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Fragility and Vitality of Female Characters in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*

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Abstract

This paper examines how fragility and vitality operate as interdependent forms of emotional existence in the female characters of Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*. Moving beyond readings centered on grief, suicide, memory, alienation, and unstable relationships, it challenges the binary that positions Naoko as fragile and death-oriented and Midori as vital and life-affirming. Using close textual analysis informed by feminist criticism, trauma theory, existential thought, affect theory, and Murakami scholarship, the study analyzes Naoko, Midori Kobayashi, Reiko Ishida, and Hatsumi. Fragility is understood through bereavement, abandonment, psychological pain, unequal intimacy, and fear of becoming burdensome, while vitality appears through desire, speech, care, creativity, humour, and the pursuit of connection. The analysis shows that Naoko's passivity coexists with attempts at communication and self-awareness; Midori's exuberance emerges from deprivation and grief; Reiko transforms psychological fracture through storytelling, music, and reciprocal care; and Hatsumi's composure conceals the effects of emotionally unequal love. The study also considers Toru Watanabe's retrospective male narration, which preserves women's voices while incorporating them into his story of maturation. It argues that fragility does not erase female action, while vitality does not free these characters from vulnerability.

Keywords: Haruki Murakami, *Norwegian Wood*, Naoko, Midori, Reiko, Hatsumi, Female Actions, Fragility, Vitality, Trauma, Gender, Memory

Introduction

Haruki Murakami's novel *Norwegian Wood* begins with reminiscence and Toru Watanabe, a 37-year-old young man living in Hamburg, is taken two decades back to Tokyo when he first hears the Beatles' song "Norwegian Wood." Thus, the melody turns to be a trigger for recalling his lost love, broken relationships, and people from the lonely past- "Memory is a funny thing" (lines 180–181), This line adds "memory as a strange

thing. Such ways of thinking picture that past events can acquire new significant meanings or long after they have occurred with intense emotions. Unlike Murakami's other phantasmagorical novels, the writing *Norwegian Wood* nicely presents a more realistic narrative while still exploring identity, loneliness, memory, and human relationships (Rubin, 2002; Strecher, 1998, 2002, 2014; Potik, 2024). The characters like Naoko, Midori Kobayashi, Reiko Ishida, and Hatsumi vividly embody these concerns as their lives are shaped by grief, longing, solitude, attachment, and emotional anguish. Simultaneously, the novel brings in emotional expression as both a risky and potentially healing way of dealing. When Reiko asks Toru, "What happens when people open their hearts?" and the answer comes, "They get better" (lines 24–26), this manner gives emphasis on the importance of relationships in human life. Although emotional openness can expose individuals to pain, it can also create opportunities for mutual connection and emotional healing.

Naoko and Midori are frequently portrayed as two diametrically opposite personalities while Naoko is depicted with the thoughts of death, the weight of memories, mental fragility, and a silent melancholy. Midori, however, is presented as a vibrant, humorous, and outspoken character brimming with the zest for life. Reiko and Hatsumi are frequently judged through specific, reductive and interpretive frameworks. However, recent eminent gender studies have faced such simplified perspectives. For instance, Hansen (2010, 2017) has argued that Murakami's female characters are not merely passive entities and Takeuchi (2010) has demonstrated that they possess latent voices and desires. Further, Sneha (2022) explains that their psychological anguish stems, in part, from male-centric notions and societal expectations. Similarly, Chakraborty and Sharma (2024) point that openly expressing personal desires can serve as a form of difficult resistance against social norms and constraints, thereby aiding women in setting their own valuable identities. Previous research on this text views fragility and vitality not merely as mutually exclusive traits, but merely as statements of coexistence within the same individual traits. Here, 'fragility' indicates the profound emotional anguish emitting from the loss of loved ones, neglect, shame, dependency on others, and personal grief, and 'vitality' which signifies strong will to live. However, the uninhibited expression of emotions, humor, care for others, creativity, and a longing for love and human connection- all have the psychological meaning of life. However, the uninhibited expression of emotions, humor, care for others, creativity, and a longing for love and human connection- all have psychological meaning in her life. Viewed through this lens, Naoko, while grappling with extreme emotional fragility, harbors an intense desire for love and emotional connection in his mind. Although Midori seems to be vibrant and energetic, she carries deep pain inside of her mind caused by the loss of loved ones. Meanwhile, Reiko heals her emotional wounds by helping others and engaging in creative pursuits. Conversely, while Hatsumi seems confident in her social life, she conceals a personal grief that remains hidden from others. Consequently, this study does not reduce Naoko merely as a symbol of 'death' or Midori as a symbol of 'life', it

portrays its female characters as complex, multidimensional beings in whom, the strength and the fragility, as well as the hope and sorrow, coexist.

