
Catastrophe and Fragmented Interiorities in Haruki Murakami's *After the Quake*

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Abstract: This paper examines the repercussions of trauma on individual identities in the aftermath of a disaster through the lens of stories in Haruki Murakami's *After the Quake*. The stories are testimonials of the impact of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, that affect people and leave indelible impressions on the human psyche, altering perceptions of the world and conceptions of the self. The narratives bring to the fore personal and collective suffering following the Kobe earthquake of 1995. The ontological crisis of the quake inscribes itself in all the short stories, propelling characters towards an unpredictable range of reactions and behaviours. The looming uncertainty and constant fear of living in the shadow of catastrophe permeate consciousness, embedding itself in memory, language, and identity, as well as in unconscious aspects such as dreams and projections. The dramatisation of trauma offered in the stories illustrates the psychic fissures in the characters' perception of reality, self, world, and identity. The paper foregrounds the characters' struggles to comprehend realities transformed by collective trauma, illustrating what Janice Haaken says in "Cultural Amnesia: Memory, Trauma and War" (465) about the capacity of catastrophic events to dismantle existing systems of meaning. It frames identity within the intricate, interrelated themes of loss, alienation, displacement, and resilience, all while delving into the multifaceted nature of identity in the aftermath of disaster.

Keywords: Identity, trauma, repression, catastrophes, fragmentation

Introduction: The impact of catastrophes extends beyond the physical destruction of life and things, and they can leave deep fissures in the self, subjecting identities to rapid changes and even reconfiguring them. The social as well as psychiatric perspective helps in understanding the entrenched nature of disasters. R. Geil, in "Psychosocial Processes in Disasters", integrating trauma studies within a broader sociocultural perspective, writes, "A major physical disaster suddenly destroys all kinds of material and social cues, rendering part of the affected population's culture [...] ineffective and inoperative" (8). Catastrophes require humanist studies as well as social and scientific angles to comprehend and manage them. Alessa Johns observes that the humanists for quite a long time have not 'weighed in

on the study of disasters” (9). Haruki Murakami concedes the necessity of the human angle to understand the earthquake disaster in his short story collection, *After the Quake*. He engages with the theme of trauma masterfully in his fiction. *Norwegian Woods* (1987), *Kafka on the Shore* (2002), *Sputnik Sweetheart* (1999), *Men without Women* (2014), *City of Its Uncertain Walls* (2023), and *After the Quake* (2000), among others, offer profound insights into people navigating complex psychological journeys. The intriguing characters in the collection, each with a traumatic past, deal with complex emotional challenges in their distinct ways.

The collection *After the Quake* approaches the trope of trauma through nuanced narratives in its assortment of six short stories, set against the backdrop of the Kobe earthquake. The stories are a narrative paradigm that delves into the psychological landscape of the characters. The seismic devastation serves as a unifying motif underpinning the complex psychological landscapes of the characters, illuminating the concealed dimensions of trauma and uncovering unexpected ways in which trauma surfaces. Trauma mediates as a subtext that structures the cognitive mechanisms as well as the reflexes of the characters. Readers encounter in these stories blunt yet subtle, pronounced yet esoteric aftershocks that the earthquake has left behind in the emotional fabric of characters and communities. The paper navigates the complex dynamics of catastrophes and trauma, and their impact on individual and collective identities. It addresses both primary and secondary trauma when exposed to the outcomes of the disasters. Rauvola, Vega, and Lavigne, in their comprehensive review on empathy-based stress, make a distinction between compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress and vicarious traumatization in professions dealing with trauma. The article helps to understand the indirect suffering of trauma-inducing events of natural or anthropomorphic genesis, capable of “disrupting beliefs regarding themselves, relationships, and the world” (Rauvola et al. 303). The characters in the stories are both survivors and carriers of trauma. Carol A. Kidron refers to Paul Ricoeur’s concept of “trauma replotting” or “emplot” to understand the transmission of trauma. She observes that the descendants of Holocaust survivors reconfigure their identities through memory, narrative practices and cultural discourse. She poses a significant question: “Assuming descendants did not personally experience the rupture of traumatic events and thus do not suffer the flashbacks of traumatic memories, how do they recapture and re-present a traumatic past that they themselves have not experienced?” (516). Kidron’s interrogation and the answers that her study yields are of immense value to conceptualise the psychic dislocation of the characters due to the earthquake.

The first story in the collection, “UFO in Kushiro”, centres its attention on different dimensions of trauma: primary trauma and vicarious or secondary trauma. The seemingly unrelated earthquake in Kobe affects Komura’s relationship with his wife, setting the duo up for separation. Neither Komura nor his wife experienced the Kobe earthquake firsthand. Post-earthquake, Komura’s wife was engrossed in the screen displaying images of the catastrophe. She withdraws from the external world and brackets Komura out of her emotional ambit. The emotional injury that she undergoes challenges the notion that trauma

always has a connection to proximity and witnessing. Natural disasters often have the potential to trigger previously experienced individual traumas and resurface them. Post-disaster, the past identity becomes inaccessible to the survivors of the tragedy. The new identity is informed by exclusion, alienation and grief corresponding to what Cathy Caruth calls the “traumatic collapse of reference” in *Unclaimed Experience*.

