

*Anthropomorphic Imagery and Characterization in Haruki Murakami's Novel  
Kafka on the Shore*

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**Abstract**

The research paper traces the effect of employing anthropomorphic elements in Haruki Murakami's novel *Kafka on the Shore*. The delicate art of characterization when combined with anthropomorphism highlights the very nature and function of Murakami's animals. The article traces the function and effect of imagery, as a literary technique, in highlighting the characteristics of the various animal characters, encountered by the human characters, on their quest for the unknown. Imbued with recurring themes of "search for identity" and "postmodern strains", the novel stands as a testament to the social conventions that plagued the masses of Japan. The qualitative analysis puts forth the irony of ascribing identity to stray animals by the ones who themselves lack an identity and sense of self. The novel has been subjected to qualitative analysis from two perspectives: character portrayal and imagery, in terms of the animal characters of the novel. The specific tools adopted for scrutiny are a mix of rhetorical and narrative tools: Character Attributes, Types of Imagery (thermal, olfactory, tactile, auditory, gustatory, kinesthetic, visual), Point-of-View, Simile, Metaphor, Allusion, Hyperbole, Onomatopoeia.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, Haruki Murakami, Animals in Literature.

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## Introduction

‘Murakami's style is rarely less than seductive and I read *Kafka on the Shore* in one non-stop feeding frenzy’ (Mitchell, 2005) muses David Mitchell. *Kafka on the Shore*, in essence a bildungsroman, composed by Haruki Murakami traces the story of the protagonist, Kafka Tamura who, pitted in the midst of a looming prophecy, flees from home in search of an identity. A novel marked by parallel odysseys and perspectives, induces a sense of time paralysis, owing to its slow pace. Laura Miller, a writer for The New York Times comments, ‘Murakami is an aficionado of the drowsy interstices of everyday life, reality's cul-de-sacs, places so filled with the nothing that happens in them that they become uncanny...’ (Miller, 2005). In the mesh of reality, he creates instances of magic and time warps, that reflect the deepest desires of the subconscious of the characters. The most intriguing aspect of the novel stems from his art of anthropomorphism which is represented through the characters of the talking animals. Nakata, the decrepit old man can communicate with cats, who in turn help him trace his destiny. The most crucial aspect of Murakami's novel stem from internalized issues that need to be corrected. Patricia Welch states that these internalized issues are observed by the felines of the novel but no words of wisdom or solace are offered, instead Nakata is guided through his journey by the cats he chooses to communicate with. *Kafka on the Shore* is marked by dark dreams and the oscillating subconscious.

Sarah Stebbins, in her article *Anthropomorphism*, establishes that the attribution of mental states to nonhuman animals depend mostly on compulsive human behavior owing to constant interaction with various animals on a daily basis. She states that, in the literary sense, animals are viewed as sentient. Stebbins traces the cause of attributing mental states to animals as a result of anatomical capability on the part of the animal and the capacity of human beings to empathise based on physical expressions. Animals are similar because they exist in similar environments and behave in similar manner.

## The Animals of the Novel

Haruki Murakami employs cats, a dog and a crow as the animal characters in his novel *Kafka on the Shore*. The cats talk to Saturo Nakata and aid him in his journey through the novel. Kafka, the protagonist is observed to refer to ‘the boy named Crow’, for constant approval of his decisions. The talking cats provide an insight into the plot. The conversations that take place between Nakata the cats highlight the similarities between ordinary felines and human needs. The animals of the novel enact rather crucial roles. Bryan Walsh comments on Haruki Murakami's obsession with cats and says; ‘Cats are key to Murakami...Murakami himself is catlike: aloof and independent, fastidious yet dreamy. Cats are frequent characters in Murakami novels too--and the more cats, the better’ (Walsh, 2011).

