Alma Mater – Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies
Research Article, JISC 2025:3, 164–174
DOI: 10.29329/almamater.2025.1360.13

Oneirism, Alternative Realities, And Covid-19 Pandemic in Murakami Haruki's *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* (2024)

Veronica De Pieri[1]

Abstract

Murakami Haruki's literary production can be associated with oneirism from different perspectives. The liminal boundary that in authorial works divides 'his world' (*kocchi no sekai*) from the 'other world' (*acchi no sekai*) constitutes the focus of a narrative between truth and fiction, facts and dreamlike visions. This impairment in reality testing can thus be interpreted as a multifaceted psychotic disorder, in which the delusions, hallucinations and mnestic dysfunctions to which the protagonists are subjected find manifestation in the "double world" that characterizes the authorial production, undoubtedly influenced by magic realism. It is the identity crisis of the contemporary era, in which the mind is tormented by the freneticism of daily life, social pressures and the present insecurity. Murakami's most recent novel, *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* (2024), indulges in the author's most common literary tropes by adding to the psychological distress of the protagonists the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic that saw the genesis of the work. The novel explores the sense of loss, regret, and social withdrawal provoked by urban barriers in the claustrophobic context that compels the search for a dreamscape in which to take refuge. Through an interdisciplinary approach that brings into dialogue literary criticism and an interest in psychopathological sequelae related to the fluidity of the present and the social anxiety that permeates the contemporaneity, this paper aims to explore how Murakami's alternative realities are manifestations of hallucinatory psychosis reflective of social turmoil and political chaos, a split, if not an actual dissociative disorder of the individual unable to integrate into the society of which he or she is a part.

Keywords: Murakami Haruki, magical realism, alternative realities, oneirism, mental health

Introduction: Murakami Haruki – Writer, Idol, Myth

Murakami Haruki 村上春樹 (born 1949) is one of the most controversial contemporary authors: much loved by his loyal fandom, but at the same time criticized by the literary circles for his production aimed more at the global than the local Japanese dimension (Chozick, 2008, 62). His elusive personality is unconventional in Japan, where writers are considered stars and at the same time opinion leaders, often engaged in the national and international socio-political debate. Thus, Murakami's distance from the public sphere contributed to the creation of his myth: an idol celebrated by the masses but difficult to approach. His many passions and hobbies – music, especially jazz, travelling, running –

[1] Senior Researcher and Adjunct Professor, Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, Italy, veronica.depieri@unibo.it, ORCID-ID: 0000-0003-0041-2710.

How to cite this article: De Pieri, V. (2025). Oneirism, Alternative Realities, And Covid-19 Pandemic in Murakami Haruki's *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* (2024). In: *Alternative Realities, Special Issue of Alma Mater – Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies, 2025:3, 164–174.*
Submitted: 05.08.2025
Accepted: 09.08.2025

This article © 2025 by Maurer Press is licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0

contributed to the construction of a lifestyle later imitated on social media (Torrefranca, 2020).

His literary production bears a trademark that distinguishes his novels from other contemporaries: the protagonists are a male (*boku* 僕) and a female narrative voice surrounded by mystery; continuous flashbacks fragment the time frame; and the setting is always suspended between the real and dream-like worlds, which often overturn the perception of the narrative in what is considered Murakami's 'double world'. Then again, a series of collateral but distinctive elements characterizes Murakami's writing style: a cat, a fantasy figure somewhere between a man and a sheep, explicit if not violent sexuality, and unresolved psychological trauma. The recipe for a Murakami-like bestseller is all here, resolved between the use of magical realism and the description of contemporary anxiety.

Ōe Kenzaburō, Japan's second Nobel laureate in literature, lamented in Murakami's generation and his production a lack of social engagement, at least in the early part of his career. Critics agree in defining a very early production of the author as 'detachment' and a second of 'commitment', as will be explored later (Kim, 2023, 416). The constant references to popular culture, especially North American pop culture, that characterize Japanese literary production in the 1980s, were not just a result of post-World War II occupation, but rather a consumerist drive dictated by the first hints of globalization. The constant intertextual references to overseas musical, cinematic, and literary creations are accurate homages to a production that accompanied this generation of writers born after World War II in childhood and adolescence. According to Yurdakul (2024, 1004), "Murakami's international success is emblematic of this broader cultural shift, as his works resonate with both Japanese and Western audiences, bridging cultural divides and demonstrating the enduring impact of Japan's historical engagement with Western ideas".

