

***Suicide, Alienation, and Sexuality as Radical Actions in  
Haruki Murakami's Norwegian Wood: A Study of Slavoj Žižek's Subjectivity***

Sulistyaningtyas, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2018  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

As one of the most outstanding Japanese authors, Haruki Murakami always comes up with unique ideas of surrealistic stories. Yet, his only realistic novel, *Norwegian Wood* (2000), is also a masterpiece. Translated from the original version entitled *Noruwei no Mori* (1987), this novel tells about a complicated story rooted from the death of the beloved one. This research aims to investigate the subjectivity of the main characters: Kizuki, Naoko, and Toru as they do certain radical actions to be free from their symbolic mechanism. Set in Tokyo during the late 1960s, the background shows the student movement which grew wider after the World War II to protest the government. Nevertheless, their ambition to be free from the structures that chained them do not always come true. Some of them left their symbolic mechanism to enter another one. In the end, the characters cannot be *the Other*; as long as they are still structured by a particular symbolic mechanism they would only be able to be *the other*.

Keywords: Alienation, Radical Action, Sexuality, Suicide, Subjectivity

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## Introduction

Haruki Murakami, one of the most outstanding Japanese authors in the world today, always comes up with remarkable ideas about the darkest side of human being. At the beginning of his authorship, compared to the other writers, his writing style could not be completely accepted by Bundan, the literary association system in Japan (Strecher, 2014). At that time, the credibility of Murakami as an author was not counted by the literary world in Japan. They even claimed that his writings could ruin their common literary tradition. Yet, the uniqueness he offered in his literary works was a sort of breakthrough in the contemporary Japan literature. After the sensational success of *Noruei no Mori (Norwegian Wood, 1987)* in Japan, the “Haruki Murakami Phenomenon” (*Haruki Murakami genshō*) reached a global scale (Wakatsuki in Strecher & Thomas, 2016, p. 3).

Murakami’s writing is easily accepted by the global society due to the universality of the contents. His strength to break the boundaries allowing the readers from different nationalities, religions, and cultural backgrounds to enjoy the works. The everyday cosmopolitanism he offers in his writings is a new Japaneseness that can be shared not only by the Japanese, but also the people in the global sphere (Wakatsuki in Strecher & Thomas, 2016). Though some critics mainly categorized Murakami’s works as “non-Japanese Japanese literature”, in fact, it presents the new perspective to seeing the culture (Kiryama in Strecher & Thomas, 2016, p. 106). Murakami might even be called as a storyteller who has a quite different way of transferring his idea other than Yasunari Kawabata or Kenzaburō Ōe.

One of the most welcome works of fictions by Murakami which is widely accepted is *Norwegian Wood*. The novel tells about the loss of the beloved one which is strongly related to the burgeoning sexuality and alienation of the main characters. The concept of dependence and independence are the main themes of the novel. To see this novel deeply, even each character in this novel apparently needs the others, either too much or too little (Dil in Strecher & Thomas, 2016). Moreover, this novel is also the true representation of Murakami’s ‘normal’ characters: the loners who isolate themselves from the society.

The plot narrates an intense relationship between Kizuki and Naoko, who were friends since childhood. Toru, Kizuki’s best friend, was often described as the one who connected this couple to the world outside of their relationship. With the background of the student struggle in the 1960s, the conflict arose when Kizuki committed an unexpected suicide, leaving an unanswered mystery to Toru and Naoko. This later gave an impact to Naoko who suffered mental illness and finally chose to be alienated herself from the society. Toru himself experienced a complex sexuality issue as an impact of Naoko’s attitude towards him.

Based on the explanation above, it can be seen that a problem exists dealing with dependence and independence in this novel in a certain range. The three main characters do particular radical actions in order to be free from the structures that chained them. Some of them left their symbolic mechanism and entered the others, while some others were successful to be absolute subjects. Thus, this research aims to investigate how the process of subjectivity in those main characters after they take a step to do the radical actions.

The problems of this research are (1) what are the radical actions done by the main characters of *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami to be free from their symbolic mechanism? (2) how is the process of subjectivity in the main characters of *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami?