## **Animal Characters Reflect the Human Characters**

### **1. Otsuka**

Otsuka appears to be a rather caring and concerned cat even though he is a stray cat. He appears to be concerned about the lost one-year-old tortoise shell cat Goma, because he knows that a domestic cat when lost in the outside world, will find it extremely hard to cope with her circumstances. He states, ‘...wouldn’t know the first thing about making herself in the world...’ (Murakami, p.52). Otsuka also seemed rather concerned for Nakata, who according to him was not dumb like he had been told all his life. He tells Nakata that the mere fact that he can talk to cats is proof of the fact that he is not dumb. However, he urges Nakata to look for the other half of his shadow instead of hunting lost cats. His concern for Nakata’s shadow is vital in proving that the cat is a rather caring and concerned one. He was curious about too about what kind of accident befell a man that made him rather peculiar and bestowed him with the ability to talk to felines. Otsuka is presented by Murakami as rather intelligent and as he converses with Nakata it becomes clear that his level of understanding and reasoning skills are much like an ordinary human’s. Otsuka aids in highlighting the similarities between cats and humans, creatures of habit. Despite being a cat, he understands the habits of humans and attempts to explain to Nakata how cats function on similar basic needs of sex, hunger and shelter.

He provides Nakata with the option of meeting him again, whenever he feels the need to, because he enjoyed their little chat. Therefore, he is not merely caring and concerned but he liked the idea of communicating with the peculiar old man. Otsuka appears to be more of a friend who provides pertinent information, to help Nakata find Goma. The conversation does not appear to be one between an animal or a human, but between two human beings. Apart from the rare instances, where the narrator describes Otsuka’s postures and movements and paw licking actions, Otsuka appears to be just another human being, while conversing with Nakata. Nakata’s constant contact with cats, highlight his ability to relate to the animals and consequently empathise with them and therefore attribute them with mental states, as stated by **Sarah Stebbins** in her article *Anthropomorphism*.

Otsuka resembles Hoshino to a great extent, since Hoshino too decides to help the old eccentric man, without any hesitation or clue about where the journey would eventually lead. Much like Otsuka, Hoshino offers valuable advice to the old man and convinces him to be proud of the fact that he stood out from the crowd. Otsuka offers him advice and urges him to seek out his shadow. Otsuka tells Nakata that he was a fine man and that he, thought him to be smart and intelligent. Similarly, Hoshino too tells Nakata that it was absolutely fine for him to not be able to read since he was the only one who could accomplish other tasks, like talking to the entrance stone and making sardines rain from the sky.

### **2. Kawamura**

Kawamura is described as the least ‘...brightest kitty in the litter...’ (Murakami, p. 83) by Mimi, the Siamese cat. Mimi narrates to Nakata, Kawamura’s accident when he was a kitten – ‘When he was still young a child ran into him with his bicycle, the poor thing, and he struck his head against some concrete. Ever since then he hasn’t

made much sense' (Murakami, p. 83). Therefore, Kawamura spoke in a rather strange manner with a limited vocabulary, using the same words to answer different queries – '...Nakata found Kawamura impossible to decipher...' (Murakami, p. 81). But overall none of his statements made any sense to Nakata, as he appeared to talk in riddles – 'What the cat said came out sounding more like riddles...' (Murakami, p.81).

Kawamura, in a way, represents the character of the 'not so bright' Nakata who was barely understood by fellow human beings. His childhood accident parallels Kawamura's past, since he too underwent the same plight at a young age and ever since, neither of them have been able to retain the ability to talk properly. Kawamura, with his eccentric and incomprehensible speech is what Nakata's speech is viewed as by fellow human beings ----- . Therefore, Nakata fails to comprehend the stray's linguistic approach, which is exactly what others face while communicating with Nakata, in the human world. Murakami highlights the similarities between Kawamura and Nakata, with the same childhood accident and resultant linguistic and mental shortcomings. However, despite the linguistic errors, Kawamura attempts to help Nakata in his search for Goma by sprouting eccentric statements every time he meets the old codger.

### **3. Mimi**

Mimi, the black Siamese cat is known in the area as a rather self-reliant cat who likes to keep to herself - '...or perhaps you'd say a very private sort of cat, and I don't normally interfere in others' affairs...' (Murakami, p. 83). In spite of her practices of not interfering in others' business, Mimi chooses to help Nakata, which depicts her as a rather accommodating cat – '...I've been watching for a while, and I'm afraid I couldn't just sit idly by. I know it's forward of me to do so, but I had to say something.' (Murakami, p. 83).

Mimi attempted to aid Nakata because she overheard their conversation about Goma and she chose to take pity on Nakata, being aware of Kawamura's condition to not be comprehensible. However, she pitied Kawamura's condition as well since his verbal and mental issues were not a result of his own misdeeds – 'It's not his fault he's this way, and I do feel sorry for him...' (Murakami, p. 84).

