prostitute of the flesh, but now I am a prostitute of the mind” (*Wind-Up* 212). To Murakami, these are one and the same. Sex is used for connection; the eroticism of it is necessary to develop the relationships between two people. What this does for the female characters is place them in an inescapable position of sexualization. If they are to have a connection with a male character, despite it fleshing out the woman as emotionally intelligent, they must have sex with that male character to assure that connection and prove their place in the



story. In a way, this renders the depth given to the female character by their trait of intelligence irrelevant.

*Norwegian Wood* offers a different path to this same conclusion. What varies is that the significant female character starts off as unassuming and supposedly outside the gaze of desire, only to be proved otherwise at the end of the novel. Reiko serves as a major source of emotional support for the protagonist Watanabe, and his first love interest, Naoko, as they navigate their feelings towards each other as well as their attitudes towards life. Though less of a Logos-driven character in the traditional sense, since she is not explicitly portrayed as conventionally smart, Reiko acts as a sort of wise woman, providing the characters with advice, stories, and a source of reason for Naoko and Watanabe. The logic and rationality in Reiko's character manifests in the practical sense rather than the academic sense, making her a trustworthy and reliable supporting character. Unlike many other of Murakami's female characters, Reiko is introduced without her level of physical attractiveness being a large factor in the initial impression of her character; her description paints her rather plain and somewhat unassuming, especially in comparison to the previous description of the prostitute. "Here was a woman in her late thirties who seemed not merely a nice person but whose niceness drew you to her" (*Norwegian Wood*<sup>7</sup> 94), Watanabe says of her upon first meeting. Of her sex appeal, Watanabe only says "Long and slim, she had almost nothing for breasts" (*Norwegian* 94), the brevity of the statement suggesting that she is not really viewed as an object of sexual desire. Later, it is revealed that Reiko was a victim of sexual assault perpetrated by a younger girl, further sullyng her image as something sexually desirable by a heterosexual man. What is repeatedly emphasized about Reiko's character is not her appearance but rather the advice she offers and her prodigious musical skill, once more establishing her as a more intellectual being than a sexual one. With two other younger female

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<sup>7</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Norwegian* in in-text citations and body.

characters serving as love interests and it being narratively established that she is a divorced mother, her character fulfills a role that is more sisterly and guiding than that of an object of sexual or romantic desire.

Still, despite the prolonged lack of lust Watanabe has towards Reiko and their steady relationship as good friends, Watanabe sleeps with Reiko at the emotional climax of the novel in a scene that feels like something of a betrayal to both the main love interests and to Reiko's character itself. Sex scenes involving Naoko and Midori, although gratuitous, are arguably expected, if not appropriate: as the two main love interests, both young women with an emotional and physical investment in the main character, it is not unnatural for them to be frequently depicted in a sexual manner. Reiko's sexualization, however, comes as an unpleasant surprise because she was presented as the only main female character who existed outside the realm of sexual desire. The sex scene suggests that despite everything that may suggest otherwise, if a woman exists, she can still be sexualized. Reiko had a deep emotional connection with Watanabe, but by having sex with him, the implication is that any emotional connection between a man and woman can and must be consummated sexually to complete or fulfill the relationship. The placement of the sex scene at the climax of the novel suggests that it was even necessary for narrative resolution. Even then, the sex scene with Reiko is not written as solely an emotional plot device, the detail within it indicates that there is pleasure or gratification to be derived from it: the sex is *sexual*, in the physical sense of the word. Reiko serves as a good example of the frustrating struggle of analyzing Murakami's female characters in a feminist lens. Her character is rich in complexity, backstory, and narrative role, and the depth of such characterization is largely independent on her sexual desirability until the very end, where it turns out even the most unsexual of women can be reduced to or pursued as an object of sexual

pleasure. It is a harsh reminder of the ever-present male gaze, the desire for sexual gratification, despite the character existing entirely independently of a sexual relationship with the male character for the majority of the novel.

Moving away from the Jungian terms, what the treatment of Reiko's character implies is an extension of what is also suggested by characterization of the prostitute from *Kafka*: intellect cannot exist without sexuality. While the prostitute exhibited a surprising amount of intellect for her incredible amount of sexual appeal, Reiko's character arc demonstrated that intellect and rationale do not exempt female characters from sexualization. One way or the other, the female character is subject to being sexualized. Outside of just intelligence, however, Murakami also sexualizes other mundane characteristics of female characters, leading into the idea that Murakami's female characters simply cannot escape sexualization, despite any relationship to the protagonist, role in the story, or personality that they may have. To reiterate and reframe in terms of the gaze, these female characters are almost always returned to being the object in the subject-object power dynamic. They may have more personality than a simple vessel for sexual pleasure, but even that ounce of intellect may be turned against them as it is another factor to be enjoyed sexually. With the prostitutes and Reiko, there seems to be an exhibitionistic joy on the women's parts, taking their own pleasure or seeing it as their own duty to have sex as means of emotional connection. Of course, all this ends up gratifying the heterosexual male reader, leaving the sexual power of observation in his hands.

Even if a character does not follow the patterns outlined above (strictly sexual until proven intelligent or strictly intelligent until proven sexually desirable), the characteristics of either intellect or sexuality are highlighted in many other female characters, although they sometimes favor one more than the other. This one-sided characterization is usually reserved for

minor characters or for characters that do not exhibit a strong sense of specifically Logos or specifically Eros. The strongest contrast is reserved for the most sexual female characters and the smartest female characters: if a female character shows a distinct affinity for either Eros or Logos, the chances of a scene exhibiting the presence of the other within her character seems to increase. The same cannot be said for the male characters, although this could be due to either sexual desirability being a much less prominent aspect in Murakami's male characters, or the lack of interesting characterization in the male characters in comparison. More often than not, Murakami's male characters simply do not have as strong of tendencies towards either Logos or Eros in the way that his female characters do, although this discussion of depth between male and female characters may be reserved for a later section. Anyways, this spectrum of intelligence and sexuality allows for more movement and development of the female characters than the narrower typology of section I. With Murakami's manipulations of the archetypes, women can be made more powerful to different degrees of intelligence, emotional and otherwise: the potential to cover a broader width of character complexity does not go ignored. As is the recurring pattern in Murakami's writing, however, there is the mechanism (in this case, Hung's archetypes) in writing that grants the female character more agency, yet that same mechanism can objectify her within the very same paragraph.