Background of the Study

Norwegian Wood was first published in Japanese in 1987. The novel presents the difficult social climate of the late 1960s. Toru Watanabe has relationships with Naoko, Midori, Reiko, and Hatsumi. These women experience loneliness, painful memories, grief, and emotional suffering. Kizuki dies by suicide. After his death, Naoko becomes isolated. She lives in deep emotional darkness. Midori experiences loss. She also shows strong vitality. Reiko experiences deep emotional pain. She uses compassion and creative activities to deal with her suffering. Hatsumi appears confident in her relationship with Nagasawa. She also carries hidden emotional pain. These women respond to emotional suffering in different ways. Midori expresses her desire for emotional connection. She says, "I want you to always remember me" (lines 57–58). Her words show her desire for recognition. They also show her need for love and emotional connection (Khan & Sharma, 2025; Uzma et al., 2025).

An Overview of the Text

Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* explores the emotional fragility and creative qualities of its female characters and its characters Naoko and Reiko Ishida are important examples because their relationships with Toru Watanabe develop in 1960s Tokyo. The novel does not present women's emotional fragility as simple "weakness", rather the experiences of the characters involve grief, separation, loneliness, and the harsh realities of life. These experiences create distance from the outside world since Naoko loses her childhood lover to suicide. For this reason, she struggles with the demands of adult life and later she seeks refuge in a mountain sanatorium. Art and creativity provide her with emotional comfort there. As it is seen that Reiko tries to support Naoko through classical guitar. The Beatles' song "Norwegian Wood" also connects grief, memories, and painful experiences in her and within these moments, the power of art is shown. Here. Art can provide a temporary relief from emotional pain but it can also help people reconnect with the outside world. Toru tries to understand these relationships and emotional distances but Naoko withdraws from the world, yet she still desires love and connection expressing her desire, she says, "I want only you in this world. I want to see you, I want to talk to you" (lines 89–90). Midori, however, appears vibrant and energetic though she has also experienced hidden sorrow and loneliness. Reiko experiences emotional suffering and Hatsumi as well. These four women show different forms of pain and strength and their lives also show different forms of aspiration and survival. Their fragility does not mean

weakness. Their experiences show the complex nature of human life.

Statement of Problem and Significance of the Study

Previous studies often present Midori as a strong and lively woman and Naoko as a fragile person having mental distress. The present study ignores these simple descriptions but examines vulnerability, desire, strength, and emotional complexity in each woman. Naoko, for example, remains highly sensitive and emotionally fragile, with personal desires and distinctive forms of self-expression. Midori, on the other hand, appears happy and full of vitality, yet hidden sorrow hides beneath her outward liveliness. Reiko shows emotional resilience despite her psychological wounds and grief. Then, Hatsumi appears confident and comfortable in social relationships, but private sadness remains hidden from others. The article also examines Toru's role as the male protagonist as well as his influence on four women and their voices, emotions, and inner experiences.

Literature Review and Research Gap

Research on Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* has mainly focused on the themes of self-identity, loneliness, memory, modern life, culture, and the psychological experiences of individuals. Strecher (1998) examines the relationship between literary tradition and popular culture in Murakami's fiction, while Strecher (2002) discusses the desire to rediscover lost identity and Strecher (2014) explores psychological experiences and supernatural narratives. Besides, Suter (2008) analyzes the relationship between Murakami and his literary works within global culture and Seats (2009) examines the relations to modern life across nations, and Rubin (2010) focusses on the importance of music and sound in his writing. The term 'memory' is a central element in Norwegian Wood, that narrates structure and emotional experiences. Cruz (2019), however, investigates the psychological aspects of the novel thoroughly about cultural and musical elements which allow the characters to revisit memories and past experiences. Potik (2024) explores existential crises, Prameswari and Marsih (2023) analyze Toru's personal crisis and perception of life, and Uzma et al. (2025) examine non-existent complexity, psychological alienation, grief, and emotional suffering. Caruth (1996), LaCapra (2001), and Freud (1957) further explain experiences of trauma, loss, grief, and melancholy. In fact, these theories should not limit literary characters to clinical interpretations but should instead help understand emotional struggles through memory, attachment, loss, and the human desire for connection.

Gender studies provide another important perspective for understanding the female characters in *Norwegian Wood* since Hansen (2025) emphasises on the idea that Murakami's female characters exist only for male self-discoveries and their independent

experiences, while Hansen (2017) further highlights the complexity of their identities. Takeuchi (2010) examines women's hidden desires and relationships, whereas Sneha (2022) talks about the influence of male power and the male gaze in their representation. Chakraborty and Sharma (2024), drawing on Audre Lorde and other theorists by arguing that women's intense desires can turn into sources of self-preservation and survival. To Dil (2010) it is a psychological telling about life and its emotional pain, while Dil (2016) explores again on the suffering created by emotional dependency and the search for meaningful relationships in Norwegian Wood. Khan and Sharma (2025) analyze Naoko, Midori, and Reiko within gender and patriarchal contexts by portraying Naoko's mental fragility, Midori's confidence, and Reiko's too caring nature, while Uzma et al. (2025) examine Naoko's hidden and untold grief, Reiko's troubled way of life, Hatsumi's agonised and unfulfilled love and dependency, and Midori's longing for emotional connection.

