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Nature, Ethics, and Sustainability: An Ecocritical Reading of Haruki Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase* and *Kafka on the Shore*

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Abstract-- This paper investigates the intersections of nature, ethics, and sustainability in select novels of Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami through an ecocritical lens. While Murakami's fiction is predominantly examined for its psychological, existential, and postmodern dimensions, comparatively little scholarship foregrounds his representation of the environment or the ethical implications of human-nonhuman relations. Addressing this gap, the study analyzes how Murakami constructs natural spaces, animal presences, and ecological motifs to critique Japan's late-capitalist consumerism, urban alienation, and the erosion of meaningful interspecies relationships. Drawing on two major novels—*A Wild Sheep Chase* and *Kafka on the Shore*—the paper illustrates how Murakami's narrative worlds articulate alternative ecological imaginaries that challenge anthropocentric hierarchies and suggest sustainable modes of coexistence. Methodologically, the study employs ecocritical theories from the environmental humanities alongside posthuman and ethical frameworks to assess the social, cultural, and ecological textures within these texts. The findings posit that Murakami's fictions perform a subtle yet significant ecological critique that reframes sustainability not merely as environmental management, but as an ethical practice rooted in reciprocity, care, and balance between the human and the nonhuman world.

Keywords-- sustainability, ecocriticism, consumerism, urban alienation, anthropocentric hierarchies, posthumanism

The accelerating ecological crisis of the twenty-first century has led scholars to revisit literary texts through environmental perspectives, with greater attention to the relationship between culture, ethics, and the nonhuman world. Professor Pramod K Nayar in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory* asserts that our modern world is “increasingly lost to pollution, contamination and industry sponsored bio-disaster. It is now a truism to say that mankind is efficiently committing ecocide, making the planet inhospitable for life of any kind”. (241). Within this context, the works of Haruki Murakami offer a significant yet relatively underexplored area of study. Although Murakami's fiction has been widely discussed for its surreal elements, psychological depth, and existential concerns, its engagement with ecological questions and human-nonhuman relations has received less sustained critical attention.

However, his narratives consistently foreground landscapes, animals, and liminal spaces that challenge clear distinctions between the human and the nonhuman.

Murakami's fictional settings are often urban spaces marked by alienation, consumerism, and a sense of existential disconnection. At the same time, these environments are repeatedly interrupted by encounters with nature - such as wells, forests, cats, and other nonhuman presences - that open up alternative ways of understanding reality. These elements are not merely symbolic; rather, they function as sites where ethical questions about coexistence, agency, and relationality emerge. Through such encounters, Murakami's texts expose the limitations of human-centered thinking and invite a reconsideration of the relationship between humans and the natural world.

This paper argues that Murakami's novels present an implicit ecological critique of late-capitalist modernity, where sustainability is understood not only in environmental terms but also as an ethical concern. By examining *A Wild Sheep Chase* and *Kafka on the Shore*, the study shows how Murakami represents nature as an active and meaningful presence rather than a passive background. In doing so, his fiction challenges anthropocentric assumptions and suggests more balanced and interconnected ways of living, grounded in coexistence, care, and mutual dependence between human and nonhuman life. Peter Barry aptly opines that for the ecocritics ‘nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironised as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it.’ (Beginning Theory 251)

From an ecological perspective, *A Wild Sheep Chase* by Haruki Murakami can be read as a subtle yet incisive critique of anthropocentrism, late-capitalist consumerism, and the human impulse to dominate and instrumentalize the nonhuman world. Although the novel is often interpreted through existential or postmodern frameworks, its narrative structure and symbolic economy also foreground questions central to ecocriticism: nonhuman agency, environmental estrangement, and the ethical limits of human control.



At the centre of the novel lies the enigmatic sheep, distinguished by 'a star-shaped birth-mark'(A Wild Sheep Chase 112) on its back, which functions as more than a symbolic device. The sheep resists reduction to a mere allegory and instead emerges as an agentic nonhuman presence that disrupts human systems of knowledge and power. In this sense, the sheep challenges anthropocentric assumptions that position humans as the primary agents of meaning and control. Its elusiveness and refusal to be captured signify a form of ecological resistance, suggesting that nature cannot be fully subsumed within capitalist or rational frameworks.