It is unwise, therefore, to regard these authors' literary production as merely aimed at entertainment. Murakami Ryū 村上龍 (born 1952), a multifaceted novelist, radio broadcaster, and filmmaker, recounts in his novels the revolutionary movements for sexual emancipation of his generation; Yoshimoto Banana 吉本ばなな (born 1964; real name Yoshimoto Mahoko 吉本真秀子), who owes much of her success to *shōjo bunka* 少女文化 (girl culture), deals with the redefinition of identity of her protagonists as they enter adult life and cope with the trauma of bereavement, abandonment, and social isolation by cultivating nostalgia for the past.

Murakami Haruki, for his part, committed as an essayist by investigating one of the most sensitive collective traumas of 20th-century Japan: the terrorist attack at the Tōkyō subway by the Aum Shinrikyō sect in 1995, covered in the two-volume *Underground* and *Underground II* (1997-1998). In the same year, the author also commemorated the Kōbe earthquake in his collection of short stories, *After the Quake* (1995). According to Rosenbaum (2014, 102), the fil rouge of these two works is the 'underground' which enables the exploration of the Japanese mindscape. In a sense, "[t]his dual exploration of the 'underground' in both literal and symbolic terms underscores Murakami's innovative perspective on the intersection of personal and collective trauma" (Yurdakul, 2024, 1006).

Less than a decade later, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* (2014) was released, which Suter (2016, 306) read as the author's critical response to the Tōhoku triple catastrophe and the mainstream discourse of endurance and social bonds, by proposing an "individual story of loss and grief". At the same time, Lee (2019) considers the abrupt abandonment by Tsukuru's friends as a response to the tremendous toll of the 2011 earthquake and tsunamis. Last but not least, in the author's last novel, *The City and Its*

Uncertain Walls (2024) readers glimpse the legacies of the Covid-19 pandemic that has ravaged the globe in the two years of global health emergency.

Hence, it is inappropriate to limit the definition of Murakami's production as 'art pour l'art'; equally complex to frame him as a socio-political committed author, in the sense attributed by Jean-Paul Sartre (1998) or Ōe to the writer's activity. Certainly, Murakami's meta-literary reflections on writing return a more accurate picture of his opinion on the subject, but, as he stated (2022, cover), "[w]ords have power. Yet that power must be rooted in truth and justice. Words must never stand apart from those principles". *Jun bungaku* 純文学 (pure literature) and *taishū bungaku* 大衆文学 (popular literature) are outdated labels that reveal little about an author's production.

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that brings into dialogue literary criticism and an interest in psychopathological sequelae related to the fluidity of the present and the social anxiety that permeates contemporaneity. The final aim is to explore how Murakami's alternative realities are manifestations of hallucinatory psychosis reflective of social turmoil and political chaos, a split, if not an actual dissociative disorder of the individual unable to integrate into the society of which he or she is a part.

Oneirism, Psychotic Disorder and Reality Testing in Murakami's Double World

In the psychological field, the term 'oneirism' refers to a dream-like state (from the Greek word 'oneiros,' meaning 'dream'; APA Dictionary of Psychology). This dream-like mental state is experienced while awake; the concept of 'dream delirium' also addresses visual and auditory hallucinations, temporal and spatial disorientation, trance or other altered state of consciousness, delusional thoughts provoked by irrational ideas and emotional discomfort.

According to a psychoanalytic perspective, oneirism occurs as the repression of a painful stimulus; it is the distancing from reality that is unconsciously manifested through states of somnolence. Murakami's short story *The Little Green Monster* (1993), played on the metaphor of a bleeding ground of a large tree as the ejaculation of non-consensual intercourse suffered by the protagonist, is undoubtedly one of the most striking examples among Murakami's production that employs oneirism to expose repressed psychological trauma.

Critics link the protagonists' refuge in alternative realities, in another dream-like, fantastic world, as a more or less conscious escape from reality, a 'detachment' due to "protagonists' lack of engagement with the external world, a lack of social critique, an unproductive urban ennui, solipsism, an escape into surrealist fantasy" (Kim, 2023, 417), which seems to mirror author's lifestyle. The presence of the oneiric dimension finds explanation in Murakami's production since "dreams or other semiconscious states are one way to come in contact with [particular] images, but more often they surface unpredictably in our waking lives to apprehend by the conscious mind and then to return just as unpredictably to their place of origin" (Rubin, 1999, 180).

