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Representations of Existential Trauma in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* and Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

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Abstract: This paper examines the representation of existential trauma in two landmark works of postcolonial and postmodern fiction: Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (1987) and Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971). Drawing on existentialist philosophical frameworks—particularly the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir—alongside trauma theory as elaborated by Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, this study argues that both novels construct trauma not merely as psychological wound but as an ontological rupture: a fracturing of the subject's relationship with time, identity, community, and meaning. While Murakami's Watanabe navigates the interior labyrinth of grief and erotic loss in post-war Tokyo, Joshi's *Billy Biswas* enacts a more radical existential revolt, abandoning metropolitan civilisation for the primordial tribal world of central India. The article traces the shared grammar of estrangement, the impossibility of mourning, and the body as a site of existential negotiation that connects these geographically and culturally distant narratives. It concludes that both novels resist therapeutic resolution, insisting instead on the irreducible weight of traumatic experience as constitutive of modern selfhood.

Keywords: *Existential Trauma, Norwegian Wood, the Strange Case of Billy Biswas, Alienation, Postcolonial Fiction, Murakami, Joshi, Grief, Identity, Postmodernism*

Introduction

The twentieth century produced, alongside its unprecedented material advances, an equally unprecedented literature of inner devastation. From Kafka's metamorphic anxieties to Beckett's paralysed tramps, the century's most enduring fiction has repeatedly returned to the figure of the dislocated self—a consciousness that cannot be at home in the world it has inherited. Haruki Murakami and Arun Joshi, separated by nationality, language, and literary tradition, are nonetheless fellow travellers in this bleak cartography. Their novels *Norwegian Wood* (1987) and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) each dramatise what we might call existential trauma: a condition in which ordinary psychological wound deepens into a crisis of being itself, threatening the very intelligibility of the self.

Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* is set in late-1960s Tokyo, a city in the throes of student radicalism and rapid modernisation. Its narrator, Toru Watanabe, looks back from the vantage of middle age upon his nineteenth and twentieth years, years shaped by the successive deaths of his closest friend Kizuki and the woman he loved, Naoko. The novel is less a story of events than a phenomenology of grief: an attempt, in Watanabe's own words, "to think, to understand" (Murakami 8). Arun Joshi's novel, by contrast, is set in post-Independence India. Its protagonist, Bimal Biswas—Billy—is a Columbia-educated professor of anthropology who surrenders his privileged Delhi life to live among tribal communities in the Maikala hills of Madhya Pradesh. The novel's existential stakes are announced from its opening pages: Billy's disappearance is not a crime but an act of philosophical refusal.

Existing scholarship has addressed these novels separately and often within narrow national frames—Murakami within Japanese postmodernity and popular culture studies (Rubin 2002; Seats 2006), Joshi within postcolonial Indian fiction in English (Mukherjee 1985; Dodiya 1998). A sustained comparative reading of the two has not, to this author's knowledge, been undertaken. Yet the convergences are striking: both texts are narrated retrospectively, both are structured around the trauma of loss and the failure of mourning, both interrogate modernity's promise of self-fulfilment, and both conclude in death that cannot be fully assimilated by those who survive. This paper offers such a reading, arguing that trauma in these two novels functions as an existential condition—a wound in being—rather than merely a clinical or psychological phenomenon.

Theoretical Framework: Existentialism and Trauma Theory

The theoretical lens employed here is composite and deliberately so, for the phenomenon under investigation exceeds any single disciplinary framework. Existentialist philosophy offers the broader

ontological vocabulary: the concepts of thrownness (Heidegger's *Geworfenheit*), bad faith (Sartre's *mauvaise foi*), the absurd (Camus), and alienation provide the tools to describe what happens when a subject finds itself unable to inhabit the scripts of social belonging. Trauma theory—particularly as developed by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub—supplies a more specifically temporal and psychological account: trauma as an event that the mind cannot metabolise, that returns in fragmentary repetition, that resists the linearity of narrative and thus of the healing that narrative is supposed to enable.

For Caruth, trauma is characterised by its belatedness: "the experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself" (Caruth 1996, 17). This latency—the gap between wound and recognition—is structurally mirrored in both novels' retrospective narration. Watanabe writes his memoir at thirty-seven, eighteen years after the events described; the narrator of Billy Biswas, Rono Chowdhury, recounts Billy's story after his death, assembling evidence like a traumatised archaeologist. In both cases, the very form of the text enacts the trauma it describes: the past refuses full accessibility, and the act of writing is confessedly incomplete.

From existentialism, the most useful concept is perhaps Sartre's notion of the look of the Other as constitutive of shame and self-alienation, and Camus's articulation of the absurd as the confrontation between human desire for meaning and the world's radical silence. Both Billy and Watanabe are characters who have been, in Camusian terms, struck by the absurd: they have glimpsed the void behind social convention, and they cannot unsee it. Their trauma is not reducible to personal misfortune; it is an insight into the nature of existence that makes ordinary social life feel fraudulent, suffocating, and finally uninhabitable.