To this point, the discussion of Murakami's female characters has been centered around general archetypes and tropes of the female gender presented in Western literature and centered around a Western perspective. Given Murakami's status as an international author hailing from Japan (however contentious that status may be, but that is a topic that bears more discussion later), it is worth investigating how exactly his work fits into tropes present in Japanese literature. As such, a relevant feminine archetype of Japanese literature is the "myth of

motherhood.” Outlined by Japanese feminist writer Noriko Mizuta, the myth of motherhood is the restrictive archetype in which female characters are bound to the theme of maternity. Essentially, within this archetype, to be feminine is to be maternal, and so many female narratives focus on motherhood as an identification of the self. A better articulation comes from Mizuta’s essay *When Women Narrate the Self: Personal Narratives in Modern Women’s Literature*. “Because women are rendered synonymous with life and nature, their very femininity is subsumed by the imperative to accept and fulfill such an essential notion of selfhood” (Mizuta 168). In this essay, Mizuta proceeds to describe two methods in which women attempt to narrate themselves. One would be a reclamation of the maternal narrative, and the other would be a subversion of it, the “witch-like,” infertile woman who attempts to escape the myth of motherhood. Mizuta argues that this very escape only returns to the myth of motherhood, because the explicit avoidance of motherhood only acknowledges the existence of the structure in the first place. As such, modern narratives about women that do not involve motherhood create an “ideological vacuum.” As Mizuta says, “The process of women awakening to self-awareness was also a process of becoming aware of the dark and empty space in one’s own uterus—the womb as a hollow vessel, like a bowl. The question of how to fill this empty space or interiority of the self can therefore be understood as the most pressing concern of the female ego in modern literature” (Mizuta 169). Mizuta then describes the modern departure from the myth of motherhood is the “narration of the self,” or *jikogatari*. For the modern female narrative, this involves describing one’s private sphere, separate from the male public sphere and not speaking for female culture as a whole. This recalls the gaze theory: in this female narrative, the female character acts for herself, observing herself through her own eyes and not through the eyes of a voyeur, thus granting more agency to her.

Not all of Murakami's female characters are mothers or concerned with motherhood, and for those that are, the depth of entrenchment within this "myth of motherhood" varies: Murakami's female characters wrestle with other issues such as romantic love, sexuality, and existential identity, and motherhood is just one of the many conflicts they engage with. A very prominent example of the struggle with the myth of motherhood, however, is Miss Saeki from *Kafka on the Shore*. Though it is revealed at the end of the story that Miss Saeki is protagonist Kafka's real biological mother, Murakami does everything within his power to convince the reader and Kafka that she is not. Using Mizuta's framework, Miss Saeki can be described as a character who tries to escape the myth of motherhood through the "witchcraft" subversion. First of all, Kafka himself tries to avoid identifying Miss Saeki as his mother in order to escape the Oedipal prophecy inflicted upon him: from the outset, there is a fated reason for her to evade the role of a mother. Miss Saeki is a character surrounded by the magical realism of *Kafka on the Shore*, and both her backstory and physical body are shrouded in mystery and the supernatural. After losing her beloved in an accident, she loses her identity, purpose, and her shadow, and becomes "frozen in time", in both the physical and mental sense. It is through this supernatural existence that Miss Saeki's other self can slip through time, with a younger, ghost version of herself visiting Kafka while he sleeps. Aside from the supernatural aspects, Miss Saeki also defies the maternal archetype by appearing before Kafka as a young sexual partner. Her beauty and sexuality is bewitching, so unlike that of a mother, and of course, the most drastic of lines and taboos are crossed when Kafka and her have sex, and when Kafka falls in love with her. Through the supernatural and her depiction of a young romantic interest, Murakami portrays Miss Saeki as the farthest from a mother one could possibly be. All throughout Miss Saeki's narrative, she describes herself as "hollow" or "empty," which within context likely refers to her

deep grief after losing her lover at a young age, could also be the hollow vessel of the womb that Mizuta refers to, seeing as Miss Saeki tries to deny her status as a mother for as long as possible. After leaving Kafka at a young age and crossing the lines of literary archetype that define a mother figure, Miss Saeki proves a worthy example of this subversion of the “myth of motherhood” in Murakami’s writing.

This subversion, however, still recalls the myth of motherhood. Just as Mizuta outlines, by confusing Miss Saeki’s identity as a mother, Murakami only highlights her status as Kafka’s mother by the end of the story. Plotwise, Miss Saeki does avoid her role as Kafka’s mother for the better part of the story, and violates the mother role altogether via sex, but from a meta point of view, Miss Saeki still serves as the primary mother figure in Kafka’s story. Interestingly enough, Miss Saeki’s character still manages to operate outside the myth of motherhood, just as Mizuta dictates, by means of self-narration. Miss Saeki spends the entire story writing her own autobiography, thus engaging in the very private, feminine introspection that Mizuta calls *jikotagari*. Even though she attempts to escape her identity as a mother, Miss Saeki still finds her own way to take ownership over her life, self, and story by narrating it on her own terms, and not in terms of how it fits into the her son, the protagonist’s, own narrative. This is only further emphasized when she burns the entire document at the end of the story without anyone reading it: it symbolizes her taking her own dictation of her narrative and assuring that it is hers and hers alone, not Kafka’s, and no one else’s. Despite being a sexual object in Kafka’s life, she manages to make a version of herself that is beholden only onto her, which only she can observe, and therefore make a subject out of herself. It is fascinating that Murakami manages to write what is essentially a character that fulfills Mizuta’s idea of a modern female writing her own personal narrative. Interesting that Murakami can write what is basically a character in Mizuta’s self

realization. Of course, there is still the layer of the myth of motherhood, but in adding the two together (the modern female narrative and the archetypal constrained mother) Murakami takes common archetypes and bends them beyond what is recognizable, creating a fascinating, twisted female character beyond the flat dimension of a single archetype.

Ultimately, and perhaps unsurprisingly, Murakami operates both within and outside of the expected archetypes of the female character within literature. Recalling tropes, although female characters may be introduced as the embodiment of a certain trope, as the story progresses, their character incorporates elements of another trope, and sometimes the character transforms into another trope altogether. Murakami exhibits no restraint for the women in his stories in this respect: they are not trapped to certain fates or expectations by one dimensional, preconceived roles. What does restrain the characters, then, is this relentless burden of sexuality and objectification. Murakami's female characters are allowed to weave through labyrinths of existential crisis, mazes of romantic and maternal troubles, whether holding the hand of another male character or of their own accord. Murakami builds these networks of complex characterization, with each new path being a new backstory, a magical power, a hunger, a guilt: details that embellish the characters and make their journeys all the more exciting. No matter how deep they dive, however, these women will always find themselves entrapped by the impregnable walls of the maze, the ever-present sexualization and hungry eyes of the reader surrounding them at every single turn.