Some of these symptoms of oneirism overlap, in whole or in part, with psychotic disorders in which the subject loses contact with reality due to misinterpretation of one's thoughts. In fact, according to *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition (DSM-5), visual and auditory hallucinations perceived as real; delusions, i.e., false beliefs; disorganized behaviors and thoughts for which normality becomes the exception and vice versa; expressive disorders, such as alexithymia or selective mutism, refer to the psychosis cluster.

The protagonists of Murakami's works often find themselves in liminal circumstances, on

the border between truth and fiction, facts and dream-like visions. Reading's alienating effect comes from the inability to recognize the demarcation line that separates Murakami's so-called 'double worlds,' *kocchi no sekai* こっちの世界 (this world) and *acchi no sekai* あっちの世界 (the other world). In some novels, that line is more evident, as in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985); in others, it is much more insubstantial, as in *Norwegian Wood* (1987), considered the author's most realistic novel, even though the clinic where the female protagonist is ospedalized is described as a non-place suspended in time. In other works, immersive storytelling blurs the otherwise fairly precise boundaries of these 'double worlds', so much so that it flips the perspective between what is real and what is fictional; Roy (2021) defines it as "psychic, physical and spiritual fluidity-cummobility".

Such is the case of *The Strange Library* (2014) or the *1Q89* (2011) trilogy pervaded by a dystopian atmosphere that even the title recalls George Orwell's masterpiece. For instance, the Jungian psychologist Kawai (2002, 234) locates in the name of the protagonist of *Kafka on the Shore* (2005) a mirror of his inner conflict, trapped between what is possible (*Ka-* 可) and what is not (*-fuka* 不可), reinforcing the idea that Murakami's 'double world' consists of two parallel universes, communicating but not interchangeable. Likewise, in *The City and Its Uncertain Walls*, elements that blur common auditory and visual perceptions appear, contributing to the bewilderment of reason.

Oneirism can also be described, in psychological terms, as an impairment in reality testing (Arlow, 1969): the protagonists, and by extension, the reader, compromise their inner world, consisting of their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, with objective reality. This state of derealization is perceived as highly unfamiliar, thus causing detachment towards the outside world.

As anticipated, this deviation from reason is usually due, in the author's novels, to a psychological trauma that the protagonist has undergone without having the opportunity to reprocess his or her traumatic memories. In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1997) it is the trauma of war, rape, adultery, and murder; in *South of the Border, West of the Sun* (2000) the psychological disorder is given by illness, represented by Shimamoto's polio and the Inuit syndrome called Piblokto or Siberian hysteria that affects the protagonist; again, in The Trilogy of the Rat it is suicide, both in *Pinball, 1973* (1980) and in *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1989), and abortion in *Hear the Wind Sing* (1987). Potik (2023, 2) summarized them up in "isolation, meaninglessness, freedom and death". In debating the reception of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Strecher (2002, 69) concluded:

> But after all, the inner mind is not a well-organized machine, but a place of dark, disturbing forces, containing the roots of identity, but also the potential for madness. How can one really discuss such chaos in concrete, logical terms, much less expect a well-reasoned conclusion?

Hence, Murakami's resorting to magical realism and alternative realities serves as a literary stratagem to approach the unconscious, the inner psyche, and its unpleasant turmoil. In this sense, also the massive presence of music in Murakami's novels acts as a vessel for introspection and reprocessing of traumatic memories (Islam, 2024, 19).

Murakami, in conversation with Kawai Hayao (2022), stated he started writing fiction as a self-therapy for having lost his ex-girlfriend by suicide. Dil (2022) suggests that Murakami's novels are a battle between a Jungian-inspired protagonist and a Nietzschean-inspired antagonist. Eventually, some critics have attempted a Jungian reading of the author's works through the archetypes of Persona, Shadow, Anima, and the Self (Perez & Perez, 2024; Nygren, 2010). The author himself introduced a psychotherapist as a protagonist in the short story *A Shinagawa Monkey* (2006), published in *The New Yorker*.

The repression of such traumatic memories, which often emerge through these states of dream-like delirium, occurs through a tacit rule of omertà or taboo, which imposes strict secrecy on the protagonists. Contrary to critics' assertions, who see Murakami as an author closer to Western sensibilities than Japanese, this typical temperament of his characters is instead extremely Japanese: it is the *enryo* 遠慮, as to say, the hesitation in expressing oneself so as not to risk making the interlocutor uncomfortable, provoking embarrassment. This is a crucial element in cultural psychology because it intervenes as a modifier of relationships between both strangers and acquaintances.