Death as the Origin of Existential Rupture

Norwegian Wood: Death Inside Life

The central existential insight of *Norwegian Wood* is announced in one of the novel's most philosophically charged passages. Following the suicide of his seventeen-year-old friend Kizuki, Watanabe undergoes a conceptual revolution that permanently alters his relationship with mortality:

Until that time, I had understood death as something entirely separate from and independent of life... Life is here, death is over there... The night Kizuki died, however, I lost the ability to see death (and life) in such simple terms. Death was not the opposite of life. It was already here, within my being, it had always been here, and no struggle

would permit me to forget that. When it took the 17-year-old Kizuki that night in May, death took me as well. (Murakami 31)

This passage is a compressed existentialist manifesto. The comfortable metaphysical separation between life and death—the assumption that sustains ordinary social existence—has been annihilated. Watanabe now experiences what Heidegger called Being-towards-death (Sein-zum-Tode): the knowledge of one's own finitude not as an abstract future event but as a constitutive presence within the present moment. The sentence "death took me as well" is not rhetorical hyperbole but a precise phenomenological claim: the self that existed before this knowledge is gone, and the self that remains is permanently shadowed.

This traumatic initiation explains the characteristic register of Watanabe's subsequent existence. His affective flatness—the "hollow echo" (Murakami 51) of everything around him, his inability to connect with the student political movements that animate his peers, his solitary drinking and reading—is not apathy but the residue of a fundamental ontological rupture. He has been, in a very precise sense, bereaved of his former self. The narrative structure reinforces this: we are always reading about a past that the present narrator cannot fully recover, a self that exists only in increasingly dim memory.

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas: Death as Philosophical Catalyst

In Joshi's novel, death is equally transformative but operates through a different mechanism. Billy's existential crisis is catalysed not by a single death but by the accumulated weight of what he perceives as the living death of metropolitan civilisation. He observes around him—in Delhi's drawing rooms, in the corridors of academia, in the hypocrisies of his own social class—a form of spiritual extinction that he finds more terrifying than physical mortality. As Rono reflects, wondering at Billy's inner life, the novel raises the Tolstoyan question of whether conventional social success constitutes genuine life at all.

Billy's later immersion in tribal existence is, in this light, a wager on authentic being against the inauthentic existence that Sartre identified as the fundamental human temptation. The tribal world he chooses is explicitly figured as pre-civilisational, pre-modern, and in a certain sense pre-traumatic: a world that has not yet undergone the existential fracture that modernity brings. Yet the novel is careful not to romanticise this choice. Billy's death by police bullets—the "civilised" world's ultimate response to his defection—ensures that the text refuses any easy pastoral resolution. The price of authenticity, Joshi suggests, is absolute.

Crucially, Billy's trauma precedes his flight. The novel makes clear that he has long been estranged within his own life—that his Columbia education, his marriage, his professorship are

performances of a self he does not recognise as his own. This is trauma in the existential sense: not an event that wounds a previously whole self, but the discovery that the self was never whole to begin with, that the social scripts it inhabited were always alien impositions. Joshi locates the origin of this alienation in the postcolonial condition: Billy is a man between worlds, educated into a Western modernity that does not fit the deeper registers of his being.

Alienation and the Failure of Belonging

The Fractured Social World in *Norwegian Wood*

Watanabe's alienation from the social world around him is rendered with extraordinary precision in Murakami's narrative. The Tokyo of *Norwegian Wood* is a city in which political passion, sexual liberation, and consumer culture all offer themselves as sources of meaning—and in which Watanabe can participate in none of them with full conviction. His fellow students throw themselves into the anti-university protests; Watanabe watches from the margins, registering only a nihilistic indifference: "Dismantle the University! they all screamed. Go ahead, do it, I thought. Dismantle it. Tear it apart. Crush it to bits. I don't give a damn" (Murakami 51).

This indifference is not political conservatism but existential exhaustion. Having already experienced the annihilation of the self through grief, the political theatre of the student movement registers as mere noise. Watanabe's social isolation is meticulously documented: he goes to lectures "more faithfully than ever," sits in the front row, "speak[s] to no one," eats alone (Murakami 51). The body performs social existence—attending, occupying space—while the inner self has withdrawn to a place that social life cannot reach.

Naoko's condition offers a more radically visible version of this same fractured belonging. Her famous image of the "field well"—a hidden pit of bottomless darkness into which one might fall and from which one could never be rescued—is the novel's central symbol of the existential abyss:

It was deep beyond measuring, and crammed full of darkness, as if all the world's darkneses had been boiled down to their ultimate density. (Murakami 8)

The well is the trauma that both characters carry within them: the knowledge of an inner void that cannot be filled by relationship, social success, or sensory pleasure. Naoko's eventual death by suicide is the logical terminus of a subjectivity that has been entirely colonised by this void. Her tragedy—and the novel's—is that she cannot make herself understood to those who love her. The traumatic knowledge she carries exceeds language, preceding and exceeding the words that might communicate it.