The objectives of this research are (1) to explore difficult situations experienced by the characters in a fictional work as the representation of reality, (2) to redefine the subject from a structured one to be an absolute one, (3) to investigate the process of subject's establishment in reaching the goal to be free from a certain structure in the society.

The theoretical framework used in this research is Psychoanalytic Historic offered by Slavoj Žižek. This Slovenian philosopher redefines the subject by underlining that a subject might be able to be an absolute subject by doing a radical action, especially to solve the global capitalism issue (Robet, 2010). In reconstructing an absolute subject, Žižek adopted Lacanian concept of subject's establishment. In mirror phase, there are three dimensions which play an important role in subject's establishment, namely the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The shackles of symbolic mechanism lead the characters to have an intention to do radical actions. Later, there will be a revolt in the self of the subject which brings him or her to a condition of *ex-nihilo*. This condition can also be defined as a space of emptiness which is free from any ideology.

The radical action generally is seen negative as it tends to be destructive to the existing structures. In doing the radical action, there will be certain changes in the self of the subject. This process of subjectivity describes the changes from the structured subject to be an absolute subject (Žižek, 1993). Yet, not all subject can reach this goal after doing the radical action. Some of them just enter another symbolic mechanism so that they will never be free. These subjects will be *the others* who are structured by certain structures again (Žižek, 1989).

## **Analysis**

*Norwegian Wood* (1987) represents the concept of dependence and independence between a character and the others. Doi Takeo, a Japanese psychologist, defines this sort of dependence as *amae* (Dil in Strecher & Thomas, 2016). This *amae* is strongly related to the three main problems which lead the plot development: suicide, alienation, and sexuality. In this case, suicide is a form of reaching the real, alienation is a form of escape from the reality, while sexuality is a form of exploitation, growing up, and healing.

The core issue of this novel is the suicide incident by Kizuki which has done unexpectedly "without no indication, no suicide note, and no motive" (Murakami, 2000, p. 31). Kizuki's decision to end his life left a mystery for the people in his circle. In fact, Kizuki does not have any problems with his family nor his school; he is even in a good relationship with Naoko and Toru. With such background, the death of the 17 years old Kizuki becomes a question mark which remains unanswered until the end of the story.

Kizuki's spontaneous move which was done without any special purpose can be categorized as a radical action opposite to the symbolic mechanism in the society. Even though Japan is well known with the tradition of *hara-kiri*, yet this ritual is only done by *samurai* for their dignity (Varley, 2000). In the history of Japan, that tradition has been undertaken since the 12th century. With the setting of the novel in the 1960s, the tradition seems not relevant anymore in the contemporary environment. Thus, suicide seems to contradict the norm in the society.

Before committing the suicide, Kizuki asked Toru to do something other than their routine. One day in May, they did not attend a class and instead they went to a pool. Different from the common Kizuki who was not really serious, at that time Kizuki was so obsessed to win the game. When Kizuki said '*I don't want to lose today*', he already had the feeling that death would be his victory. It can be seen in this quote below:

*I had no special interest in my afternoon classes, so together we left school, ambled down the hill to a pool hall on the harbour, and played four games. When I won the first, easy-going game, he became serious and won the next three. This meant I paid, according to our custom. Kizuki didn't make a single joke as we played, which was most unusual. We smoked afterwards.*

*"Why so serious?" I asked.*

*"I didn't want to lose today," said Kizuki with a satisfied smile. (Murakami, 2000, p. 29)*

The death of Kizuki was a mystery for all of the people in his surrounding. To Toru, the death had robbed him from a part of his adolescence. When Toru was interviewed by a police, Toru also explained that no one knows the motif underlining Kizuki's suicide. This quote below shows that Kizuki had no indication of what he would do.