The common traits of Murakami's protagonists seem to confirm the author's interest in translating onto paper a psychotic distress of which some symptoms are evident: hallucinations, delusions and expressive impairment that require the protagonists to restrain the expression of their feelings. At times, the symptoms are so pronounced as to suggest a schizoid personality: introverted, withdrawn and solitary characters - "lethargic", according to Potik (2023, 1); those protagonists who are socially cold and distant but very reflective and with a rather pronounced intimate dimension. They are intimidated by intimacy (but rather curious), uncommunicative, and prefer theoretical speculation to practical action. This can perhaps be recognized as the archetype of Murakami's male protagonists, a schizoid personality belonging to the personality disorder cluster. In the short novel *TV People* (2006), Ferreira (2018, 22-24) even identifies schizophrenic traits. Potik (2023, 3) discussed them in terms of "isolated schizoids"; instead, I would speak of the protagonist in terms of a schizotypal personality with paranoid ideas. Nevertheless, the author's interest in psychological distress and mental disorder is quite clear.

As a literary technique, this mutual intrusion into reality and fiction aroused by emotional distress is expressed through magical realism, which undermines the distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary through the incorporation of fantastic or supernatural elements into a real setting. The result, in the author's production, is to prefer an imaginative view of life, in which the distinction between reality and fiction is not only undermined but ultimately loses importance. In *Super-Frog Saves Tokyo* (2002), the reader is not shocked that an ordinary salaryman meets a giant talking frog one day: what matters is the outcome of that association and the rescue of the city from the monstrous Worm that is swirling under the metropolis, threatening to give rise to the fearsome Big One earthquake.

Murakami's production provides no solutions. According to Suter (2008, 120), "the writer/analyst Murakami Haruki is able to give meaning to the stories that people tell him because he is able to give them a narrative form". This metaphor of the author as psychotherapist highlights the complexity of the authorial production. It is not exclusively meant for entertainment, since it investigates the unease of modernity given by the frenzy of the present, the fluidity of both individual and collective identities and the social anxiety derived from an unstable and insecure contemporaneity. Both the socio-political sphere and the virtual world in which humankind is taking refuge are epitomized by Murakami's 'double world' and his conception of virtual (ir)reality. Loughman (2017, 88) stated:

> Murakami's characters are universal stock figures of contemporary literature, almost a cliché of the existential condition. Lonely, fragmented, unable to communicate, they live a mechanical, purposeless existence […] [and v]aguely sense they have a deep need for meaning and self-fulfilment. Mostly they are simply bewildered by their sense of disconnection and loss.

Cityscape, Isolation, and Covid-19 Pandemic in *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* (2024)

Machi to sono futashikana kabe 『街と、その不確かな壁』 was published by Kōdansha in April 2023, and therefore, when Japan was still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic emergency (level 2 of the Infectious Disease Control Law until May 2023). The pandemic officially caused in Japan more than 74.000 deaths, with 33 confirmed million cases (Worldometer). The result was a voluntary public cooperation in refraining from going out or "non-compulsory self-restraint requirements" (Karako et al., 2022, 1) – *jishuku* 自粛, which was successful thanks to Japanese cultural cohesion and collectivism (Qiao, 2024, 3). Indeed, Japanese allocentric society imposes forceful conformism, which in turn has contributed to enhancing civic spirit and collective responsibility for the Covid-19 transmission during the pandemic crisis. According to Yamamoto et al. (2020), although mask-wearing, hand-washing, and a strong awareness of public hygiene by the Japanese have worked as protective factors, almost 50% of people in major cities in Japan reported mild or greater psychological distress during their one-month mild lockdown experience.

The novel, first published as a short-story in *Bungakukai* 『文學界』 magazine in September 1980, had been judged by the author to be "a flop" that he "should not have written" (Murakami, 1991). Notwithstanding, the author confessed in the novel's afterword that he felt the urgency to invest new time and energy in the ancient plot, revisit it, and republish it in a new form, not least because, he added,

> [o]ne other thing to add is that 2020 was the Year of the Coronavirus. I started writing this novel in March 2020, just as the coronavirus began its rampage across Japan, and finished it nearly three years later. In the interim I rarely set foot outside my home, and avoided any lengthy trips, and in the weird and tension-inducing situations (with fairly long pause or cooling-off period in between) I worked steadily, day after day, on this novel (like the Dream Reader reading old dreams in the library). Those circumstances might be significant. Or maybe not. But I think they must mean something. I feel it in my bones. (Murakami, 2024, 445)

The novel is divided into three parts. The first involves a male and female character who, as teenagers, experience first love, moving between their cities of residence until the girl disappears without a trace. The only clue is the fact that she is convinced she is not real but a shadow: her authentic self, she claims, lives in the 'city of a high wall', described as "a very technically clever, artificial space" (Murakami, 2024, 122).