Mimi, the posh domestic Siamese feline, represents the sophisticated and elite upper strata of the humans, who choose to while away time listening to Puccini Opera, whilst nibbling on exotic food. Mimi is the mirror image of the trendsetting woman of the elite class, who cares only about grooming herself and fill their heads with worthless facts, absorbed from excessive television exposure. Her cognitive ability is highly developed, for she overhears the difficulty Nakata faces while communicating with Kawamura and then offers to help him comprehend the eccentric cat's speech. Her knowledge base trumps Nakata's as well, which implies that she was far more intelligent than some humans. However, in spite of Nakata's lack of intelligence Mimi communicates with him effectively and does not judge him to be a mere eccentric old man. Murakami representation of Mimi falls under the category of a round character since, she develops a liking for Nakata from being absolute strangers, after choosing to communicate with him and she warns him to be careful of the man in the hat.

The Siamese warns Nakata of the cat catcher who prowls the neighbourhood and requests him to tread with utmost care seeing as the person she was referring to was particularly evil and dangerous – ‘Mr. Nakata...nobody can escape the violence...You can’t be too cautious. The same holds true for cats as for human beings.’ (Murakami, p. 88). This highlights her caring and cautious nature, as she warns Nakata, a man she barely knew and even chose to help him with his problem.

The stark contrast between Mimi and Kawamura has been highlighted by Murakami through their behaviour and physical attributes. Kawamura, a mere stray brown striped cat and Mimi was the agile and educated Siamese. The two represented two polarities of the society – the eccentric stray and the posh domestic. In a way, one can associate Nakata with Kawamura and Mimi with Nakata’s siblings with regards to the class difference between them.

However, Mimi appears to resemble Oshima to a much greater extent. The Siamese aids the old man, just like Oshima aids Kafka by providing him with work at the library. Yet, Kafka does not heed Oshima’s warning of not wandering deep into the woods and Nakata too chooses to overlook Mimi’s words of caution, as he continues his search for Goma and eventually falls into Johnnie Walker’s trap. Her knowledge base is extensive, more so than the old man’s, just as Oshima’s expertise trumps Kafka’s.

#### **4. Okawa**

Okawa the stray ‘...black and white tabby with torn ears...’ (Murakami, p.129) was surprised by Nakata’s ability of talking to cats. He called it ‘Impressive’. Okawa did not have a problem with the name Nakata assigns him, therefore when Nakata asks him if he was fine with being called Okawa, his reply was ‘whatever’. However, the minute Nakata showed him the image of Goma, his expressions changed instantly – ‘Okawa glanced at the photo and made a gloomy face...’ (Murakami, p.130). He seemed rather disturbed and ‘...blinked in consternation several times...’ (Murakami, p.130). He tells Nakata that he cannot talk about the cat in the photograph because ‘...I’ll be in hot water if I do...’ (Murakami, p.130). Okawa warns Nakata and asks him to forget about Goma. He requests him to stay away from the vacant plot because – ‘I don’t want you to get into trouble...’ (Murakami, p.130). He was fond of Nakata and thus he was warning the man, because he knew that Nakata would definitely be in danger if he chose to linger around, looking for Goma. He apologises to Nakata – ‘Sorry I couldn’t be of more help, but please consider this warning my way of thanking you...’ (Murakami, p.130). Therefore, Okawa was a cautious stray, who did not want Nakata in any danger and thus requests him to leave the plot and forget about looking for Goma. Okawa says this with so much confidence because he is clearly aware of something that Nakata is not and in order to thank Nakata for offering him sardines he asks him to stay away from both Goma and the vacant plot, just to stay out of harm’s way. He somehow felt that Nakata, even though he was human, was in the same danger the other cats of the area were in.

## 5. Black Dog

When Nakata opens his eyes, he sees ‘A huge, black dog...the beast looked more like a calf than a dog. It had long legs, short hair, bulging, steely muscles, ears as sharp as knife points and no collar...’ (Murakami, p.131). The dog resembled the breed that were used in K-9 Corps, therefore Nakata could tell that it was as vicious as it looked. The dog’s eyes were expressionless, his lips pulled over his fangs that was dripping blood and chunks of meat. His tongue was blood red. The vicious black dog was not exactly the cuddly puppy. It’s bare bloody fangs and bloody tongue was proof of his viciousness, since it hinted that he had ripped some poor animal to shreds to satisfy his hunger or to merely kill. He commanded Nakata to stand up and follow him. There was no ounce of civility in his mannerisms and his expressionless eyes implied that he would not make for a very good friend.