The novel's critique of late-capitalist modernity is closely tied to this representation of the nonhuman. The corporate figure known as the Boss attempts to harness the sheep's power for political and economic domination, thereby exemplifying the commodification of nature. The sheep becomes a resource to be exploited, mirroring real-world practices of environmental extraction and control. However, the failure to fully control the sheep underscores the instability of such systems. The narrator's realization that he has been chasing something that didn't want to be caught reflects the futility of treating the nonhuman world as an object of possession. This dynamic resonates with ecocritical arguments that critique the logic of exploitation embedded in capitalist modernity.

Spatially, the novel enacts a movement from urban to rural environments, which carries significant ecological implications. The protagonist begins in a detached, consumer-driven Tokyo, a space characterized by routine, alienation, and disconnection from the natural world. His journey to Hokkaido, by contrast, represents an encounter with a more remote and less mediated landscape. Kevin Gladding in his thesis titled *Negotiating place: Multiscapes And Negotiation in Haruki Murakami's Norwegian Wood* contends that cityscapes offers little but claustrophobia, death, decay and suffering whereas landscape that is remote from cityscapes offers beauty and life.(4)However, this transition does not result in a romanticized return to nature. Instead, the rural environment is depicted as uncanny, ambiguous, and resistant to human comprehension. This aligns with what Timothy Morton terms "dark ecology," where nature is not idealized but understood as complex, unsettling, and entangled with human existence.

Furthermore, the novel complicates the boundary between human and nonhuman through the phenomenon of possession associated with the sheep. Human characters who come into contact with the sheep are overtaken by its will, blurring distinctions between subject and object, human and animal. This dissolution of boundaries reflects a posthumanist ecological vision in which identity is not fixed but relational and permeable.

The human subject is no longer autonomous but is instead embedded within a network of forces that include nonhuman agents.

The figure of the Sheep Professor also contributes to the ecological dimension of the text. His obsessive study of sheep reflects a scientific impulse to classify and control the natural world. Yet, his eventual marginalization suggests the limits of such knowledge systems when confronted with nonhuman agency that exceeds rational explanation. This critique of epistemological mastery further reinforces the novel's challenge to anthropocentric thinking.

Ultimately, *A Wild Sheep Chase* reconfigures sustainability as an ethical rather than purely environmental issue. It suggests that ecological balance cannot be achieved through domination or control but requires an acknowledgment of nonhuman agency and a reorientation of human desire. The novel does not offer a clear resolution; instead, it leaves readers with a sense of ambiguity that mirrors the complexity of ecological relations. In doing so, Murakami's text invites a reconsideration of the human place within a broader ecological network, emphasizing coexistence, restraint, and ethical responsibility toward the nonhuman world.

Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* provides a compelling case for such an ecocritical reading. Throughout the novel, Murakami portrays nature not merely as a backdrop, but as a living, responsive force - a site of healing, revelation, and transformation. The novel begins with a fifteen-year-old Kafka Tamura, who is preparing to run away from home, sits in his father's study and talks with a crow. The crow advises him to be tough and strong. The name Kafka, as the character points out, is the Czech word for crow. So the crow can be seen as the alter-ego of the protagonist Kafka Tamura. It helps the introverted Kafka to verbalize his thoughts. So crow is not only an internal voice for Kafka but also acts as a tool to help him communicate more complex ideas. Kafka's "boy named Crow" serves as a mysterious guiding force - part internal voice, part spiritual or metaphysical presence. From an ecocritical viewpoint, Crow can be read as a personification of nature or the nonhuman world having agency in the narrative. This challenges anthropocentric worldviews and aligns with ecocriticism's focus on decentralizing the human subject. In Murakami's novels we find man, who is capable of making conversation with cats, dogs and other natural objects like stones, is facing difficulty when he talks with other human beings.

Murakami in this novel, through his braided narrative, suggests that there is always a connection between human beings and the outer natural world. Post war culture and environmental disaster are also predominant themes in *Kafka on the Shore*.