### Section III: Gender Relationships, or “Men Without Women”

“May Kasahara, Malta Kano, Creta Kano, the telephone woman, and Kumiko. May Kasahara was right: I had just a few too many women around me these days. And each came packaged with her own special, inscrutable problem,” Okada says (*Wind-Up* 217), and indeed, the same uttering could have been said by almost any other male protagonist of a Murakami book. Murakami’s stories are inundated with female characters of all personalities, ages, and ailments, and almost all the time, they serve as the cogs of the story, rotating and spinning around the male main character. Up until now, I have described the relationships of female characters on an individual basis, but in terms of the broader relationship between men and women in Murakami’s books, there is a consistent pattern of characterization in his works in which the male protagonists are quite ordinary, with little initial emotional desire or motivation, while the female supporting characters are eclectic and overexaggerated. *Norwegian Wood* and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* serve as novel examples of this. In *Norwegian Wood*, Watanabe repeatedly calls himself exceptionally ordinary, and his day to day life consists of going to college with no larger goal at hand. In contrast, his surrounding female supporting characters, Naoko and Midori, have astoundingly opposite personalities and lead lives in settings far more extraordinary than Watanabe’s. In *Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, the protagonist Okada is an unemployed, middle-aged man who spends the beginning of the novel looking for a cat. His surrounding female characters include his wife Kumiko, a busy businesswoman who has a twisted family background, May Kasahara, a strange teenage girl with whom Okada talks about death and the human condition with, and the bizarrely dressed medium sisters Creta and Malta Kano. Both stories feature women so eccentrically different from the exceptionally ordinary main character that they seem almost supernatural, especially in *Wind-Up Bird*, and perhaps even

from an entirely different genre than the main character. When presented with such a bland protagonist with little motivation, the purpose of the strangeness of these women is to then push the protagonist into the plot of the novel, where the magical realism of Murakami's writing begins to unfold. Their being strange subsequently serves as the axis upon which the story rotates, and this level of quirky characterization is almost always reserved for the female characters. As such, the majority of Murakami's stories only begin to move once a dynamic female character is introduced.

While more grounded in reality than *Kafka on the Shore* and *Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, this repeated and emphasized pattern that is utilized throughout every single story in *Men Without Women*: these stories assemble a broad generalization of gender dynamics in Murakami's stories. Like the novel examples, these short stories depend entirely on the presence of a female character to move the story beyond that of the comparably less interesting male protagonist. Much like in the novel examples, the protagonist is often mediocre or mundane, with little to show for in life. In a rapid-fire round of examples, Tanimura from "Yesterday" says "When I thought about how I'd been living, how I'd been approaching life, it was all so trite, so miserably pointless. Unimaginative middle-class rubbish" (*Men* 45). After being cheated on by his wife, Kino from "Kino" realizes "In his life, after all, he had achieved nothing, had been totally unproductive...He didn't have a clear sense of emotions like pain or anger" (*Men* 153). If he is not extremely ordinary, then at the very least, he is incredibly lonely. Kafuku from "Drive My Car" confides in only two people besides his wife, Habara from "Scheherazade" and Gregor Samsa from *Samsa in Love* only have one contact with the outside world. "Once you've become Men Without Women, loneliness seeps down inside your body, like a red-wine stain on a pastel carpet" (*Men* 221), says the narrator of the titular story. The men also mourn their feelings of

emptiness or their lack of central identity. After falling in love, Doctor Tokai says “It makes me realize how incomplete I’ve been, as a person” (*Men* 92). Mundanity, loneliness, emptiness: each protagonist of Murakami’s short stories (although such qualities are certainly not just reserved for this story collection) exhibits at least one if not all three of the existential shortcomings. What this repeated characterization of pathetic men does for Murakami’s narrative is that it sets up the male protagonists as inherently incomplete, as in dire need or want of something, as in hopeless and waiting to be saved. The existence of the pitiful and flimsy main character gears the story towards the inevitable introduction of the plot-driving Woman, the one who shall complete the man, who shall direct the man towards what is missing, who will upend the narrative and the characters and set the story itself into motion.

A possible name to this pattern can be found in Japanese literary criticism. Although many of Murakami’s novels do not fall into the traditional genre of romance, given the complex relationships between men and women that characterize his novels, tropes of heterosexual romance serve as a useful starting point to discuss gender dynamics within his works. In *The Pitfall of Romance Novels*, Japanese novelist Kazuko Saegusa discusses two categories of romance that broadly encompass the writing of Japanese literary masters. The first, influenced by European romance novels, seek to portray an equal relationship between men and women but still ignore the power dynamics of the male/female hierarchy and the ever-present patriarchy. The second “involves an unmistakable contempt for women, which lies beneath attachment to and admiration for the female body” (Sachie 73).

The second category in particular provides yet another helpful trope in which to discuss Murakami’s writing. Contempt for women, in this case, indicates attitudes of inferiority towards women, both sexual in nature and at large. When it comes to Murakami, the “attachment to and

admiration for the female body” is quite overt, but Murakami goes on to defy the rest of this categorical definition for his treatment of the female gender as a whole. As discussed previously, female characters take an active role in his stories; although they are not always the protagonists, they are far from mere objects of sexual desire. They are allowed to have depth in their characterization, fulfilling roles and occupations that do not solely consist of wife, sister, or girlfriend. They also exhibit cleverness and unique ambitions, which speaks to a degree of respect Murakami puts into constructing his female characters, as their multi-dimensionality is on par with those of the male characters. In other words, Murakami does not sideline women on the sole basis of their gender. Furthermore, although women are very sexual beings in Murakami’s work, their sexuality is never shamed. The desire of female characters to have sex is not spoken of in a negative light, instead, it is treated similar to that as the male desire to have sex, as an ordinary want or a part of the natural human condition rather than an immoral one. Take Kumiko from *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*: as rampant as her sexual infidelity to her husband was, Okada trusted Kumiko before and after discovering her affairs, never once calling her any ill names or wishing harm upon her. Her sexual addiction was not viewed as a gender-based moral failure, rather, it was simply one component of a deteriorating marriage in which both spouses were responsible. Midori from *Norwegian Wood* serves as another example. As mentioned previously, Watanabe does not ask questions about his and Midori’s sudden closeness and discussion of intimate topics, despite her having a boyfriend, and treats her like an equal, regardless of their frank and frequent discussions of sex. Of course, it can be argued that such characterization still fulfills a male fantasy of a willing, constantly available sexual partner, but in the end, women are not resented for their sexuality, much unlike other narratives written by men, in which women are expected to be sexually faithful either to their virginity or to their

partner. Though Murakami's general attitude towards women leaves much to be desired, especially in the sexual respect, given his consistency on avoiding writing women as generally inferior to men based only on gender, 'contemptuous' would be far from the word to describe said attitude.