Postcolonial Alienation in Billy Biswas

Joshi's novel situates its protagonist's alienation within the specific historical matrix of post-Independence India. Billy Biswas is the product of two contradictory formations: an ancient, deeply rooted Indian sensibility and a Western-educated, rationalist modernity. The tension between these formations is the engine of his existential crisis. Unlike Watanabe, whose alienation is largely interior and generational, Billy's is structural: it inheres in the very conditions of postcolonial subjectivity.

The novel's diagnosis of this condition is delivered through Billy's own voice, preserved in letters and fragments that Rono assembles. Billy articulates a form of what Frantz Fanon called the psychic colonisation of the colonised subject: the internalisation of Western values so deep that the native self becomes alien to itself. His anthropological work on tribal communities is initially a professional interest, but it becomes the occasion for a recognition: that the tribal world represents not primitivism but a form of wholeness—of integration between self, community, and cosmos—that Western modernity has systematically destroyed.

Billy's abandonment of Delhi is thus a form of existential decolonisation: a refusal of the borrowed selfhood that colonial education has imposed, and an attempt to recover a mode of being that the modern world cannot accommodate. The alienation that drives him into the forest is not merely personal neurosis but the wound of a civilisation. As the novel suggests through its multiple perspectives—Rono's bewilderment, his wife Meena's grief, the police reports—the dominant culture can only read Billy's choice as madness or criminality. It has no vocabulary for a man who chooses tribal authenticity over metropolitan success.

Memory, Grief, and the Impossibility of Mourning

Freud's foundational distinction between mourning and melancholia is pertinent to both texts, though neither novel stays within its boundaries. In "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Freud argues that healthy grief is a process of gradual withdrawal of libidinal investment from the lost object, culminating in the release of the ego for new attachments. Melancholia, by contrast, is grief that cannot complete this work: the ego identifies with the lost object, turning the anger of abandonment inward, resulting in the depressive self-punishment that characterises melancholic subjects.

Both Watanabe and Billy are constitutionally incapable of completing the work of mourning in Freud's sense. Watanabe cannot grieve Kizuki and Naoko because their deaths have not simply removed objects of attachment but have destroyed the framework of meaning within which attachment was possible. As he reflects at the novel's opening, memory itself becomes increasingly unreliable—the faces of the dead recede while the scenery they inhabited remains with strange, painful clarity:

The sad truth is that what I could recall in 5 seconds all too soon needed 10, then 30, then a full minute—like shadows lengthening at dusk. Someday, I suppose, the shadows will be swallowed up in darkness. (Murakami 7)

This is not mourning but its impossibility: not a gradual releasing but a gradual erasure that is itself traumatic. The grief cannot be worked through because the loss is not merely of persons but of a whole mode of being—the mode that existed before death revealed itself as internal to life. The novel's very existence as a text is Watanabe's attempt to arrest this erosion, to hold in language what memory is losing, but the attempt is confessedly partial and unstable.

In Billy Biswas, the impossibility of mourning operates differently. Rono, the narrator, attempts through the very act of narration to perform the grief that he cannot otherwise experience. But the novel's structure reveals that this project is compromised from the start: Rono cannot understand Billy, cannot enter his experience, and therefore cannot truly mourn him. His narrative keeps circling back to the same questions—why did Billy leave? what did he find?—without arriving at satisfying answers. This circularity is the formal signature of traumatic return: the mind that cannot metabolise an experience returning to it compulsively in an attempt to make it yield meaning that it ultimately withholds.

Billy's own relationship with loss is equally complex. His departure from metropolitan life is simultaneously a form of grief—a mourning for an authentic selfhood that civilisation has destroyed—and a refusal of mourning, a decision to seek life rather than continuing to inhabit the living death of social conformity. His death, however, forecloses the possibility of knowing whether this wager on authenticity was ultimately redemptive or merely another form of annihilation.

The Body as Site of Existential Negotiation

Both novels deploy the body as a key site for the negotiation of existential trauma. In *Norwegian Wood*, sexuality functions not as pleasure but as an attempt to establish contact across the void that grief has opened. Watanabe's sexual encounters—with Naoko, with Midori, with the various women he meets—are inflected with a peculiar quality of desperation: a search for the reassurance of presence, for evidence that the self is not finally and irreparably isolated. Yet sex, in Murakami's rendering, cannot deliver this reassurance. The moments of physical intimacy are followed by renewed awareness of separation, and the novel carefully avoids the romantic convention in which sexual love resolves existential crisis.