He did not bother replying to Nakata’s inane questions about if they were still within the boundary of Nakano ward, or if the dog belonged to the Governor. Therefore, the dog knew his business well and did what he had to do with great precision and focus. The beastly dog was not merely strong but also intelligent for he guided Nakata with absolute precision to Johnnie Walker’s house, without hesitating for a second. He also maintained a pace that would be suitable for Nakata to follow – ‘...the dog continued walking, setting a pace he knew Nakata could keep up with...’ (Murakami, p.133).

The dog ignored traffic lights at pedestrian crossings and when the cars honked at them he merely bared his fangs and walked decisively because he knew he would get his way. He also knew what the traffic signals meant. Therefore, the dog can be referred to as street smart. The pedestrians would move out the dog’s way the minute the laid eyes on him because of his brutish demeanour. They were afraid of him. The manner in which he commands Nakata also shows the essence of the alpha in his character. While guiding Nakata to Johnnie Walker’s house, the pedestrians move out the way when they see the dog approaching out of pure fear – ‘When people spied this giant, violent- looking beast, they leaped aside, a couple of cyclists even getting off and crossing over to the other side of the street to avoid facing him.’ (Murakami, p.132). The dog never bothered following the traffic lights and kept walking even though he knew what traffic lights implied because – ‘...the dog bared his fangs, glared at the drivers and sauntered defiantly across the street...’ (Murakami, p.132).

## 6. Toro

The black, fat cat was a Sushi chef’s pet and his name was Toro. Out of utter shock Hoshino asks him how he understood the feline or vice versa and Toro tells him that they were at the end of two worlds because of which they could understand and talk to each other. The cat appeared to know all of Hoshino’s problems and therefore, he warns him. Toro asks Hoshino to be prepared for a creature will make itself known soon. According to Toro, this creature was not human or any animal they know, but it wanted desperately to enter through the entrance. He warns Hoshino and asks him to never allow that to happen. Toro asks Hoshino to kill the creature before it reaches the entrance.

Toro reminds Hoshino that Nakata’s responsibilities now rested on his shoulders and that he would not be able to find peace if Hoshino cannot stop the creature. Toro

reminds him of the fact that he was a part of the SDF, so he had professional training to murder. Hoshino wondered how the cat knew so much about Nakata and him, and the cat's reply surprised him. Toro exclaims that Nakata and Hoshino were quite famous and that all the cats were rooting for Hoshino to murder this creature and only then could he close the entrance stone for good and carry on with his life, like he wanted. Toro tells him that the creature would only emerge at midnight and therefore Hoshino should rest till then and be prepared for it.

Toro's physical, mental and emotional attributes point at the fact that he was not merely an intelligent cat, but he had moral responsibilities to fulfill. The sole reason he warns Hoshino is so balance can be restored once again in the world again, which was Nakata's only plan. He clarifies that he was rooting for Hoshino to kill the monster in order to bring peace to Nakata's soul. He provides all the pertinent information to Hoshino to help him solve the problem, to help him out of the goodness of his heart and moral accountability. Murakami presents Toro more in terms of a guiding angel, whose interruption aids Hoshino continue the work Nakata had started. Had Toro not spoken to Hoshino and explained what he was up against, the story would have been met a very different end.

Murakami's poetic genius is depicted through the use of imagery and the minute detailing of the various characters. His portrayal of the animals as extensions and reflections of the human characters of the novel, depicts the level of maturity that anthropomorphism has achieved over time – evolving from childhood novels to serious fiction of Nobel prize nominees.

### **Animals Guiding the Plot**

Murakami's cats, become a dominant force without which the novel would not have hoped to proceed. The cats are responsible for guiding the plot along, for instance, Mimi and Kawamura aid in informing Nakata about the vacant plot of land from where the vicious black dog, leads him into the lair of Johnnie Walker. Mimi warns Nakata of the cat catcher who prowls the neighbourhood and requests him to tread with utmost care seeing as the person she was referring to was particularly evil and dangerous – 'Mr. Nakata...nobody can escape the violence...You can't be too cautious. The same holds true for cats as for human beings.' (Murakami, p. 88).