Saegusa goes on to explain that both categories focus on the possession men have over women. Romance or love is used as a tool to either justify or obscure the domination of men over women's own identities, desires, or bodies. In these classic Japanese romances, men, in some way, shape, or form, come to possess their female love interest. Saegusa notes that in *Norwegian Wood*, "the relationship of the 'possessor' and the 'possessed' has disappeared, so that one does not detect the concept of male possession" (Sachie 73). Given the love triangle premise of *Norwegian Wood*, it is easy to assume that the male protagonist can freely come to possess the love, body, or identity of one of the two incredibly different women in his life. Even the mere power to select puts Watanabe in a power advantage, and that advantage is further fueled by the expected gender dynamic that whatever woman he chooses is to become his – recall the idea of objectification of the two love interests under the gaze theory. Basically, Watanabe's status as a man should automatically grant him the possessor title over Naoko or Midori. However, Watanabe does not come to own or otherwise possess either of the women, rather, Watanabe's life revolves around their lives far more than their lives revolve around Watanabe. Naoko's narrative, as previously discussed, centers around her struggle of moving out of one such possessive relationship into one in which she acts independently. After her boyfriend's death, Naoko must move on and define herself as someone other than the intense and intimate association and closeness she had with her boyfriend. Watanabe does not present himself to Naoko as a new Kazuki, which is to say, a new boyfriend and ultimately a new

possessor. Instead, he acts as an observer and a source of encouragement for Naoko's own journey. What is important in the power dynamics of their relationship is that Watanabe, despite being in love with her, never asks Naoko to get better so that they can be together. Knowing that she does not love him back, he asks that she get better simply for the sake of it. As for his relationship with Midori, Midori crashes into Watanabe's life and then comes and goes as she pleases. Her appearance in Watanabe's life is often random, and when she is especially upset with Watanabe, she evades him altogether. When the two do interact, it is more often because of Midori's desire to do so instead of Watanabe's. Midori's influence on Toru's life is initially much stronger than his on hers, and the same can be said for Naoko. *Norwegian Wood* is a story told in the first person, with a male protagonist, however, as the novel progresses, the expectation of this male character to take control of the narrative is subverted when the story shifts in the direction of the women's journeys and not his own.

Had the novel operated on the standard trope of possessor/possessed, Watanabe might have weighed the pros and cons of each woman and then selected to pursue the one that most suited his own established, static desires. Instead, Watanabe's choice is a matter of which woman's future he will become a part of. When Watanabe ultimately chooses Midori, he says "What exists between Midori and me...has an irresistible power that is bound to sweep me into the future...It stands and walks on its own, living and breathing" (*Norwegian* 268). He does not seek out Midori based on what she can bring to his future, instead, his affections for her and her power over him draw him towards her; he does not act upon romance, romance acts upon him. The verbs within the passage further emphasize Watanabe's passivity. The love between him and Midori 'sweeps,' it bowls over with great power, and it is personified as a living thing outside of Watanabe's control and therefore, outside of his realm of his possession. Watanabe is technically

not even granted the power of the possessor or the power of choice: close to the end, Naoko commits suicide and Midori initially rejects him, leaving Watanabe alone and at the mercy of the two women he was supposed to be choosing between. Even though Watanabe resolutely declares his love for Midori, the ambiguous ending of the novel avoids explicitly stating that Watanabe and Midori entered a relationship and all became well. Instead, Watanabe is at an extreme loss with no clear possession over Midori: “Again and again, I called out for Midori from the dead center of this place that is no place” (*Norwegian* 293). In this final line of the novel, as Watanabe calls Midori, he is not asking her to be his, he is asking her to guide him and to help him out of his spiral. In the end, both women prove to be unattainable beings that cannot be possessed because they are too focused in their own worlds and struggles for the male protagonist to become the centerpiece of their narratives. If anything, Watanabe is forced to ask to become a part of their lives instead of him asking them to become a part of his. What was once a trope that fell easily upon gender divisions, with the male romantic protagonist exhibiting some or complete ownership of the female romantic protagonist, is turned on its head, and it becomes impossible to tell who is the possessor and who is the possessed.

Indeed, the idea of male possessor and female possessed is often entirely subverted in Murakami’s writing, echoing the tentative subversion of the female observed/male observer from section I and section II. Murakami’s short story collection *Men Without Women* provides numerous examples of this, notably in the short story “An Independent Organ”. Told from an acquaintance’s perspective, “An Independent Organ” follows plastic surgeon Doctor Tokai and describes his general attitude towards women and his many endeavors with them. Uninterested in commitment or marriage, Doctor Tokai engages in numerous affairs with various women, most married or already in other relationships, for temporary periods of time. His many affairs came

from a pursuit of selfish pleasure: “What he sought most was an intimate, intellectual connection with a number of attractive women” (*Men 81*), and Tokai’s casual relationships fulfill his want to possess a woman’s time and attention, however intimately and briefly, just for the sake of desire itself. In this way, Tokai easily embodies the role of a possessor; his reputation, personality, and position allow him to use multiple, faceless women out of self-interest, however consensual the relationship may be. Eventually, Tokai falls in love with a married woman after never experiencing genuine love towards anyone before. The power Tokai once had by his usual lack of serious attachment is suddenly gone, and when the woman rejects him, Tokai falls into a depression so deep he dies a slow, tragic death from anorexia. Ironically, after going so long being a possessor of women, a single woman comes to possess him, in both the figurative and literal sense. Tokai’s worst betrayal came from the discovery that his lover was seeing a third man and that she was using the money Tokai gave her to run away with him. Aside from his physical possessions, the woman also took Tokai’s heart. Tokai’s secretary assessed from his appearance and demeanor that “He’d lost his soul, and it wasn’t coming back” (*Men 109*). Thus, a woman had come to possess Doctor Tokai to a degree so great that it destroyed him, turning the possessor/possessed romance trope entirely on its head.

This pattern of inverted female possessor/male possessed continues significantly throughout the short stories of *Men Without Women*, and every male protagonist takes on a much more passive role than the more active, deuteragonist female character. “Drive My Car” explores the motivations of a lonely actor whose wife’s infidelity still haunts his thoughts well after her death, and he goes through the motions of life socializing until his young, rough female driver becomes his confidant. “Scheherazade” features a woman who stole objects from her high school crush’s house in an attempt to physically possess his belongings as an extension of himself, and



she relays her story to a hermit, of whom she is his only point of contact with the outside world. The Kafkaesque protagonist of “Samsa In Love” awakens hungry, naked, and confused, until a hunchback locksmith sexually captivates him. Finally, the short story “Men Without Women ” describes the almost cartoonish grief any man experiences after experiencing the loss of a woman in his life. Unsurprisingly, sex is featured heavily in almost all these stories, and the graphic descriptions of the female character’s appearance and sex scenes are to the degree one can expect out of Murakami’s work. In this manner, Murakami still follows the typical possessor/possessed trope: when it comes to sex, women are inarguably desirable objects to be pursued for the sake of a male character’s sexual wants. There are little to no examples of this being inverted in the sexual respect; female characters rarely subject male characters to the degree of raw sexual objectification they face. Still, although the male characters may wield sexual ownership over the female characters, time after time, the female characters come to possess the men’s hearts. There is an undeniable hold that these women have over men, as the emotional degree to which these men are attached to their respective women often has massive effects on the plot and course of the story as a whole. While the men may hold possession over the bodies of women, they still must succumb to the women that own them in mind and soul. This ability to wield great emotional influence over the protagonists is curiously reserved for women, and the extent to which they can possess a man’s psyche serves as some power and agency that they are not granted in regard to their own bodies. Romance or otherwise, Murakami presents an interesting dynamic where the possessive, conventional sexual domination of men over women is balanced by a profound emotional possession of women over men. In what I imagine is a sardonic acknowledgement of this unsteady seesaw of power, Murakami writes

“Suddenly, one day, you become Men Without Women. . .Only Men Without Women can comprehend how painful, how heartbreaking, it is to become one” (*Men* 220-221).