The description of their loving rendezvous is intertwined with the dream-like tales of the male protagonist, now an adult, who finds the girl again in that 'city of high a wall', even though he is not aware how he found it. This city is described as an oneiric space that can be reached only by coincidence, animated by strange figures – the unicorns that keep dying at its gates, the Gatekeeper who minds the only way in, the silent and condescending inhabitants. The atmosphere there is gloomy and the weather really cold.

To enter the city, individuals must renounce their shadows: that is why the girl is sure that her 'real' person is not the one the boy fell in love with in our world, but the eternal adolescent who lives in the city without her shadow. The girl, who has remained a teenager, does not seem to remember her great love and instead merely treats him as a Dream Reader. The protagonist's job is to spend his days in the library, reading people's old dreams – a skill he acquired through both innate nature and the sacrifice of his own shadow to enter the city, driven by a desperate attempt to meet the girl again.

Hence, the first impasse: if it is not reconnected to the human body, the shadow is bound to perish after a while. The protagonist then has to make a decision: stay in the 'city of a high wall' with the 'real' girl while losing his own shadow, or make the desperate attempt to escape back to 'our world', inhabited by the girl's missing shadow and the 'real' him.

Murakami devotes pages to the inner conflict of the protagonist, unable to make up his mind about what to do. His indecision is a symptom of the crisis of modern humankind, trapped between reality and virtuality: "Walking you home every night after work. How much of that was real, and how much was fiction? I couldn't say. […] Which world should I belong to? I couldn't decide" (Murakami, 2024, 103-104). And again: "In my head, there was a battle going on between reality and unreality. At this moment I was standing right in the interstice between this world and the other world. There was a fierce split between the conscious and the unconscious, and I had to choose where I should belong" (Murakami 2024, 121).

The protagonist opts for the second choice and he manages to escape, although without understanding clearly how. Once in Tōkyō, he decides to abandon his lifestyle and take refuge in an old library that reminds him of that of the 'city of a high wall' – a decision made not without regret:

> In the real world on this side I was on the verge of what's called middle age. Just a man with nothing special about him, not a 'specialist' anymore with the skills I possessed in that town. My eyes weren't wounded, and I wasn't qualified to read old dreams. I was nothing more than a cog in one of the systems that made up a gigantic society. A tiny, replaceable cog. I couldn't help feeling some regret for that. (Murakami, 2024, 133-134)

The second part of the novel begins with the man moving to an unnamed but icy town in Hokkaidō. Here, he becomes the director of a small, rather busy municipal library. The fantastical element emerges when he discovers that his employer died months earlier and that the pleasant conversations in front of the fireplace that he entertains with him are ... Dreams? Hallucination? Reality? It is hard to say, since this second part of the novel features realistic descriptions and the protagonist is not the only one who sees Mr. Koyasu: Mrs. Soeda, the library secretary, also enjoys occasional discussions with him and talks openly about the former library director to the protagonist. The liminal boundary between dream and reality, seems to have invaded 'our world' as well, considering how much the figure of the ghost – if it can be labeled such – of Mr. Koyasu is present in the second part of the novel.

Up to this point, the reader is completely bewildered: he has been repeatedly catapulted from a real urban setting to a dream-like one, suspended in space and time (the clock in the 'city of a high wall' has no hands). The protagonist himself cannot explain the nature of the city and comments: "And we went on to create and share a special, secret world of our own – a strange town surrounded by a high wall" (Murakami, 2024, 16).

The reader, therefore, cannot tell whether the town actually exists in a parallel world, whether it is a daydream created by the imagination of the two teenagers and then cultivated by the adult protagonist to escape his life of loneliness and broken hearts. Alternatively, the city can be the result of a collective hysteria shared by a few members of the story, such as the protagonist and his girlfriend, Mr. Koyasu and the young boy who always comes to the library, nicknamed Yellow Submarine because of the sweatshirt he constantly wears. He suffers from savant syndrome, and wants to reach that city at all costs.