The dominant feature that constitutes Komura’s wife's response to disaster could be termed mental suffering or emotional injury, which characters in other short stories also experience. The culmination of events leading to their separation foregrounds the relationship dynamics of the duo. The story is as much about the traumatic experiences of Komura’s wife as it is about him. It deftly transitions its focus from Komura’s wife to Komura. The visceral impact of the earthquake on Komura’s wife also draws the reader's attention to Komura’s emotional void. In the case of the wife, the earthquake triggers her previously repressed inner wounds or evokes existential fears, causing her to withdraw from her routine. The disconnection and disengagement from her daily responsibilities elicit no reaction from Komura, who leaves her alone, continuing with his routine and life as usual. The wife vanishes after five days, leaving him a note that states she would not return to him again, “... you have nothing inside you that you can give me. You are good and kind and handsome, but living with you is living with a chunk of air” (Murakami 4).

The story illustrates two dimensions of trauma: earthquake as a trigger point to her repressed experiences and as a reflection of Komura’s emotional numbness, dissociation and sense of emptiness. When the wife is deeply disturbed by the earthquake, he fails to engage her in a meaningful way, hindering the effective processing of her emotions. He prepares meals for himself, eats alone, and continues with his routine. His inability to empathise with her anxiety and failure to comfort her further estranges her from him. The box that his friend Sasaki sends with him to Hokkaido signifies the emotional lacuna that he embodies. Through a brief account of his past life, we learn that the stability brought to his life with his marriage gives him a settled feeling, “He slept well with her, undisturbed by the strange dreams that had troubled him in the past... He no longer had to worry about death or venereal diseases or the vastness of the universe” (4).

The desertion of his wife overthrows the stable life he built for himself. He wonders about the last time he laughed. Even during his attempt to be intimate with Shima, all he can think of are the images of the earthquake displayed on TV. Komura’s trauma is not overt; it is implied through subtle references. Komura’s relationship with his wife is an example of hidden trauma and its adverse impact on relationships. Komura’s emotional absence creates a profound rift between them, ultimately leading to their separation. The inability to feel is shown to be distinctly a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, as Bessel Van Der Kolk observes, “Trauma, whether it is the result of something done to you or something you yourself have done, almost always makes it difficult to engage in intimate relationships” (*The Body Keeps the Score* 13).

The second story in the collection “Landscape with Flatiron” depicts characters fleeing traumatic pasts. Miyake enjoys building a bonfire on the shore of the ocean. He has a fear of refrigerators, and he gets frequent dreams of dying locked inside a refrigerator:

I’m in this tight space, in total darkness, and I’m dying little by little. It might not be so bad if I could just plain suffocate. But it doesn’t work that way. A tiny bit of air manages to get in through some crack, so it takes a really long time. I scream, but nobody can hear me. And nobody notices I’m missing. It’s so cramped in there, I can’t move. I squirm and squirm but the door won’t open. (Murakami 35)

The recurrent dream is indicative of the traumatic experiences of the earthquake, in which his close people might have died, buried in the rubble. His refusal to talk about the earthquake points to the repression of that traumatic event he underwent. In the past, he had a family of a wife and two kids, about whom he seldom speaks. Mystery surrounds his past as he says he visualises his death stifled in a refrigerator. Junko, also fleeing from bad childhood memories, confesses to him about her void. She ran away from home, unable to focus on her studies and neglected by her father. Miyake suggests that they die together when Junko views her problem as something that cannot be fixed. He believes that people’s way of living is guided by how they envision their death. He lives in the shadow of death and dwells on the possibilities of the imminent end. He paints, and his recent painting, “Landscape with Flatiron,” is suggestive, evoking fears of claustrophobia. To Junko’s questions about his family in Kobe, he answers vaguely, not divulging any information. Speculatively, he believes his house to be in Kobe and supposes his family to be living there. He immediately adds that it reflects on his emotional state. He calls him an idiot king who is no longer using his brain. The self-accusation and the reality where he is living alone without his family might refer to the psychological phenomenon “grief hallucination” where the traumatised subjects continue to believe their loved ones to be still alive. His vague belief about his family still living in Kobe can be one of the projections he invented to cope with the grief of losing his family members to the earthquake, and points to the state of denial and psychic conflict he experiences. His identity post-disaster undergoes a radical shift as he lives in a perpetual state of fear, anticipating death. His conceptions of life, reality, relationships and death remain altered, and his struggle reveals his difficulty in deciphering reality. Miyake’s situation, where he might have lost his home and family, goes beyond the physical damage. It resonates deeper traumas, “Placelessness is more than the loss of land and home, it also represents a loss of self or part of the self. As personal and collective identity grows out of and reflects the places from which we come” (Casey 1993, as cited in Moulton 324).