#### Section IV: Conversations With Kawakami

When questioned directly about the role of men and women in his work, Murakami seems to admit some awareness about this male/female dynamic. In a 2017 interview with *Breasts and Eggs* author Mieko Kawakami<sup>8</sup>, Murakami acknowledges a role-based relationship between men and women in his works. “I do feel that women have rather different functions from men. Maybe it’s cliché, but this is how men and women survive—helping each other, making up for what the other lacks. . . Perhaps it’s less about making up for what we lack, so much as cancelling each other out,” he said to Kawakami (Murakami). With this interpretation in mind, we can guess that the aforementioned common dynamic between male and female characters reflects Murakami’s own ideas of gender differences and how characters balance each other out. Male and female characters “cancelling each other out” could explain the different directions men and women take their respective stories in: the men often occupy the passive or calmer role, while the women actively drive the story forward. Male characters bemoan the emptiness of their lives while female characters practically overflow with personality and vigor. One cannot exist in the story without the other. In addition, the line about “helping each other” rings true for almost all of the male/female relationships in Murakami’s stories; recall the entirety of *Men Without Women*, wherein the title relays the dependent nature of men on the women surrounding them. Such a power dynamic can be read as empowering to women, even flattering. In a world where narratives of women being overlooked and undermined are abundant, a male author acknowledging the dependency of men upon women is refreshing. However, these female characters in Murakami’s works, no matter how powerful or necessary, are still usually

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<sup>8</sup> Murakami left a favorable review on *Breasts and Eggs* in 2017, calling his attitude towards the book one of “pure astonishment.” Murakami’s interest in Kawakami was what originally brought me to juxtapose the two, in addition to their similar country of origin and depiction of gender.

secondary characters to the male protagonist. Key players they may be, these narratives consistently restrict women to the role of support.

Kawakami calls out Murakami for this very issue in the interview. She acknowledged the power women wield over men and the narrative: “She [the general female character] triggers a metamorphosis in the protagonist. There are many cases where women are presented as gateways, or opportunities for transformation” (Murakami). She went on to state the epigraph from the introduction, challenging Murakami’s tendency to “sacrifice” his female characters, either by having them succumb to sexuality or by having them face bodily or emotional harm. Murakami, in his own defense, called this pattern unintentional. “I never set things up like that on purpose. I guess it’s possible for a story to work out that way, on a purely unconscious level,” he said, and then used the women from *Norwegian Wood* as an example. “Naoko and Midori are respectively grappling with their subconscious and conscious existences. The first-person male narrator is captivated by them both. And it threatens to split his world in two. . . The story is propelled almost exclusively by the will of the female characters. So I can’t agree that women are always stuck playing the supporting role of sexual oracles or anything along those lines” (Murakami). Similar to arguments made earlier in this paper, Murakami interprets these stories to be led by the female characters. Naoko and Midori’s stories defined Watanabe’s journey, and thus they determined the course of the entire novel. The female characters are essential to almost all of Murakami’s stories, and not just in the sense that they serve as scaffolding for the male characters. They surpass the role of support by basically building the narrative in which the protagonist dwells, making their own space in the narrative that is not merely in the protagonist’s shadow: in this way, they are not “sacrifices” to the male characters. Murakami’s response, however, does not directly acknowledge the female sacrifice in terms of the physical and

emotional suffering that his female characters face, once again reintroducing his back-and-forth fashion of writing women: one issue tackled, the other left unresolved.

Murakami denies this complexity of his work. Again, in the introductory excerpt, he claimed to write about the “interface” or interaction between men and women rather than the individual character themselves. This “interface” commonly manifests as the reaction between a plain male character and an explosively extraordinary female character, as the female possessor/male possessed. In response to Kawakami inquiring about the type of woman Murakami tends to write about, Murakami responded “We can talk about the women in my novels as a group, but to me, they’re unique individuals, and on a fundamental level, before I see them as a man or woman, I see them as a human being” (Murakami). Once again, the importance of the interaction between men and women, on what they can do for each other, is emphasized. Curiously, this response still dodges the question of Murakami’s repeated objectification of women; of course, his perception of his own writing is prone to be riddled with all sorts of internal biases. It bears repeating, but Murakami can indeed write human characters: whether quirky, sexy, witty, or just plain strange, women are allowed to be complicated humans living in an equally complicated world. If anything, the female characters are allowed to be more exciting than the male characters, who are often restricted by their loneliness, boredom, and apathy. This leads to an exciting take on the female character, engaged in the struggles of life while somewhat disconnected from the restraint of gender. Kawakami commented on this style of female character, stating the quote from the introduction of this paper: Murakami manages to create a “new woman.” Joyous as it is to read about a female character that comes close to reality, Murakami’s female characters still succumb to the pitfalls of sexualization. Of course, women in reality have sexual desires and can take pride and power in their own sexuality. To write only

sexless female characters would be detracting from the range of complexity that any character can possess, and Murakami's female characters do indeed actively engage with their sexuality. However, In Murakami's hands, it just seems that they cannot escape the sexual female body that primarily serves the desire of a male character. Whatever agency they may have feels tainted by desirable gaze.

All this circles back to the idea that there is a noticeable pattern in Murakami's works that relies on gender division and the constant teetering instability of gaze and power. Murakami himself appears to be vaguely aware of it, and in his defense, he claims that he writes human characters, not gendered ones. Kawakami's criticisms and Murakami's insight add to the running argument in this paper that Murakami often comes close to writing a realistic, dimensional female character: a woman with power, not so restrained by gender-based tropes or gender-specific issues. If she is beyond realistic, it is often in a good way, regarding characterization and personality: she is electrically fascinating in her strangeness, unbound by mundanity so unlike the male characters, the "new woman." As such, the story relies on the path-altering interaction between the male and female characters in order to move forward. It is impossible to describe the female characters as *only* passive subjects of the gaze, on which readers can project their sexual desires on. Even if the female characters take secondary positions in relation to the male protagonist, the word "support" fails to properly describe the role that they occupy in their narratives. They very much direct the narrative. It is not a matter of whether the protagonist is a man, it is a matter of activeness and passivity. Touching back on the dynamic outlined earlier, even if female characters are not the protagonists, their active roles determine the course of the story, oftentimes more so than the blander male protagonist. Still, as Kawakami points out, the constant sexualization and pain the female characters are subjected to is

uncomfortable to read. To readers, especially female readers, and admittedly to my biased self, the complex feelings towards Murakami as an author stem from this pattern: his female characters are ever so close to the human characters Murakami claims they are, balancing their male characters in power, agency, and activeness, but there are those ever-present jarring moments of sexualization and imagery that detract from the “human” status, the status of power that challenges the gaze with her own story, and briefly return her to the “object” status.

