

# Magical Realism and Alienation in *Kafka on the Shore*

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### Abstract

*Kafka on the Shore* is a surreal and philosophical Japanese novel written by Haruki Murakami. It weaves together two parallel stories that explore themes of identity, fate, memory, and the unconscious. The first story follows Kafka Tamura, a fifteen-year-old boy who runs away from home to escape his father's dark prophecy, and the second story features Satoru Nakata, an elderly man who lost his cognitive abilities due to a childhood incident but gained a unique connection to the metaphysical world. Through magical realism, symbolism, and references to other texts, Murakami looks at the tension between free will and destiny, the lines between reality and dreams, and the search for meaning in a fragmented modern world. The novel is rich in classical mythology, Western, and Japanese literary traditions, and music. This creates a layered narrative that resists a single interpretation. He uses ambiguity and magical realism not just as stylistic choices but as ways to depict psychological depth and existential uncertainty. By contrasting rational thought with instinct, memory, and the unconscious, the novel challenges traditional ideas about causality and linear time. It invites readers to actively participate in creating meaning. This approach highlights the novel's larger commentary on modern alienation and the ongoing quest for self-understanding.

**Keywords:** Surreal, Philosophical, Metaphysical, Magical Realism, Modern Alienation.

The term "Magic Realism" originated in the 1920s to describe a specific artistic movement that included German painters who practiced surrealist techniques. The technique of Magic Realism establishes sharp boundaries between actual events and their common properties, and their fantastical elements, and their dreamlike qualities, and their elements which come from myth and fairy tales. He used it as a method to show real life while showing the mysterious parts of reality through art. The plots in magical realism novels characteristically employ hybrid multiple planes of reality that take place in juxtaposed arenas of such opposites as urban and rural, Western and indigenous, and so on Arva 2008.

*Kafka on the Shore* was published in 2002, and the novel is considered one of the magical realism novels by Haruki Murakami. The novel deals with two plot lines originating in two different times and spaces, and at the end, these two plots mingle into one. Through his use of the magic realism technique, Murakami asserts the importance of individual identity in the social flow of modern

civilization, and in doing so, he explores several dimensions of identity that were cultivated in modern-day Japan, especially after the Second World War.

The story is told in first-person narration, opening with a fifteen-year-old boy named Kafka Tamura who escaped from his home in order to avoid the oedipal prophecy given by his father, Koichi Tamura, a famous sculptor. His father told Kafka that he would be sleeping with his mother and sister. Kafka is determined to leave everything behind except with his companion, the Crow, his alter ego, who advised him at times to become the toughest man in the world. Kafka is seen carrying the weight of his curse throughout the novel. Kafka went on a self-proclaimed journey in search of his mother and sister, whom he remembers well but had no clue about their whereabouts.

The novel also tells the story of Satoru Nakata, whose story runs parallel to Kafka's about an old man of sixties who has been a victim of a mysterious accident that happened during the time of War. The incident happened when Nakata was in fourth grade, when a group of sixteen children lost their consciousness collectively while searching for mushrooms. Nakata is the only child who does not recover from the accident and has several impacts on his health, and he sustained a mental deficiency that resulted in strange characteristics, such as being able to talk to cats. Nakata is presented in the novel as a cat catcher and makes his living from it. In a very mysterious way, Nakata is seen killing Kafka's father, who kidnaps cats, cuts their heads, and takes their soul to create a divine flute. In the novel, Nakata realizes that he has a mission to fulfil to restore the balance of the world. For this, he needs to find the "entrance stone", which opens the entrance of an alternate world by turning the stone, and when the time comes, closes the entrance again by turning the stone.

In doing so, he sets out on a journey to Takamatsu with the help of a truck driver named Hoshino, who also helps him in opening and closing the entrance. While living in the jungle aloof from the whole world, Kafka has a dream about raping Sakura. Feeling so guilty about himself, Kafka goes deeper into the jungle and discovers the parallel world's entrance with the help of those two lost soldiers, and in that world, Kafka finally meets his mother. In the other world, Hoshino and Nakata find their way to the library and meet Miss Saeki. Nakata tells Miss Saeki that it is time for them to return to where they visited in their youth, since the entrance is open, and Miss Saeki seems to understand it. Oshima finds Miss Saeki dead on her desk after a few hours of Nakata and Hoshino's departure.