So, although previous studies have addressed significant themes in *Norwegian Wood*, including identity, memory, trauma, gender, grief, and human relationships, they, in fact, have largely focused on particular aspects of female experiences such as suffering, vulnerability, psychological struggles, and emotional crises. Limited or less attention has been given to how fragility and vitality can coexist within the same umbrella of individualisms. However, this study looks at how Naoko, Midori, Reiko, and Hatsumi feel fragile and strong at the same time. Although each woman experiences pain, loss, and vulnerability in different ways, they altogether possess a profound longing for love, human connection, and life itself, revealing the complex relationship between suffering and resilience in Murakami's portrayal of modern women.

Research Questions

1. How are fragility and vitality shown in the four women?
2. How does Naoko's vulnerability coexist with action?
3. How does Midori's vitality emerge from grief and deprivation?
4. How does Reiko turn suffering into care and creativity?
5. What hidden vulnerability does Hatsumi reveal?
6. How does Toru's perspective shape the female characters?
7. How are fragility and vitality connected in the four women?

Hypothesis, Scope, Focus, Analytical Lens, and Research Objectives

This study hypothesizes that fragility and vitality exist together in the four women in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*. Naoko is vulnerable, but she has her own desires and choices; Midori is lively, yet she also has grief and sadness and Reiko suffers from

pain, but uses care and creative activities to deal with it. Then, Hatsumi looks confident, but she has hidden emotional pain. The study also hypothesizes that Toru's way of telling the story affects how one can understand these women, their feelings, and their inner lives. Overall, the study hypothesizes that fragility and vitality are not opposite qualities rather they can exist together in the same person.

However, we find that this study focuses on four female characters in Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*: Naoko, Midori Kobayashi, Reiko Ishida, and Hatsumi. It gives special attention to Naoko and Midori because they are the most influencing characters in the novel and this study uncovers their emotions, relationships, pain, desires, vulnerability, strength, grief, and ways of dealing with life. It also examines Toru as the narrator and his role in presenting these women, their feelings, and their experiences. In fact, the study uses feminist criticism, vulnerability theory, trauma theory, affect theory, and existential ideas to examine the characters.

Indeed, the study aims to examine fragility and vitality in the four women, Naoko's vulnerability and action, Midori's vitality and grief, Reiko's suffering, care, and creativity, Hatsumi's hidden emotionally lingering pain, and the effect of Toru's narrative perspective on the presentation of these women, their voices, emotions, and inner experiences.

Research Methodology

It is a qualitative approach based on a close reading of Jay Rubin's English translation of Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* (Murakami, 2000). The analysis examines the portrayal of the female characters through their actions, dialogue, correspondence, memories, music, care for others, hidden grief, and Toru's narrative style. Psychological and trauma-related theories are used only as interpretive tools for understanding these literary aspects though the characters are not labeled as patients, nor are their conditions interpreted from a medical perspective. In fact, Rubin's English translation serves as the primary textual reference and therefore provides the basis for maintaining word choice, sentence structure, and different modes of expression.

Conceptual, Theoretical and Analytical Frameworks

This study integrates several theoretical perspectives to understand the complex experiences of the four female characters. The writers like Beauvoir's (2011/1949) and Cixous's (1976) theories help analyze how these women normally construct their identities as "female subjects" and navigate social and gender-based expectations. Then, Lorde's (1984) concepts further explain how their voices, secret desires, personal preferences, and forms of self-expression become ways of establishing their own "actions." Mulvey's (1975) perspective draws attention to male-centered forms of representation and

perception, which becomes particularly important because Toru's narration primarily presents the women's experiences to the reader. Freud's (1957), Caruth's (1996), and LaCapra's (2001) theories generally provide a framework for analysing grief, separation, and traumatic memories, as well as their effects on the characters' actions and relationships. Next, Berlant's (2011) concept of "cruel optimism" helps explain emotional bonds and relationships that promise hope, love, or connection while producing suffering and lasting melancholy. However, these perspectives allow the female characters to be examined from multiple angles. It demonstrates how emotional vulnerability can coexist with a strong desire for life, love, connection, and self-expression.

It should be noted that the practical analysis raises some key questions pertaining to the experiences of the four women and the perspective from which these experiences are conveyed. Namely, the traumatic loss of a beloved person and close relationships with people are explored as factors that cause Naoko's high level of psychological sensitivity. Meanwhile, the perspective from which Midori achieves her own identity and independence in the form of intense desires, a sharp mind and a powerful presence is discussed. At the same time, Reiko's painful life experiences are analysed through the prism of her compassionate and creative nature. Hatsumi's composed and well-bred personality is explored through the prism of the inner vulnerability that lies behind it. Finally, the masculine perspective of Toru is explored with regards to the experiences of these women. Thus, it can be seen that the theoretical perspectives remain tightly connected to the literary work and become the tools of its analysis.

Discussion

Naoko: Fragility as the Labour of Holding Oneself Together

The character of Naoko presents one of the best examples of emotional fragility in the novel because her psychological sufferings were not triggered by the death of Kizuki alone. Before his death, she had faced yet another trauma associated with the suicide of her older sister. Therefore, the death of Kizuki added another injury to those wounds that have already made life of Naoko very painful because she and Kizuki had spent their childhood together and their relationship had become a very significant part of her dreams related to love, adulthood and future.