On that note, what I would now like to do is add a female author into the discussion in order to compare how Murakami’s female characters hold up against female characters from female-driven narratives, as to this point all analysis has still ultimately centered in male narrative. The previous exploration of Saegusa and Mizuto’s tropes of modern romance focused on male-based narratives. Seeing as romance is often a female-based genre, with female protagonists fulfilling female desires, it would be interesting to see how Murakami’s construction of female characters, from the active woman to the objectified woman, compare to female characters written by a woman and less hampered by the pressure of the male gaze. As for the author to compare to, who better than Mieko Kawakami herself, the very female author who has challenged Murakami’s depictions of women?

Mieko Kawakami’s *Breasts and Eggs* focuses on young author Natsuko and her daily life, particularly her relationship with her older sister and niece and her desire to conceive as a single woman in Japan. Kawakami herself is a young female author hailing from Japan, and Murakami himself has positively reviewed *Breasts and Eggs*. Because of this, Kawakami makes a useful comparison point for Murakami on contemporaneity and similar cultural background. The point of this exploration, however, is not to weigh Murakami or Kawakami against each other and argue which work or author is more feminist or progressive. It is purely to compare the

differences between the depiction of the female body and female agency when written from a male versus a female perspective, to see where there is surprising overlap, and to identify any cultural influences on the construction of female characters.

*Breasts and Eggs* is a narrative primarily about the cis female body and the cis female experience, from the point of view of a woman. Kawakami's story features long monologues about periods, breasts, and childbirth, most of which depict the female body in a brutal or tortured manner. The narrative describes the period as a strictly unpleasant experience. Midoriko, Natsuko's twelve year old niece, writes about her impending first period with dread. "Once I start getting my period, every month, until it stops, blood is going to come out of my body and that scares me so bad. I can't do anything to stop it from happening. Just thinking about it is upsetting," she says in her journal (*Breasts and Eggs*<sup>9</sup> 43). Midoriko focuses on the bloody aspect of the period as well as her perceived lack of control over it. She fears not only the pain and mess of it, but also its inevitability, as she has no choice over when it comes and when it will stop. Midoriko's lack of control over her menstrual cycle also reflects a general lack of control over the female body itself: in conceding agency of one's very own body to nature, one loses agency of themselves. The despair of the period is also not limited to a young woman who has not yet experienced her first menstrual cycle. Natsuko also dreads her period, but unlike Midoriko, she dreads the end of it. "I wondered how many more times I was going to get my period," Natsuko muses. "How many more? How many times has it happened already? Another month, another egg" (*Breasts* 108). Aware of her finite window to conceive children, Natsuko is anxious about the moment her body makes her unable to give birth. Natsuko and Midoriko together create a lose/lose portrayal of the female body: one fears the beginning of the period, the other fears the end. They are both slaves to a force outside of their own control: their own bodies.

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<sup>9</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Breasts* in in-text citations and body.



Their narratives and characters are dominated by this horrifying powerlessness, on which they hinge their identities. There is often no room for the sexual when it comes to descriptions of their bodies: the characters are too preoccupied by the gruesomeness of it, of the pain, of the uncontrollable anticipation. While Murakami's searches for identity are centered around the self, Kawakami's identity crisis focuses on the physical body.

Murakami, on the other hand, writes of periods in a more erotically charged manner (likely to no one's surprise). In *Kafka*, a young teacher's period begins suddenly, preceding a traumatic supernatural event. "It wasn't time for it. Perhaps this erotic dream had stirred something up inside me and set it off," she comments, referring to a vivid dream she had had the other night about having passionate sex with her late husband (*Kafka* 99). In "Scheherazade", Scheherazade describes an instance in which she broke into her crush's house and hid a tampon of hers among his belongings to leave a piece of herself behind. Of the experience, she says, "That really turned me on. The fact that a tampon of mine was stashed away in his desk drawer. Maybe it was because I was so turned on that my period started almost immediately after that" (*Men* 128). Here, the unexpected period also comes after experiencing lust. In these examples, as a curious misunderstanding of biology, Murakami seems to imply that the menstrual cycle can be spontaneously triggered by moments of intense lust. Another example of periods in Murakami's works appears in *Wind-Up Bird*, albeit in a less sexual context. Kumiko comes home especially upset one night, and noticing the precise phase of the moon, Okada attributes it to her period. "Her periods were always difficult," he says. "She would become unstable—even depressed—for some days before they began. So her cycle became my cycle" (*Wind-Up* 28-29).

Like Kawakami's depiction, the lack of control of the female characters' periods is emphasized, but unlike Kawakami, this ordinary bodily function is painted in a sexual light. The

fact that periods are spurned by lust puts periods in not just sexual context but an erotic one. Once again, Murakami sexualizes a part of the identity of the female characters that was not inherently sexual. There is also a loss of emotional control associated with periods with Murakami, similar to Kawakami, but the manifestations are not exactly the same. Periods in Murakami's writing lead to heightened emotions, leading the female characters to act out beyond what they might have ordinarily done. Scheherazade rides on the high of stalking her crush and breaking into his house, while the teacher strikes one of her young students in embarrassment when he discovers her bloodied napkin. Kumiko's period puts her on edge, causing her to lash out at her husband, something that happens frequently enough that he already knows to account for it. The emotional turmoil related to periods, when written by Murakami, only takes place over brief, spontaneous spurts, while Kawakami's turmoils follow the women for life. In comparison, periods in *Breasts and Eggs* are reflected upon to a great extent, and the heavy weight of identity is placed upon it. The reflections are simultaneously frank, profound and horrifying. Murakami's portrayals are more surface level: the recollective nature of the three examples turn these moments of uncontrollability into something temporary, something unordinary that is to be gazed at in its strangeness and its sexiness.