The protagonist's confusion is thus at its peak: "About all I did know was that right now I seemed to be hovering on the boundary between the world over there and the world over here. […] That's where I was situated, in that twilit world. A line that was neither one nor the other. And I was trying to judge which side I was really on, and on which side the real person, the real me, could be found" (Murakami, 2024, 287-288). Indeed, the protagonist himself reasons about the liminality of the city and especially of a life contended between two worlds, the real and the dream-like one, whose boundaries are uncertain by nature:

> As my shadow said, the town might be full of made-up stories, the origins of the town itself rife with contradictions. Since this was nothing but an imaginary town you and I had dreamed up over the course of a summer. Nevertheless, the town might actually be able to snatch away a person's life, since it was already out of our hands and had grown on its own. Once it was set in motion, I couldn't control that power or alter it. Nobody could. (Murakami, 2024, 87)

The frenzy of the contemporary era, which forces individuals to focus on productivity and achieving goals rather than on the 'here and now', leads to a lifestyle which 'surfs' or 'floats' on the surface, encouraging individuals to take refuge and thoroughly enjoy an imaginary life instead. The virtual reality to which video games and social media have accustomed us reflects this unease of modern humankind. We are more concerned with 'what to do next' (we think it, imagine it, and daydream about it) than we are with appreciating what we are already experiencing. Once again, Murakami's 'double world' epitomizes an investigative mirror of contemporary psycho-social distress, and it is not limited to portraying a fantastic, magical story.

The third part of the novel takes place in the 'city of a high wall'. After the sudden disappearance of Yellow Submarine, again, without knowing how, the protagonist finds himself in that distant city in time and space. There, he finds not only the girl, still a teenager, but also the boy, with whom he will later merge his consciousness, to become one. And this is because,

> I think the wall surrounding the town is the consciousness that creates you as a person. Which is why the wall can freely change shape apart from any personal intentions. A person's consciousness is the same as a glacier, with only a fraction of its showing above the water. Most of it is hidden, unseen, sunk in a dark place. (Murakami, 2024, 375)

The pandemic is present several times in the novel, as a possible description of the causality that led the 'city of a high wall' to be strictly guarded by a Gatekeeper. This boundary wall delimits its urban space. In his written exchange with Yellow Submarine the two try to understand why such a city has become hermetically sealed off from the outside world. The answer is a pandemic: "But an epidemic had to have ended at a certain point," I said to the boy. "No pandemic lasts forever. Yet the wall went on as before maintaining a strict isolation. No one could come in, no one could go out. Why is that? […] 'A never-ending pandemic,' I read aloud" (Murakami, 2024, 306).

The influence of the Covid-19 pandemic is present in the novel's conception, as confirmed by the author in the afterword. Moreover, these words also leave room for metaphorical reflection on lockdown. The sense of isolation, alienation and segregation to which the pandemic emergency has forced us has actually revealed many fragilities already inherent in our communities. Weak and marginalized individuals – the elderly, the diseased, minorities, and *hikikomori* – have been most affected by the pandemic. However, our lifestyle has revealed that such social isolation is a common feature even in non-critical times. The fact that the walls of the 'city of a high wall' change according to a person's consciousness reveals how the individual himself builds barriers between himself and others: a social distance caused by inequality and virtual-life dependency that Murakami's 'double world' and the Covid-19 pandemic have exposed.

Conclusion: Murakami's Alternative Realities

> What is real, and what is not? In this world is there really something like a wall separating reality from the unreal? I think there might be. No, not might – there is one. No, it's an entirely uncertain wall. Depending on circumstances and the person, its shape transforms. Like some living being. (Murakami, 2024, 399)

The generation of writers who debuted in the 1980s-1990s, of which Murakami Haruki is a member, is regarded by critics for their leisurely produced works, which reveal the great legacy of the post-World War II period in Japan, defined by the double atomic bombing, the dismantling of a colonial empire, and the American occupation. However, an unresolved intergenerational trauma, that of bitter defeat, does not seem to emerge in the author's works; nor does the bewilderment due to the clash with the consumerist era that was advancing unstoppably with its music, cinema, ever-changing fashions, of which Murakami's works are overloaded. Perhaps this is why literary critics have no difficulty in associating his literary production with the label of world literature, which still eludes a clear epistemological definition but undoubtedly intersects sociopolitical issues of global concern: "geography, identity, nationalism, and postcolonialism have become more prominent subjects for world literature scholars from the West and former colonizing cultures (Atkins, 2012, 228). Thus, Scrolavezza (2023, 163) argued Murakami Haruki is "the most comprehensive example of *brand author*" referring to the Murakami franchise which since the 1980s has invaded global editorial market with a series of recurring themes and subjects (see Grant Snider's *Bingo Board* on Murakami's novels, 2014) able to enhance the fidelity of its fandom while promoting an high-recognisable - and thus bestselling - (literary) product.