*Kizuki had left no suicide note, and had no motive that anyone could think of. Because I had been the last one to see him, I was called in for questioning by the police. I told the investigating officer that Kizuki had given no indication of what he was about to do, that he had been exactly the same as always. The policeman had obviously formed a poor impression of both Kizuki and me, as if it was perfectly natural for the kind of person who would skip classes and play pool to commit suicide. (Murakami, 2000, p. 30)*

The unexpected death of Kizuki left a significant impact on Naoko that led her to suffer a mental illness. In a dialog with Toru below, Naoko explained that the alienated world is haunted her. She underlines that it is quite hard for her to exist in the reality. The death of her loved one made her completely withdraw herself from the outside world which made her created her own world.

*"I'm scared I'll never get better again. I'll always stay twisted like this and grow old and waste away here. I get so chilled it's like I'm all frozen inside. It's horrible ... so cold..."*

*I put my arm around her and drew her close.  
“I feel like Kizuki is reaching out for me from the darkness,  
calling to me, ‘Hey, Naoko, we can't stay apart’. When I hear  
him saying that, I don't know what to do.” (Murakami, 2000,  
p. 170)*

When Naoko decided to stay in Ami Hostel, the sanatorium, she entered a real place in Kyoto. Yet, she also created the other world, the world “over there”. In Murakami’s writings, this sort of world frequently appears as the escape of the protagonist from the reality. Different from the real world (*kochiragawa*) which is a physical world, the land of the living, and the place for consciousness, the other world “over there” (*achiragawa*) is a metaphysical world, the land of the dead, and the place for unconsciousness (Strecher, 2014, p. 71-74). It can be seen in this quote below how the song *Norwegian Wood* could be the door to her alienated world.

*“That song can make me feel so sad,” said Naoko. “I don't know, I guess I imagine myself wandering in a deep wood. I'm all alone and it's cold and dark, and nobody comes to save me. That's why Reiko never plays it unless I request it.” (Murakami, 2000, p. 146)*

Naoko’s inability to accept the death of Kizuki led her to end up her life by hanging herself on a tree. In fact, Naoko had already lost her life instinct on the day Kizuki died. It was just a matter of time until she finally chose the death. Moreover, Naoko’s hallucination of Kizuki who was calling her from the dark made her think that suicide was the only solution. This decision is the second radical action she did after the death of Kizuki which eventually let her free from the symbolic mechanism.

What happened to Naoko had a significant impact on the personal life of Toru. After the death of Kizuki, Toru and Naoko often spent their time together, sharing the reminiscences of Kizuki. Soon, Toru was sexually attracted to Naoko. Yet, the sexual intercourse they did on Naoko’s 20th birthday turned into a complicated situation as Naoko revealed that she never did any sexual intercourse with Kizuki before. They both had actually tried, but Naoko failed to achieve genital stimulation. In this quote below, Toru asked Naoko why they had never done that. It was a mistake because Naoko started to get down mentally soon after that.

*“When everything had ended, I asked Naoko why she had never slept with Kizuki. This was a mistake. No sooner had I asked the question than she took her arms from me and started crying soundlessly again.” (Murakami, 2000, p. 54)*

For many times, Toru emphasized in his narration that he was not really sure how was his feeling to Naoko actually. Aside from that, his attitude to Naoko always showed an intensive care. He was even dependent on the touch of Naoko. Yet, because Naoko’s response could not always satisfy his need, he looked for an escape by sleeping with any other girls. Even worse, sometimes he switched with Nagasawa in the middle of the night when they do a one-night stand. This quote below showed Toru’s opinion on this:

*“Sleeping with girls that way is not all that much fun.”*

*“So why do you do it?”*

...

*“Because sometimes I have this tremendous desire to sleep with a girl.”*

*“If you're in love with someone, can't you manage one way or another with her?” Hatsumi asked after a few moments' thought.*

*“It's complicated.”* (Murakami, 2000, p. 274)

Later, Toru realized that doing a one-night stand with random girls was just a temporary escape. In fact, his only desire was the touch of Naoko. Even when he tried to do something sexually with Midori, a friend from the university who was in love with him, he thought about Naoko. This quote below shows the comparison between Naoko and the other anonymous girls in Toru's point of view:

*“I could make myself feel far happier just thinking about Naoko than sleeping with some stupid, anonymous girl. The sensation of Naoko's fingers bringing me to climax in a grassy field remained vivid inside me.”* (Murakami, 2000, p. 313)

Those radical actions explained above lead the characters to two different ends. If they are able to be completely free from their symbolic mechanism, they can be called as an absolute subject. Yet, if they are able to be free from their symbolic mechanism and at the same time enter the other structures, they are still not free. These people are still structured by the norms of the society.