Naoko's relationship with her own body is still more troubled. Her breakdown is partly figured as a somatic event: her body enacts what her mind cannot articulate, manifesting the trauma in physical

symptoms that medicine cannot cure. The sanatorium to which she retreats, Ami Hostel, is a space explicitly designed to allow disturbed minds and bodies to rest from the demands of social existence—a kind of institutionalised acknowledgement that the social world is itself pathogenic for those who have been wounded by it.

In Billy Biswas, the body's significance is differently configured but equally central. Billy's transformation from a soft-handed Delhi academic to a loin-clothed tribal figure is a somatic transformation as much as a social one: he remakes his body in the image of the existence he has chosen, weathering it against the forest, learning its rhythms and capacities. The body becomes the vehicle of his existential revolt, the medium through which he enacts his refusal of the civilised world. The police bullets that kill him are, in this light, the civilised body's final assertion of its power over the body that has dared to refuse it.

The female body in both novels deserves particular attention. Naoko and Bilasia—Billy's tribal partner—are both figures of a femininity that is figured as closer to some primal authenticity, less mediated by social convention, more directly expressive of being's fundamental rhythms. Both novels risk a certain romanticisation of the feminine in this construction, and this is a limitation that feminist critics have rightly noted. Yet both texts also make these women's deaths the consequence of male existential crisis, suggesting an implicit critique of the way that masculine quests for authenticity are conducted at the expense of women's lives.

Civilisation and Its Discontents: Modernity as Trauma

Both novels participate in a broader interrogation of modernity that links them to the tradition of critical social thought associated with Freud's *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1930), Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilisation* (1955), and the Frankfurt School's diagnosis of administered society. For both Murakami and Joshi, trauma is not merely personal but systemic: it is inflicted by the structures of modern life—its alienated labour, its commodified relationships, its evacuation of transcendence—upon subjects who are sensitive enough to experience what most people learn to suppress.

In *Norwegian Wood*, the student movement gestures toward a collective critique of the university and by extension of the social order it reproduces. But Watanabe's alienation from this movement is telling: he recognises the movement's energy but cannot join it, because his crisis is more fundamental than any political programme can address. The movement, like the university it opposes, remains within the frame of a modernity that has already been revealed to him as mortally

compromised. His response is not political action but withdrawal into reading, walking, working with his hands—activities that represent a kind of minimal, provisional authenticity.

Billy Biswas makes the critique of modernity more explicit and more radical. When Billy wonders whether civilisation is anything more than the making and spending of money, he is articulating a Camusian diagnosis of the absurd at the heart of modern life:

I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than the making and spending of money. What else does the civilized man do? (Joshi 69)

This question is the hinge of the novel's existential argument. If civilisation offers no more than economic activity dressed in cultural clothing, then Billy's flight to the tribal world is not madness but sanity: the only sane response to an insane social order. The novel does not, however, allow this argument to rest without complication. Rono's narrative perspective—that of a man who has remained within civilisation and is genuinely bewildered by Billy's choice—ensures that the novel remains dialogic rather than didactic. The reader is left to weigh the competing claims of social belonging and existential authenticity without the comfort of authorial resolution.

Conclusion

Norwegian Wood and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* are, at one level, very different books: one a delicate, lyrical memoir set in the coffee shops and dormitories of late-1960s Tokyo; the other a more angular, philosophically explicit narrative set against the backdrop of post-Independence India. Yet the comparison reveals that they share a deep structural and thematic grammar. Both are organised around an existential trauma that originates in confrontation with death and develops into a pervasive estrangement from modern social existence. Both deploy retrospective narration to enact the formal properties of trauma—its belatedness, its circularity, its resistance to full articulation. Both end in death that cannot be fully mourned, in a loss that exceeds the consolations of narrative.

The comparison also illuminates the cultural specificity of existential trauma. Watanabe's crisis is shaped by the conditions of postwar Japanese modernity: the student movement, the consumer boom, the continuing shadow of the war. Billy's is shaped by the conditions of postcolonial Indian modernity: the legacy of colonial education, the tensions between tradition and Westernisation, the spiritual impoverishment of a newly independent nation still learning to inhabit its independence. These are different wounds, inflicted by different historical formations, and the comparison enriches our understanding of both.

What both novels ultimately resist is the therapeutic optimism that characterises much contemporary discourse on trauma—the assumption that wounds can be healed, that narrative can restore integrity, that suffering, properly worked through, can be transformed into growth. Neither Watanabe nor Billy achieves this resolution. The former is left, at novel's end, in a telephone box in Kyoto, unable to identify where he is standing; the latter is dead, his ashes the only thing the civilised world receives back. These are endings that honour the weight of existential trauma: its irreducibility, its resistance to consolation, its insistence on remaining as a wound in being. It is precisely this insistence that makes both novels enduring works of literary art.

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