The novel shows Japan in the year 1944 where a strange incident had taken place at the Rice Bowl Hill. Sixteen school children and a school teacher witnessed an unidentified foreign object in the form of silver lightning in the sky that made all the children fall to the ground unconscious. The novelist here gives a reference to the infamous nuclear bombing that took place in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where the inhabitants of those towns witnessed the same silver lightning in the sky when the bomb was dropped to ground.

But I saw it clearly, and so did the sixteen children in my class. All of us thought it had to be a B-29. We'd all seen many formations of B-29s, and those are the only kind of planes that could possibly fly that high. (Kafka on the Shore 16)

The students and teacher were moving to that particular place to gather mushrooms and edible plants as there was a strict rationing system in the school and most of them were hungry all the time.

“The children were encouraged to hunt for food wherever they could find it. The country was at war, after all, and food took priority over studying.” (17)

Haruki Murakami through these above lines suggests that food scarcity is one of the results of war. We, the human beings through our scientific inventions and nuclear weapons, can only do harm to nature but nature is benevolent and nourishes us in our bad times by giving us food and shelter. The characters of this novel are also affected by the war and post-traumatic stress. Rini Maria in her book named *A Critical Study of the Psychology of Magical Realism in Haruki Murakami's A Wild Sheep Chase and Kafka On the Shore* opines that the character of Nakata is seen as an outsider in his society. Nakata's everyday life is a mere representation of the fragmented life that most people have led during the war.

Kafka, the son of renowned sculptor Koichi Tamura, flees his home to escape a modern echo of the Oedipal curse and to search for his absent mother and sister. His journey into the subconscious, which may involve patricide and incestuous encounters with figures like Miss Saeki and Sakura, is paralleled by his movement through natural landscapes - particularly the forest—which emerge not only as physical settings but as healing and transformative spaces. The forest plays a crucial role in Kafka's liberation, offering a sanctuary that helps restore his fragmented identity. From an ecocritical viewpoint, the forest represents more than scenery; it becomes an active agent in Kafka's psychological and spiritual healing. This resonates with the Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku* (forest bathing), where immersion in natural surroundings is seen as profoundly therapeutic.

Murakami subtly evokes this tradition, portraying nature not as a passive backdrop, but as a vital force capable of soothing trauma and guiding individuals toward self-realization. The novel thus reimagines human-nature relationships through a lens of interdependence, spiritual ecology, and the restorative power of the wild.

Kafka Tamura's retreat into the forest cabin toward the end of *Kafka on the Shore* is not merely a physical escape from human authority but a profound ecological journey into a space where the boundaries between the self and the nonhuman world dissolve. From an ecocritical perspective, the forest represents more than a mythic or symbolic landscape - it becomes a living, sentient realm, embodying what might be called an “ecological unconscious.” It is within this wild, undisturbed environment that Kafka begins to confront the existential weight of trauma, guilt, and the fragmented pieces of his identity. As Matthew Carl Strecher observes, Murakami's characters often access alternate worlds when overwhelmed by psychological rupture - and in Kafka's case, it is the forest, rich with ancient rhythms and nonhuman presence, that offers this alternate space. (*The Forbidden Worlds of Haruki Murakami* 50)

Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* describes the wild, untameable and fierce qualities of nature at the same time nature's benevolent aspects are also shown in the novel. Nature also becomes weird and bizarre when we see fishes and leeches raining down from the sky, unnatural lightning and thundering incessantly strike the city and the stones changing its colour and weight. The raining of fish and leeches suggests disturbances in natural and cosmic order. But ultimately nature is kind and sympathetic to man and gives solace to man. In Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* the central characters move towards nature when they confront existential crises. Characters like Kafka and Nakata are marginalized from society but find deeper connection in nature than in human systems. Their stories emphasize that modern detachment from nature leads to alienation, a core ecocritical concern.

This study has demonstrated that the fiction of Haruki Murakami, particularly in *A Wild Sheep Chase* and *Kafka on the Shore*, offers a nuanced and philosophically resonant engagement with questions of nature, ethics, and sustainability. Far from functioning as a passive backdrop, the nonhuman world in these texts emerges as an active, agentic presence that both challenges and reconfigures human subjectivity. Murakami's landscapes - whether the remote terrains of Hokkaido or the liminal forests of Shikoku - operate as sites where the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman become permeable, thereby unsettling anthropocentric assumptions.



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