Murakami's production thus transcends Japanese national boundaries to become not supra-national but a-national: his protagonists give voice to the social anxiety, isolation and loss of references that contemporary society imposes with its frenetic pace and constant uncertainty, speaking to a global audience. Even the anonymity of Murakami's protagonists enables the global readership to identify with them and engage in the same life concerns:

> This is exactly where Murakami flourishes and rises above his contemporary post-modern writers who knows how to actively engage his readers in his world of hyper-surrealism and mysticism. Memories, dreams and visions actively entwin the readers and characters together, where the abnormal interpretation of equally abnormal motifs and symbols and an ambiguous inclusion remains adamantly stuck to the readers' conscience compelling them to reflect beyond the purview of the novel. (Roy, 2021)

The recourse to an alternate reality, that is, to a parallel universe that intersects the narrative on several levels, more or less dream-like, fantastic or hallucinatory, is not a symptom of a detachment from contemporaneity sought by Murakami himself. Rather, according to Kim (2023, 424),

> [t]he oft-noted surreal, fantastical, and 'thin' air of unreality underpinning Murakami's fiction, generally, is not indicative of is escaping into his own fantasy worlds on order to avoid history, society, and culture – as critics have said – but is rather a tacit suggestion that perhaps his protagonists – impressed upon by a 'heavy' evidentiary history of bloodshed and its aftermaths that suffuses the 'real world' – necessarily exile themselves from it, and, in doing so, breathe the 'thin' air of unreality they have chosen, or are forced, to inhabit.

The City and Its Uncertain Walls represents the author's latest bestseller in which the use of oneirism is, in typical Freudian interpretation, the tool the protagonists have to interrogate their fears, investigate their sense of loss and reprocess their traumatic memories. The uncertainty of those ever-changing walls, the ambivalence of being on the border between two worlds, is nothing but a metaphor for a life on the verge of a real but in many ways unsatisfying ordinariness and an alternative reality that fulfils our desire but is fictitious. In this, the pandemic has exacerbated a pre-existing state of precariousness and underscored the insecurities and fragilities of our social bonds.

References

Arlow, J. A. (1969). Fantasy, Memory, and Reality Testing. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 38*, 28–51.

Atkins, M. T. (2012). *Time and space reconsidered: the literary landscape of Murakami Haruki*. London: SOAS University.

Chozick, M. R. (2008). De-Exoticizing Haruki Murakami's Reception. *Comparative Literature Studies, 45*(1), pp. 62–73.

Dil, (2022). *Haruki Murakami and the Search for Self-Therapy*. London: Bloomsbury.

Ferreira, S. (2018). A Psychological Reading of Murakami Haruki's "The Little Green Monster", "All God's Children Can Dance," and "TV People. *BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects, 290*, pp. 1–33.

Islam, M. R. (2024). Repression, Trauma, and Identity in Haruki Murakami's Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage: A Psychoanalytic Perspective. *Sudurpaschim Spectrum*, 2(2), pp. 111–134.

Lee, Joo-Young (2019). Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage: Through a Psychodynamic Lens. *The American Journal of Psychiatry Residents' Journal*, 8.

Loughman, C. (1997). No place I was meant to be: Contemporary Japan in the short fiction of Murakami Haruki. *World Literature Today, 71*(1), pp. 87–94.

Karako K., Song P., Chen Y., Karako T. (2022). COVID-19 in Japan during 2020-2022: Characteristics, responses, and implications for the health care system. *Japanese Global Health*, 12, pp. 1-4.

Kawai, H. (2002). *Kyōkai taiken no monogatari: Murakami Haruki Umibe no Kafuka* [A story on a liminal experience: Kafka on the shore by Murakami Haruki]. *Shinchō, 99*(12), pp. 234–242.

Kim, J. P. S. (2023). Rethinking Haruki Murakami: An Alternative History of Traumas and Aftermaths in *Kafka on the Shore*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, 64*(3), pp. 416–429.

Murakami, H. (1980). *Pinball, 1973* (trans. Birnbaum A.). Tokyo: Kodansha International.

Murakami, H. (1987). *Hear the Wind Sing* (trans. Birnbaum A.). Tokyo: Kodansha International.

Murakami, H. (1989). *A Wild Sheep Chase* (trans. Birnbaum A.). Tokyo: Kodansha International.

Murakami, H. (1991). *Bungei shunjū Special Issue – Murakami Book*. 4. Tokyo: Kabushikigaisha.