The condition of Naoko is explained by Uzma et al. (2025) through the feeling of grief and meaninglessness in life. He describes how hard it is for Naoko to disconnect the present from the pains of past. Her suffering, however, is not caused by a persistent attachment to a dead person alone. It is also related to her longing to the future that had been imagined but has never been able to materialize. In this way, the loss of Kizuki affects Naoko's recollections about the past and expectations regarding the future.

Moreover, one of the most heartbreaking moments is when Toru suggests Naoko

to relax her body; the response of the girl is - "If I relaxed my body now, I'd fall apart" (Murakami, 2000, p. 8). It is clear how difficult it can be for a person to keep mental stability under the threat of being overwhelmed with grief. Since the relaxation is associated with some resting time, Naoko considers relaxing her body as some form of losing the control and fears that, while she is relaxed, her whole personality can fall apart. Consequently, the continuous efforts to hold Naoko together become part of the everyday experience. It becomes evident that Naoko's fragility is not about giving up; on the contrary, it is a silent struggle for mental survival too.

The Caruth's (1996) idea of trauma is helpful in explaining the recurrent nature of Naoko's mental agony since, according to Caruth, deep trauma does not become part of normal memory; it returns to consciousness via painful thoughts and feelings. Naoko cannot comprehend and express the deaths of Kizuki and her sister, nor her personal mental agony and fear of the disease since these events have not been resolved. Yet their effects continue to shape her emotional life, repeatedly drawing her into cycles of melancholy and psychological pain. Her past continues to influence her present life over and again.

In spite of having profound suffering, Naoko does not completely give up on life. Her struggle to survive beautifully, rather, remains pronounced because it reveals a run-on desire for love, human connection, and a beautiful future. In spite of her profound suffering, the person, Naoko does not completely give up on life initially, rahter her struggle to survive is underscored by a deep desire for love. Human connection and a stable future are also convincing. In her letters to Toru Watanabe from the Ami Hostel, she wrote the details how her quiet routine and deeply therapeutic conversations with her roommate, Reiko Ishida, finely offer a sense of peace that contrasts with her inner mental turmoil. While fear and melancholy remain powerful, the crippling forces in her life and fragile hopes of recovery persist through her written words. Rather than expressing a desperate plea to start over, her true letters reveal a quiet, cautious longing to step back into the outside world. It also reconstructs her life with Toru by normally indicating that her search for healing is deeply tied to her lovely bond with him. This intensely hidden longing for love and human connection turns out to be particularly clear in her words when he says, "I have a million things to talk to you about. All I want in this world is you. I want to see you and talk. I want the two of us to begin everything from the beginning" (lines 89–90). The statement expresses more than sorrow or loneliness by revealing both a desire to recover a lost relationship and a hope for a future with the person she deeply loves.

At the same time, Naoko does not want Toru to abandon his normal life because of her problems and therefore tells him, "Don't wait for me" (Murakami, 2000, p. 192). Although these words reveal her melancholy, they also show the concerns for Toru and his future that another person's entire life should not depend on her physical and mental struggles. The fear of becoming a burden to others for the second time complicates this concern, particularly because she worries that dependence on Toru may eventually cause

him severe pain. Here, Butler's (2004) fundamental concept of human vulnerability helps explain this trepidation that human beings are naturally in need of love, care, and support at different stages of life, and dependency is equated with weakness or a loss of self-worth. Naoko, however, finds it quite difficult to accept this natural aspect of human existence and consequently feels guilt when depending on others. Her struggle, therefore, does not arise from a complete absence of the self-preservation to live but from a conflict between the desire for love and the fear of human intimacy. Emotional closeness remains important to her, yet unknown fear prevents her from fully accepting and sustaining it.

The staying of Naoko at the "Ami" sanatorium reflects this conflict between protection and emotional connection. It is a quiet and disciplined life there which normally provides protection and some mental relief, separating her from ordinary life and other people. The surrounding mountains, trees, and grass around this sanatorium create a sense of safety, but these also produce feelings of detachment and confinement from the outside world. The sanatorium therefore becomes both a place of self-protection and a space that keeps her distant from the life and relationships she deeply desires of.

Strecher's (2014) research on psychological landscapes in Murakami's novels helps explain this experience. The writer Murakami uses physical environments to reflect the psychology of individuals, even when his fiction does not contain supernatural elements. The "Ami" sanatorium provides one example of this pattern because it stands between ordinary life and a secluded world which gives sad Naoko distance from an ever-changing society while offering a sense of protection; its physical isolation reflects the emotional tension within her life, as the security she needs also creates a gap from the human connections she continues to desire. On the contrary, Naoko's tragic suicide should not become the only rationale for understanding her character. Such a view can overlook important aspects of her life and personality. Thinking only about her death can make us forget the love, hope, and wish to live that she had before, because she tries to stay close to Toru and other people because she wants love and friendship. This wish is real since she does not pretend; rather, she truly wants to be in love with others and receive love from them.