The next day, Hoshino discovers that Nakata also passed away in his sleep, leaving Hoshino behind in sorrow. Hoshino understands that he has to close the entrance door when the time comes, while in his deep thought, he sees a cat outside his window and starts to talk. Hoshino is seen able to converse with cats, and the cat instructs him on what to do. In the alternate world, Kafka meets his mother and suspects Miss Saeki, and it is she who explains to him why she left him in his childhood and apologizes. She also asks Kafka to return to the real world, and right after Kafka steps into the real world, Hoshino closes the entrance. Murakami employs magic realism in Kafka on the Shore through various instances that happen with the characters in the novel.

Murakami also portrays magic realism through Nakata's ability to talk to cats. When he enquired about the lost cat to other cats, they led him to the dangerous man who kidnaps cats and eats their hearts raw to collect their souls to make magical flutes. The man is Jonny Walker, who happened to be Kafka's father, and finally Nakata killed him. After the incident that happened in Jonny Walker's place, Nakata goes on a mission to find the entrance. Before leaving for Takamatsu, Nakata confesses his crime to a police officer, but the officer does not believe what he said. Nakata tells the police officer to bring an umbrella the next day because there will be a fish rain.

The officer considers Nakata a madman, but he is compelled to believe that when thousands of fresh fish fall from the sky the next day. Another incident that takes place when Nakata tries to stop a gang beating a member of their own to death, Nakata purposely stands under an umbrella

and makes it rain of leeches, which causes the gang members to run away. In search of the entrance stone, Nakata and Hoshino end up reaching Takamatsu. There, Nakata opens the entrance stone, which also opens the door to a parallel world where Miss Saeki and Nakata visited once. Though Miss Saeki's story is partially blurred, she seems to understand everything when Nakata visits her at the library. Kafka Tamura's tale also goes through a magical journey through the visits to his bedroom by the ghost at the library; it appears to be the same to Miss Saeki.

Alienation functions as the psychological and thematic foundation upon which magical realism emerges in *Kafka on the Shore*. Murakami does not introduce magical elements as external fantasy devices; rather, they arise organically from the characters' profound sense of isolation, emotional rupture, and detachment from conventional reality. "I'm alone. But I'm not lonely."

The novel suggests that when individuals are cut off from family, society, memory, or even their own coherent sense of self, reality itself begins to fracture. In this fractured state, the boundary between the real and the unreal dissolves, allowing dreams, spirits, talking animals, and metaphysical spaces to exist naturally alongside ordinary life. Magical realism thus becomes a narrative expression of alienation when characters cannot fully belong to the social world; they slip into an alternative mode of existence where the subconscious, memory, and symbolism take physical form. Murakami implies that alienation is not merely a social condition but a transformation of perception, one that reshapes how reality is experienced and understood.

This internal withdrawal produces a split consciousness, embodied by the boy named Crow, who exists as both a voice of survival and a manifestation of Kafka's fractured identity. Kafka's alienation prevents him from engaging fully with the external world, and as a result, his inner world gains equal if not greater reality. Dreams bleed into waking life, guilt becomes physical, and symbolic actions carry real consequences. Murakami uses magical realism here to show that alienation destabilizes linear logic and moral certainty when Kafka enters isolated spaces such as the forest or the library, time, identity, and reality lose their fixed meanings. These magical elements are not escapes from loneliness but confrontations with it, suggesting that alienation forces the individual to live simultaneously in multiple realities.

Collectively, the parallel lives of Kafka and Nakata reveal Murakami's larger philosophical argument that alienation reshapes reality itself. Magical realism becomes the narrative language through which alienation is made visible and meaningful. Instead of depicting loneliness through social realism alone, Murakami externalizes inner disconnection by transforming mental states into tangible phenomena. Ghosts represent unresolved memory, talking animals represent communication beyond human systems, and alternate worlds represent emotional exile. These elements do not disrupt realism; they complete it by portraying aspects of human experience that rational realism cannot adequately express. Murakami ultimately suggests that in a modern world defined by emotional fragmentation, traditional realism is insufficient, and magical realism becomes necessary to capture the truth of alienated existence.

In conclusion, *Kafka on the Shore* demonstrates that magical realism is not an aesthetic choice separate from theme but a direct consequence of alienation. Murakami presents alienation as a condition that dissolves the borders between inner and outer worlds, making the magical an inevitable extension of psychological reality. Through Kafka's painful self-awareness and Nakata's peaceful detachment, the novel shows that alienation can lead either to fragmentation or transcendence, but in both cases, it transforms how reality is lived. Magical realism emerges as the form through which alienated individuals navigate meaning, memory, and identity, suggesting that when human connection fails, reality itself must expand to accommodate the depths of inner experience. Thus, Murakami positions magical realism not as escapism, but as the most honest representation of alienated modern life.

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