Murakami, H. (1993). The Little Green Monster. *The Elephant Vanishes* (trans. Birnbaum A.). New York: Knopf.

Murakami, H. (1997). *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (trans. Rubin, J.). New York: Vintage Books.

Murakami, H. (1997-1998). *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* (trans. Birnbaum A.). New York: Vintage Books.

Murakami, H. (2000) *South of the Border, West of the Sun* (trans. Gabriel P.). Victoria: Abe Books.

Murakami, H. (2002). Super-Frog Saves Tokyo. *After the Quake* (trans. Rubin, J.). London: The Harvill Press.

Murakami, H. (2005). *Kafka on the Shore* (trans. Gabriel P.). New York: Vintage Books.

Murakami, H. (2006). TV People. *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman* (trans. Gabriel P.). New York: Knopf.

Murakami, H. (2006). A Shinagawa Monkey. *The New Yorker*. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/02/13/a-shinagawa-monkey.

Murakami, H. (2011). *1Q89* (trans. Rubin, J.). New York: Knopf.

Murakami, H. (2014). *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* (trans. Gabriel P.). New York: Vintage Books.

Murakami, H. (2014). *The Strange Library* (trans. Kidd C.). New York: Knopf.

Murakami, H. (2022). *Novelist as a Vocation* (trans. Gabriel P.). New York: Vintage Books.

Murakami, H. (2024). *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* (trans. Gabriel P.). New York: Vintage Books.

Nygren, J. (2010). "She's just not there" A study of psychological symbols in Haruki Murakami's work. *Student thesis: Uppsala University*. https://www.europeana.eu/en/item/9200111/BibliographicResource_1000085989453, pp. 1–22.

Perez, A. C., Perez, L. (2024). A psychological reading of Haruki Murakami's After Dark: Presentation of the individuation process. *Puissant, 5*, pp. 1398–1417.

Potik. D. (2023). Existential issues in the fictional writing of Haruki Murakami. *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 21(1), pp. 1–14.

Qiao, M. (2024). *The Coronavirus Pandemic in Japanese Literature and Popular Culture*. Routledge.

Rosenbaum, R. (2014). Post 3/11 literature in Japan. (Starrs, R. ed.) *When the Tsunami Came to Shore: Culture and Disaster in Japan*. Leiden: Brill Press, pp. 91–112.

Roy, A. (2021). Beyond Time and Space: Physical, Psychological, and Spiritual Mobility in the Fiction of Haruki Murakami. *Medium*. Retrieved from https://rupananya1008.medium.com/beyond-time-and-space-physical-psychological-and-spiritual-mobility-in-the-fiction-of-haruki-2e3a18440401.

Rubin, J. (1999). Murakami Haruki's two poor aunts tell everything they know about sheep, wells, unicorns, Proust, elephants and magpies. (Snyder, S. & Gabriel, P. eds.) *Oe and Beyond. Fiction in Contemporary Japan*. Hawaii: Harvard University.

Sartre, J-P. (1998). *La Responsabilité de l'écrivain*. Paris: Gallimard.

Scrolavezza, P. (2023). Fra *global novel* e letteratura *prêt-à-porter*: il *brand* Murakami Haruki [Between global novel and *prêt-à-porter* literature: Murakami Haruki *brand*]. (ed. Benvenuti G.) *La letteratura oggi. Romanzo, editoria, transmedialità* [Literature today. Novel, editorial market, trasnmediality]. Torino: Einaudi.

Snider, G. (2014). Haruki Murakami Bingo. *New York Times Book Review*. August, 15 issue.

Strecher, M. (2002). *Murakami Haruki's* The Wind-up Bird Chronicle. *A Reader's Guide*. New York: Continuum.

Suter, R. (2008). *The Japanization of Modernity: Murakami Haruki between Japan and the United States*. Cambridge: Harvard University.

Torrefranca, M. (2020). I followed Haruki Murakami's strict schedule for a week. Mel Torrefranca YouTube Channel. Retrieved on 15. June 2025 from YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csY8_Ul2KAM.

Yamamoto T., Uchiumi C., Suzuki N., Yoshimoto J., Murillo-Rodriguez E. (2020). The Psychological impact of 'Mild Lockdown' in Japan during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Nationwide Survey under a Declared State of Emergency. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 17, pp. 2-19.

Yurdakul, S. (2024). Haruki Murakami: A global literary journey from Japan to the world. *Odu Sobiad, 14*(3), pp. 1002–1012.