Naoko's fragility clings to the deep pain of losing people she loves, and thus, the novel shows that logical thinking cannot simply take away the pain of such loss, nor can a better understanding of life make it disappear at the end. Toru expresses this idea when he says - "No truth can cure the sorrow we feel from losing a loved one. No truth, no sincerity, no strength, no kindness can cure that sorrow. All we can do is see it through to the end and learn something from it, but what we learn will be no help in facing the next sorrow that comes to us without warning" (lines 80–81). In fact, these words help explain why Naoko's sadness and emotional struggle fail to obtain a simple solution or treatment. Her suffering comes from deep personal loss. Such pain does not suddenly disappear through ordinary solutions. Instead, it remains close as a part of her life and continues to shape the

way she thinks, feels, and relates to other concerned people.

However, memory creates a strong connection between the living and the dead. Toru later utters - "People leave strange little memories of themselves behind when they die" (lines 157–158). Naoko similarly leaves lasting memories in the minds of those who knew her and her words, actions, love, pain, and relationships remain in Toru's memory, even after her death. Therefore, her absence does not completely erase her presence because Naoko continues to exist through the memories of other people and through the story that Toru tells about her. In this sense, her absence becomes another form of presence, as her remembered life and emotional experiences continue to hold meaning.

Midori Kobayashi: Vitality, Hunger, and the Right to Need

Midori brings a vitality to the novel. She speaks rapidly, makes jokes, cooks, drinks, sings, and expresses her feelings wide-openly. A time comes when she suddenly becomes angry and asks Toru some direct questions by breaking and interrupting his quiet and often melancholic thoughts. Her care for her critically ill father further reveals another side of her soft personality. This way, Midori appears to be very different from Naoko. Such a contrast does not mean that Naoko can simply be described as a weak and ill woman while Midori is seen as a healthy and strong one. Midori has also experienced death and loss because her mother has died, while her father is critically ill and awaiting the end of his life. Along with her sister, she must carry the daily responsibility of caring for him.

Because of these experiences, Midori knows well about the hospitals and their atmosphere very well, also because she has witnessed physical suffering and extreme exhaustion, as well as the gradual decline of the human body and the continuous work involved in caring for a person with no hope of recovery. Staying within such a painful environment, Midori develops her vibrant personality in full swing rather than simply escaping from the reality of suffering. Her intense desire for love, for example, becomes especially clear when she says, "I was hungry for love" (Murakami, 2000, p. 99). Midori looks playful, lively, and confident, but she also deeply needs love and emotional support because her lively nature does not mean that she has no pain rather her experiences of losing people and caring for others have shaped her feelings and increased her need for love and close relationships.

Midori tries to connect her understanding of love closely with physical hunger. She says, "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. Just once" (lines 64–65). Here, by using the word "hunger" to describe her need for real love, Midori intensely presents emotional desire as something as strong and real as the need for food because love is not merely an idea or a mental emotion for her; she wants to experience it deeply and physically. Psychologically, this interconnection between emotion and the body appears

throughout her life, as food, illness, physical hunger, touch, and care for others repeatedly become parts of her emotional experiences. Rather than trying to escape her body or separate emotional needs from physical life, Midori, another female character of this novel, openly accepts both her physical and emotional desires.

Theoretically, Lorde's (1984) concept of the "erotic" helps explain this aspect of Midori's character, as he describes it as a matter of deep awareness of personal feelings and bodily desires, while patriarchal society often imposes on women to distrust such feelings. Here, Midori chases after a different path by boldly speaking about her latent desires and emotions. Her spur-of-the-moment words sometimes make other people laugh, feel discomfited, or become surprised, yet such openness also gives clear expression to her sense of self. Chakraborty and Sharma (2024), however, tactfully affirm this pattern of behavior as a form of female action, typically arguing that Midori candidly expresses desires as women are often expected to keep silent. Their perspective challenges the idea that outspoken women in Murakami's selected novels exist only to satisfy male desire. A study by Sneha (2022) points out that Midori openly expresses her feelings, body, and desires, showing her own identity and choices, because Toru tells the story from a male point of view and we see Midori through his eyes; therefore, her freedom exists alongside this limitation.

Midori's intense desire to live long can be seen in her everyday life. She takes care of her seriously ill father in the hospital. There, she stays with him until his final days - like she feeds him, sits beside him, talks to him, waits for him, and does the small things needed to care for a dying person. Through these experiences, she learns about death in a very real way, and for her, death is not just a philosophical idea but a reality of the earth. She sees it through illness, pain, caregiving, and human weakness. Even in these painful situations, Midori continues joking and keeps her sense of humor alive. Indeed, her humor does not mean that she is unable to understand pain, rather, it helps her face difficult situations and continue living her life.