Walker's residence is soon converted into a blood bath where Walker much like an artist, cuts through the stomachs of the stray felines with extreme precision and eats out their hearts, like gourmet chefs at a food tasting festival. The silent writhing of the cats ignites something in Nakata, which leads him to stab the man to death and leave Nakano ward. Killing Walker gives Nakata a new destination and purpose and hence, he leaves Nakano Ward and embarks on the last journey of his life to find the entrance stone. The cat of taking Walker's life, changes something within him and he loses the ability to talk to cats following the show of violence. The involvement of the felines drives the plot. Nakata's cringing at the sight of the blood echoes **Singer** and **Reagan's** strategy, wherein they state that the cringing at the thought of hurting animals prove that the concept anthropomorphism is imbedded in his mindset.

Toro warns Hoshino to restore balance in the world again, which was Nakata's only plan. He clarifies that he was rooting for Hoshino to kill the monster in order to bring

peace to Nakata's soul. He provides all the pertinent information to Hoshino to help him solve the problem, to help him out of the goodness of his heart and moral accountability. Murakami presents Toro more in terms of a guiding angel, whose interruption aids Hoshino continue the work Nakata had started. Had Toro not spoken to Hoshino and explained what he was up against, the story would have been met a very different end.

## Conclusion

The novel becomes an exemplary instance of Anthropomorphism. **Sarah Stebbins**, in her article *Anthropomorphism*, establishes that the attribution of mental states to nonhuman animals depend mostly on compulsive human behavior owing to constant interaction with various animals on daily basis. Therefore, Murakami through the character of Nakata, who would interact with cats on a regular basis, adheres to the technique of anthropomorphism as stated by Sarah Stebbins. Murakami painted the character of Nakata in a way that he assigns every cat a name – which can be viewed as an extension of the human behaviour to assign an identity. However, when he assigns the cats a name, their first reaction is always of confusion or shock since in their feline world, identification is done through more personal attributes of smell. This concept of assigning names echoes in the article of **J. S Blanchard** *Anthropomorphism in Beginning Readers*, where the author establishes the fact that the unknown for humans must be attributed with known characteristics of humans for better comprehension. Instances of anthropomorphism are evident when Nakata cringes as Johnnie Walker slices through the cats which adheres to Singer and Regan's strategy of attributing consciousness to animals and states that before throwing a dog, if there is the most minute second spent in thinking about the barbarity of the act, that itself implies the effect of attributing mental states to sentient animals as stated by **Fredrik Karlsson** in *Critical Anthropomorphism and Animal Ethics*.

The imagery of Chapter 16 is laced with blood and gore as Nakata is stuck watching Johnnie Walker kill cats and eat up their raw and beating hearts. The intensity of mutilation lends the scene an ominous tone, where the poor old man is the hapless audience to Walker's incessant mutilation. Kawamura, the eccentric stray falls prey to Walker's blade, and Nakata watches in horror unable to stop the vile man, who hums the tunes of Snow White while cutting cats open, which enhances the sadistic side of the entire affair. Nakata, who had never harmed anyone before is expected to stab the man with a knife which he does eventually when he sees Walker taking out Mimi, the black Siamese, out for killing. The torment of watching innocent cats die right in front of his eyes, drives Nakata over the edge and he does not feel like himself when he grabs the knife and stabs Johnnie Walker to death.

Murakami's art of characterization is impeccable, as he deftly illustrates the characters of Otsuka, Mimi, Kawamura, Okawa, the Dog and Toro. However, even more commendable than his art of characterization is the manner in which each of the animal characters had been elected to resemble the human characters of the novel. Murakami highlights the aspect of anthropomorphism by reflecting the characteristics of the animals through the human characters. He achieves this feat by minutely highlighting the physical, mental and emotional attributes of the characters. The point



of view of the narrator and that of the other characters of the novel, further clarifies the character of the animals and depicts their inner depth.

### **Acknowledgement**

“Once the storm is over, you won’t remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won’t even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm you won’t be the same person who walked in. That’s what this storm is all about.”

#### **- Haruki Murakami.**

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