The same can be said for other features of the female body. To use an example with more sexual associations, Kawakami's descriptions of breasts are more grounded than Murakami's voyeuristic tendencies. Natsuko describes her sister's nipples in detail: "Her breasts themselves were little more than a couple of mosquito bites, but her nipples were like two control knobs stuck onto her chest. Or like a pair of rubber tires on their sides. And the color. Imagine the softest pencil you could find—I guess that would be a 10B. Now imagine really bearing down with it and blacking out two little circles. These nipples were that dark" (*Breasts* 57-58). The

language, although detailed, does not stray towards sexual objectification. Ordinary items are used for comparison, emphasizing the mundanity of the whole affair. In this instance, Natsuko sees the breast as a body part, not as a sexual object. The unattractiveness of the breast also lends to its realistic depiction of the female body, foregoing exaggerated, erotic detail. For Murakami, the opposite is often the case. With an example from *Wind-Up Bird* (although I think the source is arbitrary, similar examples are found in almost all his works), Okada describes the naked Creta. “She lay there asleep, with nothing on, not even a cover, revealing two well-shaped breasts, two small pink nipples, and, below a perfectly flat stomach, a black triangle of pubic hair, looking like a shaded area in a drawing” (*Wind-Up* 292). The detail obviously paints Creta as sexually appealing. All her bodily features are perfect, shapely, and artistic. Even the act of Okada gazing upon her in her sleep is blatantly voyeuristic. With Kawakami, the female body is described with empirical bluntness; with Murakami, it is gazed upon with explicit and implicit sexual intent.

Overall, Kawakami’s narratives of the female body depict what it is like to exist in a physical human body and how that physical existence is closely tied to identity. The female characters in *Breasts and Eggs* lament their absence of control over the appearances of their breasts, the length and painfulness of their periods, and of their inability to conceive or give birth. All these physical issues together constitute the driving identity crisis of these female characters. Without control of the body, they have no control or sense of the self. This construction of the female self can be attributed to the gaze. Recall that Mizuta claims that the modern female narrative writes about the private self as the subject, not the female experience as a whole. Kawakami’s narrative does not necessarily meet this criteria because the female characters are occupied with the female body and its relation to society, not just to itself.

Although the female characters are both subject and observer, they still perceive the body in terms of what it owes a patriarchal society. Even this particular narrative is tainted by male desires.

When it comes to Murakami's female characters, however, issues of the body and self are separate. Generally, female characters are preoccupied with conflicts of life experience, such as Naoko's deep plunge into grief, May Kasahara's escape to a wig factory to find herself, and Ms. Saeki's desperate avoidance of her past. Although there are some exceptions, affairs of the physical female body are not often associated with the characters' respective identity journeys. Bodily descriptions are used first and foremost as sexual imagery, and Murakami's narratives are more concerned with how the body is seen than how it connects with the self on a deeper level. This provides an explanation for Murakami's frustrating 'two steps forward, one step back' approach to writing female characters. The aspects of the female character unrelated to the body are allowed to develop and twist in new and exciting ways, but the aspect of the body is usually restrained within the realm of sexuality. In short, for Murakami, methods of writing female character and methods of writing female body operate in completely different mechanisms.

On the topic of restraint, both Murakami and Kawakami limit their female characters in some way because of gender. In Kawakami's case, the characters in *Breasts and Eggs* are restrained by the female body, and especially by the myth of motherhood. As discussed above, ideas of female identity in *Breasts and Eggs* are closely tied to issues of the female body, however, the two are so closely associated that it does not seem like there is a female identity outside of the body. Kawakami does write about the female body in a more realistic, less sexual way than Murakami, but it focuses only on the brutality of it. The characters of the novel constantly lament the physical and emotional pain that their body causes them, and their own

physical being becomes a cage, a lifelong burden with little positive outcome. The expectation to be a mother simply because of the female body's ability to conceive and because of the intense matriarchal culture in Japan weighs heavy on their minds. The first part of the novel focuses on Makiko's strained relationship with her daughter Midoriko, who only speaks to her through writing in her notebook. Makiko struggles to take care of Midoriko while working an exhausting job, while Midoriko silently wonders why her mother even had her and vows to never have children herself. In the second part of the novel, Natsuko seeks a child of her own without a partner through sperm donation. All three women are intensely concerned with the concept of motherhood, echoing Saegusa's 'myth of motherhood' that haunts women in Japanese literature. Their stories are restrained to the body and on motherhood, which itself is an extension of the female body. Conflicts outside of these conflicts are not touched on in this specific female-focused narrative. Murakami's female characters are also restrained, but they are restrained by their sexualization. As stated above, Murakami's characters face conflicts and identity journeys unrelated to the physical pangs of the female body. In this manner, Murakami's female characters are arguably more complex than Kawakami's: their sex is not a barrier to what situations they can experience. Still, no matter the type of character, these women still end up sexualized. Murakami chains these characters to the everlooming threat of being made a sexual object constantly looms above them, once again making them slaves to their gender. To both Murakami and Kawakami, to be a woman is to also be restrained by the concept of the female gender itself.

Again, this comes down to gaze. In Kawakami's case, the female self gazes on the female body, but feels no control over it because outside of the character-character perception and the reader-character perception, the body of the character belongs to a larger patriarchal society at

hand. Even though both the subject and observer are the same woman, she still lacks complete agency of herself, thus the narrative occupies itself with these issues of bodily autonomy. For Murakami, the subject and the observer are the usual suspects: the female body is observed for pleasure, as that is what is expected from a male-driven narrative written in a patriarchal society. Even when Murakami writes the female subject as more than a passive sexual object, there is always the return to the sexual indulgence of the female body. This is not viewed as an issue in Murakami's narratives, however. In crude words, this objectification is simply the way the world is expected to work, so this objectification is not a point of self conflict for female characters.

For a brief note on the influence of Western and Eastern feminism on both these authors, it is easy to point out which tropes have more Western influence and which have more Eastern influence. However, in terms of where these authors progress beyond these tropes and write more multidimensional, 'feminist' characters, it becomes difficult to determine where Western influence ends and Eastern influence begins. It would be easy to suggest that this forward thinking multidimensionality in female characters is mostly due to Western influence, and more conventional iterations of tropes are heavily inspired by Japanese literary notions, but in reality classic Japanese literature has complex female characters just as classic Western literature does. Much of the modern Japanese feminist movement was influenced by Western notions of feminism, particularly Noriko Mizuta, who is quoted frequently in this paper. Searching for a clear distinction between the Western and Eastern that would be applicable to Murakami and Kawakami would be out of the scope of this paper, seeing as how closely related modern Japanese and modern Western feminism are. Overall, it is important to note that both cultures have common archetypes in their respective literature concerning female characters, and tropes

from both cultures are incorporated, played with, and subverted in both Murakami and Kawakami's stories.