Meanwhile, Midori also deals with anger and frustration openly. Toru is confused because he still has feelings for Naoko but is also becoming attracted to Midori. She does not want to remain in this uncertain situation and wants Toru to understand what he truly feels. Her desire for emotional connection is clear when she asks, "So what's wrong if there happens to be one guy in the world who enjoys trying to understand you?" (lines 173–174). For Midori, understanding each other is an important part of love. Unlike Naoko, she openly expresses what she wants, even though this may bring disappointment or pain. She further emphasizes her need for present human connection when she calls herself "a real, live girl" (Murakami, 2000, p. 263). While Toru often remains emotionally connected to people who are dead, distant, or absent, Midori reminds him of the needs of someone who is still alive. Her vitality appears in her humor and energy. It is also expressed in her strong desire for love, care, and meaningful human connection. In fact, Midori's inner vitality

comes from her strong desire to keep living, even after experiencing loss and pain, while wanting Toru to value her life and feelings. Her emotional openness becomes especially clear when she tells Toru, "I don't care what you do to me, but I don't want you to hurt me. I've had enough hurt already in my life. More than enough. Now I want to be happy" (lines 150–151). In this sense, Midori's strength does not normally eliminate fragility; rather, her determination to live develops alongside the pain, fear, and emotional dependence.

Reiko Ishida: Psychological Fracture, Narrative, and Reciprocal Care

The experience of emotional pain and suffering is never a sign of personal weakness. Neither does it hinder one's ability to lead a meaningful existence. She had to confront hard truths at different stages of her journey in the form of mental breakdowns, the end of her music career, divorce, indifference from society, and long periods of isolation. However, none of these difficulties have made her stop. On the contrary, she has gained wisdom through these experiences and has developed into a compassionate human being with an innate capability to understand the needs of others while pursuing her life. The writings of Uzma et al. (2025) reflect that Reiko is a compassionate woman who has suffered a lot, whereas the contributions of Khan and Sharma (2025) point out her distinctive contribution towards building connections and empathy among women of the 'Sanatorium'. While not hiding her own pain and not playing the part of a normal person, Reiko finds her true strength within herself by accepting painful truths in the form of shame, guilt, and family discrimination.

The work by Takeuchi (2010) about female narratives is also helpful here. Norwegian Wood is largely told from Toru's memories; therefore, he mostly observes and interprets the stories of the women. The long story by Reiko is different since she tells her story, whereas Toru listens to her. It gives her more control over her story and helps the readers understand the girl's pain by listening to it directly. Reiko demonstrates the importance of expressing one's feelings by saying, "She's letting out her feelings. The scary thing is not being able to do that. When your feelings build up and harden and die inside, then you're in big trouble" (lines 198–199). Therefore, the girl's words prove that expressing one's emotions is not a weak action. On the contrary, bottling up the feelings can lead to greater pain. Reiko's perception of human feelings also enables her to take care of others. She helps the people by showing her love, comprehension, and emotions rather than owing to her social position and status.

The other detail about Reiko's character is her decision to leave the "Ami" sanatorium. The sanatorium keeps the girl safe, but she can't stay there forever. But, the sanatorium is a safe haven, and to be there forever could in some ways too be living shrunken. Just because she leaves does not mean that her troubles are over. Reiko is instead left to live her life, with both an uncertain future the pain of those memories that simply

will not fade. Power of her is the step she takes even when she does not know the next step. Reiko's experience proves too that grief can be experienced without stepping outside of life. Although Naoko is dead, Reiko and Toru go on living with the legacy of her suffering. It shows that it is possible for grief to coexist with a normal life. But it has to be, for Reiko embraces her pain and difference instead of allowing those things to ha define you. She said, "The very fact that we aren't normal is what makes us most normal." It is hard for a human to take in differences and pain, so for Reiko, embracing all of one another signifies living life and compassion towards someone.

Reiko endures the tragedy of Toru by overcoming the uncertainties and challenges of life with the same approach as Toru does. She advises him, "This is one more piece of advice I have for you: don't get impatient. Even if things are so tangled up you can't do anything, don't get desperate or blow a fuse and start yanking on one particular thread before it's ready to come undone. You have to realize it's going to be a long process and that you'll work on things slowly, one at a time" (lines 263–264). Her advice shows that life does not always need quick or perfect solutions because difficult problems can be handled slowly, one at a time. Reiko's own life shows this idea because she continues living with her past pain while slowly moving toward an uncertain future.

Hatsumi: Invisible Fragility and the Cost of Unequal Love

Hatsumi shows another form of fragility in the novel. At first, she does not seem fragile because she is intelligent, educated, respected, and emotionally mature. Toru also sees her as calm and strong. Unlike Reiko, she does not show clear signs of long-term mental health problems. However, her relationship with Nagasawa reveals her hidden emotional pain. Nagasawa values his freedom as well as wants Hatsumi to love him and stay close to him. He openly tells her about his relationships with other women, but his actions still hurt her deeply and their relationship shows that being honest about one's actions does not always mean caring about another person's feelings. Hatsumi, however, understands Nagasawa well, but she still hopes that he may change and that their relationship may become better. She expresses this hope when she asks, "People change, though, don't you think?" (Murakami, 2000, p. 284).

