

Midori from Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*: Exploring themes of Acceptance and Healing

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Abstract

Norwegian Wood was published in 1987 and was translated into English by Jay Rubin. It is a coming-of-age story set against the backdrop of political and cultural turbulence in post-war Japan. With its evocative prose and well-developed characters, exploring universal themes that shape human experience, the novel proves to be a timeless piece of literature. This paper explores the themes of healing and acceptance in Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* through a detailed examination of the depiction of Midori. The paper delves into Midori's complex character, her resilience, and her pursuit of love, highlighting how she acts as a catalyst in Toru's emotional growth. It examines how Midori's friendship and love aid Toru in overcoming his emotional traumas and moving on from the past. Overall, the paper provides an insightful analysis of the transformative power of love and acceptance, as depicted in the novel.

Keywords: Trauma, Love, Grief, Acceptance, Healing

Introduction

Haruki Murakami is an award-winning Japanese writer and translator whose work has been translated into over forty languages and is acclaimed worldwide. Murakami's "*Norwegian Wood*" published in 1987 became an instant success and his best-selling title throughout the world. The novel's universal themes of 'love, loss, and identity' made it a popularly cherished work of literature worldwide. The novel is set in post-World War Japan in the 1960s, a time of great political and social turbulence. The story is narrated by a thirty-seven-year-old protagonist, Toru Watanabe, who reminisces about his childhood and college days. Central to the narrative is the exploration of love and grief with Toru's introspection and existential angst reflecting the societal disillusionment in post-war Japan. Toru reflects on the bond and memories shared between his childhood best friend Kizuki and Kizuki's girlfriend Naoko until Kizuki's unexpected suicide which leaves both Toru and Naoko gravely affected. When Toru moves to Tokyo for college, he reconnects with Naoko, and they bond over shared grief. Their friendship develops into a brief romantic relationship which proves to be more confusing and mentally agonizing for both of them. Later, due to her deteriorating mental health, Naoko moves to a

sanatorium, thus leaving Toru dejected and confused. In college, Toru befriends another girl called Midori Kobayashi, who has an outgoing and quirky personality. Toru and Midori develop a strong emotional bond, providing each other comfort and intimacy. Toru finds himself in a dilemma of choosing between his past and future, that is, whether to commit to his relationship with Midori or wait for Naoko's highly unlikely recovery. Toru pendulates between his feelings for Midori and Naoko, however, Naoko's unfortunate suicide towards the end of the novel brings an end to his dilemma.

The novel focuses on Toru's emotional growth and journey concerning his romantic relationships with Naoko and Midori, who are antithetical to each other. The three main characters of the novel, Toru, Naoko, and Midori are put through intense grief and trauma, each grappling with their demons and seeking love and solace. Murakami has used the character of Midori to explore the transformative power of love and the human ability to heal amidst adversity and uncertainty. She serves as a symbol of acceptance and healing throughout the story, embodying hope and endurance. Through her authenticity, Midori encourages Toru to confront his insecurities and embrace his true self.

Midori: A Complex Portrait

Toru befriends Midori Kobayashi during his drama class and gets captivated by her eccentric personality from the outset. Midori comes across as a multifaceted character, embodying strength and vulnerability, which makes her stand in stark contrast to Toru's other love interest, Naoko. Outspoken and rebellious, Midori captivates the reader with her candor and quirky demeanor. Despite her outward confidence, Midori had her own share of trauma, which was marked by grief and emotional upheaval. Through her interactions with Toru, we witness glimpses of Midori's inner turmoil, underscoring the complexities of her character. She helps to run her family's shop, the Kobayashi Bookstore and tells Toru that her father abandoned her and her sister after their mother died from a brain tumor and had been living in Uruguay. Later, however, Toru came to know that Midori's father, Mr. Kobayashi, was actually in a local hospital, dying of the same ailment that took her mother's life. We also get to know that Midori harbors a resentment towards her parents since early childhood. She resents them for their inadequate parenting, including the decision to enroll her in an expensive private school where she felt alienated and inferior to her peers, as well as their failure to demonstrate affection and display emotional availability, ultimately resulting in a strained parent-child relationship. Midori's complicated relationship with her parents leaves an emotional void in her life which she describes as:

"Things were pretty complicated in this house. But I always thought, I mean, they're my mother and father, of course, I'd be sad if they died or I never saw them again. But it didn't happen that way. I didn't feel anything. Not sad, not lonely. But I'm not the only one to blame," Midori continued. "It's true I have a cold streak... But if they ...my father and mother... had loved me a little more, I would have been able to feel more, to feel real sadness, for example"(Murakami 92).