## Conclusion

In the global sphere, Murakami seemingly belongs nowhere as a writer: Western readers view him as belonging to Japan, but Japanese readers regard him as the “black sheep in the Japanese literary world<sup>10</sup>”. Among many others, Matthew Chozick offers an explanation for the “contradictory international reception” of Murakami’s work: he argues that the primary mechanism through which Murakami’s work is exoticized is the initial usage of certain allusions, references, or languages in the text, garnering a sense of cultural familiarity, only to be later interrupted by the introduction of unfamiliar elements opposite to the culture the reader is associated with. Western readers can recognize The Beatles, references to jazz songs and songwriters, and mentions of F. Scott Fitzgerald and other popular Western authors in Murakami’s writing. In contrast, “Murakami’s works rarely mention contemporary Japanese culture” (Chozick 63). This establishes a sense of familiarity with Western readers, but ultimately, this familiarity is disrupted by the Japanese names, settings, and day to day lifestyles of the characters. Thus the reader exoticizes the stories for their foreign origins. The reverse is true for Japanese readers: although familiar with the names and settings in Murakami’s books, the historical and pop culture references require a knowledge of Western culture to a certain degree, once again striking the notion of familiar/unfamiliar and therefore “exotic”. Summarily, what parts of Murakami’s writing are foreign versus what is recognized is interpreted differently across cultures, so Murakami’s writing balances between recognizable and exotic by both the East and West, thus putting him in a position where he can neither claim nor be accepted fully by either literary world.

This cultural plurality seems to be just one manifestation of a distinguishing characteristic of Murakami’s writing: it exists in an intermediary space. For example, Murakami often plays

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<sup>10</sup> See “The Harukists, Disappointed” by Roland Kelts.



with genre, presenting a story as one thing until it is proven not to be that thing. *Norwegian Wood* is a romance, until it is not. *Kafka on the Shore* is a coming of age story, a bildungsroman, until it is not, until the moment that Kafka doesn't grow up at all and ends up exactly where he started. Murakami's popular examples of the magical realism genre also serve as a representation of his subversion style as he blurs the line between mundane reality and absurd fantasy. Beyond genre, Murakami's work is Japanese until it is suddenly not, or it is a Western work until it is not. Much of Murakami's literary corpus explores the space between two boundaries, whether this be in genre, style, theme, or national origin. The above exploration of the exoticization of his writing is just a single example of the extensive subversion that occurs in his work, and I argue that the same logic of familiar/unfamiliar can be applied to his female characters.

A very rough formula for Murakami's subversions is as follows: X appears to act like X, but then X starts to act as a newer or deviant version of X, until it seems that X cannot be really X anymore and must be called Y. Sometimes it is revealed that X is neither X or the new Y but something else entirely, perhaps even opposite to X, and X turns out to have been Z all along. It is the space between X, Y, and Z where Murakami fleshes out his writing. The women from *Norwegian Wood* act as a the transformation from X to Y: Naoko is a frigid, distant, and seemingly unattainable love interest until she begins to explore her sexuality with Toru, and Midori, her narrative opposite, is fiery, outspoken, and sexually open until she refuses Toru romantically to the point of shutting him out entirely for a brief period. Similarly, Ms. Saeki is initially a nurturing, motherlike figure to Kafka, but their sexual desire for one another destroys the notion of the expected mother-son relationship. In these cases, the female character appears to be one trope, but she strays farther and farther from that initial expectation until she develops into a new multidimensional character altogether. Elsewhere in Murakami's writing, the woman

on the phone in *Wind-Up Bird* opens the story novel with an intense and sexually charged seduction scene, advancing upon Okada even when he tries to speak up in the conversation. The power behind her voice lingers in Toru's mind throughout the novel, and he finds himself comparing her to the soft-spoken Kumiko, thus presenting to the reader the two contrasting tropes of a confident and sexually open new woman and a quiet, distant, and closed off wife. The plot twist reveals that the woman on the phone and Kumiko are the same person, and both Okada and the readers are forced to reconcile the fact that a woman contains multitudes beyond the initial reinforced impression. Thus, Kumiko is an example of Z: someone in between two expectations. Both tropes are well established and predictable when they stand on their own, but having them both exist within the same female character allows Murakami not only to play with the differences between the familiar and unfamiliar, but also the space between two familiars, which subsequently becomes an area unfamiliar. So, what makes these characters compelling is exactly the contrast between trope and reality, between what was proposed and what was concluded, between what was familiar and expected and what is unfamiliar and unexpected. At the very least, the depth and variance in personality and portrayal that Murakami, as an author, grants to these women speaks to a level of attention and care beyond simply creating female characters for the sake of having them. If nothing else, Murakami treats these characters as he does any other aspect of his writing; they are elements he can use to subvert readers' expectations, playing with the familiar trope and disrupting it with either an unfamiliar, newer version of that trope or the combination of another trope altogether, even if the latter trope was supposed to be the antithesis of the former.

The same evasive middling can be applied to a general overview of Murakami's female characters. To describe Murakami's writing of women as either 'good' or 'bad' would be

reductive because once again, the answer lies somewhere in the frustrating middle ground, albeit perhaps unintentionally on Murakami's part. In a very broad sense, Murakami's female characters lie between the boundaries of 'sexual object,' which would be a character with little to no purpose besides gratuitous sex scenes, and 'fully-fleshed character,' in which the character has her own fully developed storyline that, even if engaged in sexuality, does not do so for the male gaze or gratification. It can be argued that on their own, both of these boundaries can be considered the familiar, at least from the perspective of a female reader. The sexual object is familiar because it so commonplace to see women reduced to their bodies in media, but the powerful, fully-fleshed character is also familiar because that is the representation to reality, in which women exist with their own complex desires and motivations outside of the men in their lives. From the male perspective, however, the sexual object may be the familiar while the fully-fleshed character is the unfamiliar. Regardless of which is which, Murakami's writing incorporates the both, once again creating a confusing subversive space. If the sexual object view is familiar and the fully-fleshed character unfamiliar, then the disorientation comes from the fusion of both in a single character. If both the fully-fleshed character and the sexual object are familiar, then the new perspective comes from the unexplored space in between.

So, why do I read Murakami? Even Mieko Kawakami struggles with this question; in the interview, she voices a concern I have faced in my everyday life: "It's common for my female friends to say to me, 'If you love Haruki Murakami's work so much, how do you justify his portrayal of women?'" (Murakami). In short, Murakami's books are defined by his female characters. His stories would never work in their absence: they are absolutely vital to every single one of his narratives. It is this vitality that allows the female characters to be so unique, so independent, and so powerful. They are granted agency in so many ways, but time after time, the

way they are most failed in agency is in their sexuality and their own bodies. He consistently fails to write a nonsexualized female character, but at the same time he succeeds in creating rounded ones with personality, drive, flaws, and a refreshing mix of both heroism and villainy. This is all to reiterate the idea that Murakami, intentionally or not, writes female characters with the same confusing, intriguing complexity that he does with any other writing elements. He takes what is expected of women (or more appropriately, women in literature) and twists it around by both greatly exaggerating their sexuality and intensely fleshing out their personalities into fully fledged enactors of the narrative. He does not choose only sexualization or only characterization, he pursues both simultaneously, once again emphasizing this stylistic exercise of subversion; a constant game between the familiar and the unfamiliar. For all its flaws, to look for a concrete answer on whether the writing is bad or good would only leave one grasping at the vague space in the middle, where all of Murakami's writing seems to exist, and that act of grasping is what keeps me reading.

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