Kizuki is one of the characters in *Norwegian Wood* who represents the figure of an absolute subject. At the time he committed suicide, he was completely free from any structures chained a living subject. Even in this quote below, Toru was envy to Kizuki who was brave enough to take an extensive move. In Toru's mind, Kizuki was not missing one thing leaving the world because this place is a sort of intersection of complication rooted from capitalism.

*“Hey, Kizuki, I thought, you're not missing a damn thing. This world is a piece of shit. The arseholes are getting good marks and helping to create a society in their own disgusting image.”* (Murakami, 2000, p. 65)

The second character who represents an absolute subject is Naoko. Different from Kizuki who wins the fight in the first place, Naoko has to enter another symbolic mechanism first before she completely be free. This quote below is a part of Toru's dialog with Naoko's friend, Reiko. He explained that from the very start, opposite to him, Naoko has actually chosen death over life. When the time has come, she just needs to hang herself on a rope in the dark wood to leave all the structures that chained her in the real world.

*“...Naoko was choosing death all along. But that's beside the point. I can't forgive myself. You tell me there's nothing I can do about a natural change in feelings, but my relationship*

*with Naoko was not that simple. If you stop and think about it, she and I were bound together at the border between life and death. It was like that for us from the start.”* (Murakami, 2000, p. 328)

Toru himself cannot be an absolute subject as long as he is still structured by the symbolic mechanism in the society. When he did some one-night stands as an escape from his sexual life with Naoko, he realized that it could not solve his problem. Later, he planned to build a normal relationship with Naoko. He even asked Naoko to leave the sanatorium for a permanent stay with him in Tokyo. It shows that the image of normal life was rooted in Toru's mind.

*“I'm thinking of getting out of the dorm when term ends and looking for a flat,” I said. “I've had it with dorm life. If I keep working part-time I can pretty much cover my expenses. How about coming to Tokyo to live with me, the way I suggested before?”* (Murakami, 2000, p. 315)

Apart from his plan to live a normal life with Naoko, Toru also has a responsibility for his whole life. This quote below shows what Toru's thought about Kizuki's decision to commit suicide. Instead of giving up on life like Kizuki, Toru chose to live his life the best way. When he said that he took the responsibility in life, he involuntarily followed the norms of the society. This shows that Toru cannot be an absolute subject.

*“Hey, there, Kizuki, I thought. Unlike you, I've chosen to live—and to live the best I know how. Sure, it was hard for you. What the hell, it's hard for me. Really hard. ... I'm not a teenager any more. I've got a sense of responsibility now. I'm not the same person I was when we used to hang out together. I'm 20 now. And I have to pay the price to go on living.”* (Murakami, 2000, p. 328)

## **Conclusions**

To conclude, *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami portrays some particular radical actions done by the three main characters. These radical actions are in sequence and each has a cause-effect relation. Kizuki committed suicide as a way to be free from the symbolic mechanism that structured him, which led him to be an absolute subject. Yet, the death of Kizuki gave an impact to Naoko's life, which followed by her alienation from the outside world. In the sanatorium, Naoko is still structured by another symbolic mechanism. When she finally decided to hang herself, she could be an absolute subject who was free from any structures. As the result of the abnormal life lived by Naoko, Toru seek for an escape by doing some sexual pleasures with some random girls. Later, he realized that he could not attain the essence of what he did. In the end, he determined that he would follow the structures in the normal life. That way, Toru could be constantly structured by the symbolic mechanism.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan/LPDP) which has sponsored this research. I am also grateful to those who has shared their knowledge in this research, especially to my lecturers at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia.

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**Contact email:** tyas.effendi@gmail.com