Berlant's (2011) idea of "cruel optimism" helps explain Hatsumi's pain. She hopes that Nagasawa will change and that their relationship will become better, but this hope also keeps her in a relationship that hurts her and her fragility does not come from a lack of intelligence or understanding, rather, it comes from her strong hope for a happy future with him. Beauvoir's (2011/1949) idea of the "woman in love", further, helps explain their relationship. Hatsumi wants love, closeness, and a life together. On the other hand, Nagasawa gives more importance to his freedom, career, travel, and personal goals. In fact, their main problem is that they want different things from the relationship- Nagasawa wants

freedom, while Hatsumi wants love, closeness, and a shared future.

Hatsumi's emotional fragility is not easy to see because she remains patient, calm, and unwilling to show her inner suffering. Psychological trauma offers one way to understand this hidden pain. The novel shows that people can hurt those people who love without fully understanding the effects of their actions. Toru reflects on this - "What a terrible thing it is to wound someone you really care for and to do it so unconsciously" (lines 105–106). This idea is closely connected to Hatsumi's experience. There is no clear evidence that Nagasawa intentionally wants to hurt her. However, his strong desire for freedom and his decision to follow his own wishes cause Hatsumi deep emotional pain though she wants a loving relationship based on care, understanding, and closeness, while Nagasawa gives more importance to his independence and personal goals. Her suffering grows from this difference between what she hopes to receive from the relationship and what she actually receives and thus, her calm and patient behavior hides a deep emotional struggle that others may not easily notice.

Toru's Male Narration and the Fragility of Female Voice

A proper understanding of the female characters in Norwegian Wood requires attention to their narrator, Toru Watanabe, who narrates most of the novel by looking back on his youth from adulthood. The entire portrayal of the women hinges, in fact, on Toru's memory. Which events she recalls, which words she brings to the fore, how she sketches their figures, or which experiences she prioritizes - all of this is determined by her own choices. The way this story is told creates an emotional tension throughout the book. On one hand, Toru's memories keep the stories of these women alive. Her memories connect their lively past to her own thoughts in the present. On the other hand, because we only see everything through her eyes, what we know about their lives and feelings is seemingly limited.

Also, Laura Mulvey's (1975) famous idea of the "male gaze" was originally made for studying movies. Because of this, it cannot be used for books and literature in the exact same way. However, the idea helps explain Toru's view of women. He often notices their physical appearance, body, beauty, and sexual appeal. Sneha (2022), another author, also connects such representations with the male-centered narrative in Murakami's work. However, Toru does not fully control or understand the women he describes. Their feelings and experiences often remain beyond his understanding, which creates clear limits in his narration.

Takeuchi (2010) proves that Norwegian Wood is made up of smaller narratives within the overall narrative of Toru's life. The letters written by Naoko give her a voice which is independent of Toru, Reiko's personal narrative turns Toru into a listener, while Midori's questions and jokes, as well as her rage, give an entirely different direction to the

narrative. In this case, the ideas put forward by Cixous (1976) can help understand the significance of those voices. Even though the narrative is told from the male point of view, the women are not voiceless and submissive.

Takeuchi (2010) shows that Norwegian Wood contains more diminutive narratives within Toru's main story. Naoko's letters give her an independent voice, Reiko's personal story makes Toru a good listener, while Midori's questions, jokes, and anger alter the very direction of the narrative. Anyway, Cixous's (1976) ideas help explain the importance of these female voices because, although the story here is told from a male perspective, the women are not passive or partly submissive. The matter of memory also creates some limits in Toru's narrations. He admits that memory is not always obvious or permanent - "Memory is a funny thing. When I was in the scene, I hardly paid it any mind. I never stopped to think of it as something that would make a lasting impression, certainly never imagined that eighteen years later I would recall it in such detail" (lines 180–181)**.** Thus, Toru rebuilds the memorable past through later recollections. He normally controls the telling of the story, but he cannot fully do it on its meaning or completely explain the women's experiences.

Naoko speaks through letters and personal expressions. Midori asserts herself through lively conversations and feelings, while Reiko leaves her mark through her memories and life story. Toru narrates their lives, and he does not completely define or control who these women are. The novel, however, thrives on this constant tension, and it balances Toru's role as the storyteller against the independent, powerful voices of the women within his life.

Beyond the Naoko-Midori Binary: Fragility as a Condition of Care

The central argument implicitly links human vulnerability with the desire to live, and Naoko lacks two things, strength and solidity, because of her deep attachment to others. Midori seeks love, care, and recognition. Reiko keeps her relationships in spite of having a painful past. Besides, Hatsumi also holds on to hope through her relationship with Nagasawa. Their experiences simply suggest that an attachment can bring physical suffering or discomfort caused by illness, but normally, it also gives people a strong reason to remain connected to life.

Butler (2004) sees the matter, vulnerability, as a normal part of human life because people need other ones on the way of life, and in Norwegian Wood, it comes from caring deeply and forming close relationships. Naoko and Hatsumi show how such attachment can leave a person open to emotional hurt. Love gives their relationships true meaning, but it also makes them more sensitive to loss of mental energy. Furthermore, the novel questions whether emotional distance can protect a person from suffering or not. Nagasawa values his freedom and avoids deep commitment. Yet Hatsumi's death leaves him with

grief, and ultimately, his experience suggests that keeping people at a distance does not mean making a person free from loss.

