

Unconscious motifs in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*

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ABSTRACT:

This research on Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* attempts to explore how recurring images like music, water, silence, and death can articulate a complex narrative of the unconscious. Psychoanalytic theories provide the grounding where Freud suggests repression and dream work as central mechanisms of psychic life, and Jung suggests individuation within the encounter between ego and shadow. Each motif in Murakami's novels performs a precise symbolic function within the theoretical frame. Music functions as a sound trigger for the memories that are deep inside. Water and rainfall mirror the turbulence of the suppressed feelings, and the silence reveals loneliness and the ache of absence which words cannot express. Death does not give an ending, they lingers in the air and shapes the living. Naoko, the central character deeply hurts Toru's sense of self. Through these symbols, Murakami reveals the struggles that the characters face. This exploration shows how he threads the unconscious elements into the novel which creates an inward and emotional journey transforming personal grief into a deeply felt experience.

KEYWORDS: Unconscious, Motifs, Psychoanalysis

Haruki Murakami is arguably one of the most experimental and internationally acclaimed Japanese novelists of contemporary literature, known for blending psychological depth with surreal motifs that quietly disturb and deeply move. Toru Watanabe, the narrator, feels overwhelmed when the song *Norwegian Wood* by the Beatles starts playing through the cabin speakers when the aeroplane lands on the runway. It is just a comforting song but Toru feels like stepping on the trapdoor. The music floods his thoughts dragging him back into the past that he has not touched in years. Memories of his loved ones, their faces, voices he lost,

ache, longing, and everything that disturbs him rushes at once. This is how memory works in Murakami's world; it is quiet and triggers at the least expected moment. This is the soul of *Norwegian Wood*. It does not say out loud but it whispers through music and silence, through the rain on a porthole or the echo of a voice that no longer exists. Murakami's motifs like songs, water, and stillness are not just poetic details. They are the pressure points that trigger the characters' inner selves to fall short. Through the lens of Jung and Freud, this research will explore how these symbols carry the weight of loss, shame, desire, and memory from the shadows of the unconscious into the fragile light of awareness. Sometimes it brings light into their lives, other times it breaks them.

From the soft strains of music that plays in the aeroplane cabin to Reiko's gentle guitar strumming in the sanatorium, music becomes the most direct line into the unconscious in Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*. The tune of Norwegian Wood returns again and again like a haunting refrain that draws emotional stimuli. Toru says, "The tune was 'Norwegian Wood.' And as I listened to it, I felt as if I were going to cry. I hadn't heard that song in years. . . Music like that would always send me back into myself, and, every time, it seemed to tighten some dark knot deep inside me" (5). Toru's unspoken grief and his buried self awakens while listening to such music, his emotional core resurfaces and haunts him through music. In another situation, Naoko calls it as deep wood of loneliness. She says, "That song can make me feel so sad. . . I imagine myself wandering in a deep wood. I'm all alone and it's cold and dark, and nobody comes to save me" (143). This is not just background music; it acts as a portal to the unconscious. Sigmund Freud, in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, calls it as "condensation", the layering of emotion and memory into a single symbolic moment. He writes, "Through the repeated occurrence of this process, the intensity of an entire train of thought may ultimately be concentrated in a single conceptual unit. This is the fact of

compression or condensation. . . It is condensation that is mainly responsible for the strange impression produced by dreams” (608). Murakami treats music like a conscious dream that one can carry the weight for years. Music in *Norwegian Wood* functions as a psychic trigger for Toru and Naoko, proving the song is less a memory than a living landscape of emotion. Freud’s idea of “condensation” explains this as music compresses entire histories of loss into a single, overwhelming moment. Thus, Murakami lets music to act as a conscious dream, ushering the unconscious into daylight and blinding the characters into their unhealed past.

In *Norwegian Wood*, it rains whenever the feelings crest. Early in the novel, a soft rain washes away Toru’s memory and for Naoko, long baths calms her down. But after her death, water turns heavy and relentless. The waves lands him in a new place after wandering around in grief. He says, “The memories would slam against me like the waves of an incoming tide, sweeping my body along to some strange new place” (360). Here, water becomes a reflection of what cannot be said out loud. He suffers from the loss of Naoko. Carl Jung writes in *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, “water is the commonest symbol for the unconscious”, and “moving water especially” represents the emotional depths of the psyche (40). Murakami symbolises water to show the readers that the characters are drowning in grief, memory, and longing. Here, water becomes a mirror for the unspoken sorrow. As Jung denotes, moving water symbolises the unconscious and in Murakami’s world it carries Toru’s pain, memory and longing to the surface.

Silence plays a major role in the novel, it is not just the absence of sound, it is the weight of everything that is left unsaid. Between Toru and Naoko, silence becomes a language of its own which is charged with grief, fragility and emotional strain. Toru says, “We could face each other over coffee cups in total silence” (34). Silence here shows Naoko’s slow withdrawal, it is not the kind of silence that soothes. Naoko pulls back from

language, from connection and heartbreakingly from herself. Jung in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* writes, “the unconscious is dangerous only when our conscious attitude toward it becomes hopelessly false” (21). Toru tries to reach her, to bridge the silence with patience and presence but his silence makes it more distant. Here silence is not neutral, it is alive, and makes the situation unbearable. It marks the space where language breaks down and the psyche starts to unravel. Silence in *Norwegian Wood* acts as both presence and pressure. The feelings of guilt, grief, and longing are not expressed and it becomes a haunting medium through which trauma lingers. As Jung suggests, ignoring the unconscious leads to danger, and in Murakami’s novel this danger flows in quietly. For Naoko, silence signals retreat but for Toru it becomes the limit of love and understanding.

Death in Murakami’s world is not as some dramatic thunderclap; it is quieter, intimate and more enduring. It lingers like a scent in the air, or a song that does not stop playing in one’s head. Toru says, “Death exists, not as the opposite but as a part of life” (30). He does not sound philosophical but he is trying to survive after losing his loved one, after realising that she has disappeared from his life; she is woven into his days in a way that hurts him and also comforts him. He realises that the world does not fall apart. It keeps going. He says, “Naoko was a mound of white ash, and Midori was a living, breathing human being” (360). The acceptance reduces his weight and the other one is right in front of him, full of messy, vibrant life. And he has to stand between them by holding grief in one hand and love in the other. Freud in *Mourning and Melancholia* writes that, “the world becomes poor and empty” because the lost object is still psychically alive inside the mourner (224). Murakami weaves it precisely that maybe she is gone, but she continues to live within Toru, shaping how he moves through a world that now feels half full. In Murakami’s world, mourning is not just about letting go, it is about learning to live with absence.

In *Norwegian Wood*, Murakami ripples the emotions beneath the surface; his motifs are like quiet messengers from the unconscious. Music carries the scent of memory, rain and water rise up when feelings become too much to contain, silence holds the pain that words cannot express, and death hovers quietly inside the ordinary. These are not just beautiful symbols, but are to be felt by the reader. Murakami uses these symbols to show that the self is not solid, it is more like the weather. Memory comes and goes like a breeze, grief arrives in waves and symbols can unravel years of forgetting. These motifs like music, water, silence and death become more than just narrative devices, they are the emotional weather systems of Murakami's world. Through Freud's and Jung's psychoanalytic lens, the researcher finds that they speak what the characters cannot and the longing does not fade. *Norwegian Wood* reminds the readers that the unconscious is something that is near, immediate, lived in the tremble of a note, the hush of a room, and the ache of an ordinary day. In the end, healing does not come from grand revelations, but from staying with the storm, letting it rain, letting it echo, and letting it change oneself.

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