A symbol of Hope and Resilience

Growing up in a dysfunctional household and enduring emotional scars during one's formative years, one might anticipate a life characterized by seclusion and detachment. Contrarily, this experience lends Midori's pursuit of love a greater sense of determination and resilience. She tells Toru how she has always wanted to be loved by her parents, "I was always hungry for love just once, I wanted to know what it was like to get my fill of it - to be fed so much love I couldn't take any more"(Murakami99). Growing up without affection and encouragement from her parents made Midori's quest for love only stronger. We get a strong glimpse of her romantic aspirations when she tells Toru that she is looking for someone who would "love her unconditionally 365 days a year". Midori's resilience and straightforward attitude demonstrate her ability to confront her past and embrace her true self. Unlike her peers who lived carefree adolescent lives, Midori's circumstances compelled her to assume the responsibilities of adulthood. Her selfless act of caring for her ailing father, who had failed to provide her with warmth and affection as a parent, exemplifies her integrity and emotional strength. Despite the suffering and pains she is put through, she extends empathy and support to those around her, offering a listening ear and a shoulder to lean on.

Midori's unapologetic embrace of her imperfections and vulnerabilities underscores the importance of accepting oneself in order to heal. She openly shares humorous anecdotes about her traumatic experiences without feeling embarrassed by them. Despite her tumultuous past and uncertain future, Midori refuses to be defined by her circumstances, choosing to confront life with courage and resilience. In doing so, she embodies the transformative power of acceptance, paving the way for her healing and growth.

Midori: a catalyst in Toru's emotional growth and healing

Interestingly, the name Midori means "green" in Japanese which symbolizes new beginnings, growth, renewal, and abundance. In Norwegian Wood, Midori's character signifies new beginnings for Toru, guiding him towards a journey of emotional growth and healing. Midori acts as a light, giving direction to Toru, whose mind is befuddled by his complicated relationship with Naoko (Cruz,2019).

Midori's introduction into Toru's life marks a crucial moment in his emotional trajectory. As Toru grapples with the loss of his close friend Kizuki and the emotional distance of Naoko by engaging in casual sex, alcoholism and solitude, Midori emerges as an invigorating presence, offering him companionship and understanding. Her vibrant personality and candidness serve as stark contrasts to Toru's internal struggles, injecting warmth and vitality into his otherwise somber existence.

Matthew Strecher, in his book 'Dances with Sheep, describes Midori as "everything that Naoko is not: she is talkative, outgoing, cheerful and sexually available"(Strecher 100). Midori's

character in the novel stands for the future whereas Naoko embodies the past. Midori's role as a healing agent is portrayed through her ability to provide Toru with a sense of acceptance and belonging. Unlike Naoko, who serves as a medium of melancholy and unrequited love in Toru's life, Midori evokes the possibility of a happy and stable future. Midori's (and her sister's) decision to sell her father's old failing bookshop and move to a new place to start afresh reverberates her resolution of moving on towards a better future, "we're finally getting used to it...this is the way we should have been living all along" (Murakami 329). Whether it be indulging in her love for books and drama, sharing moments of intimacy with Toru, or simply enjoying the small pleasures of life, Midori's resilience shines through in her ability to find moments of joy amidst the darkness. Observing Midori's life, with its highs and lows, Toru learns the significance of letting go of the painful memories of the past and living in the present. Toru, whose only coping mechanism is self-isolation and escape, is forced to confront his feelings when Midori forces him to choose between past and present. Although she struggles to gain his full attention, Midori boldly confesses her love and asks for a serious commitment.

"Let me just tell you this, Watanabe, I am a real, live girl, with real, live blood gushing through my veins...I love you...If you don't take me, I'll end up going somewhere else." (Murakami 347). She warns him, "But when you take me, you only take me" (347), asking Toru to consider the possibility of a future together. Thus, despite his flaws, Midori accepts Toru wholeheartedly, offering him unconditional love and validation which he desperately seeks.

Throughout the novel, Midori's emotional transparency serves as a source of comfort for Toru. Midori's role as a harbinger of love and healing becomes more evident when Toru admits to himself that he loves Midori (Murakami 352). In a letter to Reiko, Toru describes his bond with Midori as "an irresistible power bound to sweep him into the future, a wholly different emotion which is living, breathing and shaking him to the roots of his being"(Murakami 353). His attachment to Midori is not compelled but rather arises naturally from a profound emotional bond that exists between them. The novel ends with Toru declaring his love for Midori on the phone, asking for a chance "to begin everything from the beginning" (Murakami 386). Hence, the vague ending of the novel indicates that Watanabe has come to terms with Naoko's passing and has chosen to "start anew" with Midori.

Conclusion

"You know how they've got these chocolate assortments, and you like some but you don't like others? And you eat up all the ones you like, and the only ones left are the ones you don't like so much? I always think about that when something painful comes up. 'Now I just have to polish these off, and everything'll be OK.' Life is a box of chocolates."

- Midori Kobayashi (331)

In *Norwegian Wood*, Haruki Murakami masterfully weaves a narrative that explores the themes of acceptance and healing through the character of Midori. Midori's role as a healing agent is integral to Toru's journey towards emotional recovery and self-acceptance. Midori's companionship serves as a refuge for Toru where he finds emotional intimacy and support. Through her encouragement and unwavering support, Toru gradually learns to confront his

suppressed emotions and move on from the trauma of his past. Midori's frankness and vulnerability in expressing her fears and desires pave the way for a deeper understanding between her and Toru, ultimately forging a path of healing and self-exploration for both of them.

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