Midori and Reiko present a different response to difficult experiences such as, Midori remains open to relationships, while Reiko uses her painful experiences to make known and support others. LaCapra's (2001) central idea of "working through" helps explain Reiko's position, and it carries the meaning of living with difficult memories rather than allowing them to have control over the rest of one's life. Her eventual decision to leave the "Ami" sanatorium marks a significantly important step towards a different future phenomenon. The statement "Only the Dead stay seventeen forever" (lines 114–115), however, separates the condition of the dead from that of the living. The dead remain fixed in the past, whereas the living keep on changing, and this idea is reflected in Reiko's firm decision to leave the "Ami" sanatorium and in Midori's strong connection with the present. The novel interconnectedly develops this idea further through the statement - "If you're in pitch blackness, all you can do is sit tight until your eyes get used to the dark" (lines 121–122). In fact, the image of this line suggests that difficult experiences cannot always be understood at once. People may need time before they can see their actual situation clearly, and in this sense, vitality is not the absence of minor difficulty; rather, it is the capacity to remain engaged with life while boldly facing uncertainty and loss.

Findings

Naoko's fragility does not mean passivity because she may have deep mental anguish. Nevertheless, she writes letters, cares for Toru, expresses her feelings, and seeks connection well. Her suicide should not erase these parts of her life. In fact, Naoko's suffering is shaped by grief, loneliness, and emotional disconnection, which eventually provokes her to commit suicide (Ali & Mousumi, 2026).

On the other hand, Midori's vitality grows through serious hardship and loss; loneliness, lack of affection, and family responsibilities shape her life, but humour, directness, desire, and emotional openness nicely keep her tied to everyday life.

Then, Reiko shows that a psychological crisis does not prevent a new beginning. Via music, storytelling, friendship, and friendly care, she softly carries her painful past while initiating a new path in life and carrying her journey. Hatsumi appears calm and socially thriving, yet her attachment to Nagasawa causes in-depth pain because she seeks commitment while he values utmost freedom. Their relationship shows the cost of unequal emotional expectations, and she commits suicide later.

Toru's male-centered narration keeps these women present through memory, but their life stories are also shaped by his acquaintance with the past.

Overall, the term 'love' links fragility with vitality. Passionate relationships make these women vulnerable, but they also give them reasons to care, connect, and keep spontaneous

living.

Implications of the Study

The literary importance of this study is to see Naoko, Midori, Reiko, and Hatsumi as individual women with their own feelings, wishes, problems, and identities, not only as women connected to Toru.

The theoretical importance is to understand that being vulnerable does not mean being weak. Butler, Nussbaum, Berlant, and Lorde show that a person can suffer emotionally and still have action, make choices, express feelings, and control parts of life. From a feminist view, the study shows that the women in the novel have their own voices, although their stories are mainly told through Toru's male perspective. It therefore looks at both their freedom and their limitations.

The study also avoids simply calling Murakami's representation of women either feminist or misogynistic. Instead, it examines the representation in a more balanced way. The characters are more complex than either label suggests. Their vulnerability exists with desire, their desire with action, and their actions with the ability to make choices and maintain a sense of self.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research Directions

While going through this study, it focuses only on Haruki Murakami's novel *Norwegian Wood* and mainly uses Jay Rubin's English translation. So, some meanings and feelings in the original Japanese may not be fully captured. In fact, it uses selected literary and feminist theories yet does not examine the novel through in-depth psychological, sociological, queer, disability, or intersectional approaches. The study also focuses mainly on female characters and slights; to some extent, the psychological struggles of Toru, Kizuki, and Nagasawa for future comparative research.

Conclusion

However, in *Norwegian Wood*, one can say that emotional vulnerability and liveliness of the women are not antithetical traits, which become more complex in the cases of Naoko, Midori, Reiko, and Hatsumi. For example, although she is mentally fragile, Naoko always tries to establish connection with others. Midori's liveliness is built on the experience of losing people and being lonely. Reiko manages to start a new life in the ways of music, stories, friends, and love; under the shell of serenity and composure of Hatsumi lies the deep sorrow of her relationship with Nagasawa. In addition, the male-centered style of narration gives a new dimension to the experiences of these women. Although Toru

preserves the stories of the girls through his memories, he describes the past from his point of view. However, the conversations, emotions, desires, and decisions of the characters give them an active role in the plot since they are not turned into mere objects and triggers of Toru's emotional development. Thus, the fragility of a woman does not make her lose her identity and power to act, and vitality does not mean absence of pain in life.

In essence, the fragility of a woman does not necessarily mean that the woman lacks identity and power, just as vitality does not necessarily mean that life is without pain. Though the ability to express emotions may leave these women exposed and vulnerable, it is because of the very same ability to feel emotion that allows them to love, communicate and have meaning in life. Therefore, *Norwegian Wood* offers a multifaceted picture of women's lives.

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