“All God’s Children Can Dance” frames Yoshiya’s search for his father in parallel with his quest for identity. Murakami demonstrates the discreet ways in which catastrophes can seep into the interiority of consciousness, dictating thoughts and behaviours. The narrative leads the readers into the psychological landscape of Yoshiya following a trail of traumatic

childhood events marked by alienation, failure, and fractured identity. Growing up as a child without a father and struggling with failures in sports and relationships, Yoshiya finds it difficult to navigate his sense of the self. The paternal identity formation challenges pose extreme mental anguish and crises to the young Yoshiya. The plight of Yoshiya resonates with Simon Doring's analysis of psychic damage caused by identity issues, "... where identities have a low cultural value, individuals ascribed such identities can internalise a negative image of themselves. In such cases, the process of identification can cause psychic damage" (146). His mother and Mr Tabata, his family's benefactor, believe that he is God's child. He believes that an obstetrician, with whom his mother was involved in her younger days, was his biological father. A random event after the earthquake sparks his urgency to find his biological father figure. He speculates that a stranger he meets on a train is his biological father and follows him. The stranger's missing earlobe, age and his 'doctorish' looks make him follow the stranger on an impulse. His conviction equates the discovery of his father with the restoration of his fragmented sense of the self. The pursuit leaves him with an awareness of the roots of his initial desire to chase the stranger. The realisation, like a manifestation, turns sacred to him. He dances in the dark, deserted landscape with the realisation of his buried thoughts and desires. The dance becomes the outward manifestation of inner clarity:

At each crucial point in his dance, he could survey the complex intertwining of these elements. Animals lurked in the forest like trompe l'œil figures, some of them horrific beasts he had never seen before. He would eventually have to pass through the forest, but he felt no fear. Of course - the forest was inside him, he knew, and it made him who he was. The beasts were ones that he himself possessed. (Murakami 59)

Yoshiya feels the indirect impact of the earthquake through the images and stories he has heard and seen through people and the media. The yearning for restoration of identity, and projecting unresolved internal conflicts onto the immediate events and people refer to what Dominick LaCapra calls as transference: "The relation of transference to the process of 'remembering, repeating, and working through' may well constitute 'the most difficult as well as the most important problem [...]' (231). Yoshiya's 'acting out' by following the man, thinking him to be his father, makes him confront his unresolved trauma and psychic conflict. He comes to the realisation that the mad pursuit of a stranger was more about him than the strange. The chase was more about dealing with the darkness in his psyche than confirming ties for his existence. Identity struggle was only the beginning of the deep void he constantly combats, described by him as "the tail of the darkness inside me" (Murakami 56). The psyche is covert and hidden like beneath the earth, "the ominous rumbling of the deepest darkness, secret rivers that transported desire, slimy creatures writing, the lair of earthquakes ready to transform whole cities into mounds of rubble" (59). The deep, dark, repressed thoughts of Yoshiya find articulation in the following passage:

He thought of his mother far away in that ruined city. What would happen, he wondered, if he could remain his present self and yet turn time backward so as to meet his mother in her youth when her soul was in its deepest state of darkness? They would plunge as one into the muck of bedlam and devour each other in acts for which they would be dealt the harshest punishment. And what of it? "Punishment"? I was due for punishment long ago. The city should have crumbled to bits around me long ago (59).

When Mr. Tabata conceded to lustful thoughts about his mother, he forgave him and metacognized his terrible obsessions about his mother. The venting through the dance accords with the acknowledgement of these challenging trails of thoughts and suppressed obsessions, finally releasing him. The dance, at a metaphorical level, signifies his coming to truth.

In the story "Thailand", Satsuki is described as moving "dragging her heart to the ground" (77). Her childhood bears a mark of loss and abandonment after the death of her father. Her mother sells her husband's private collection of jazz records, causing bewilderment in Satsuki, further exacerbating her feelings of neglect and abandonment. The lack of sensitivity of her mother compounds her emotional turmoil. Embittered by her failed marriage and the eventual divorce, she oscillates between hatred and bitterness for her husband. His alcoholism and unfaithfulness rupture her faith in her husband and their marriage. He claims her to be responsible for their childless marriage, projecting it to be her decision. The vicious indictments make her live hating her husband for 30 long years. She believes that her curse on him to die miserably caused the Kobe earthquake. The actualisation of the earthquake blurs the boundary between her internal turmoil and the external event, which could be referred to as "the return of the repressed" in Freudian terms. The muffled pain she suffers comes in the way of her perception and agency, distorting both. The older woman, who reads her palm, sees through her emotional repression and suggests that she get rid of the stone in her chest. The stone, in psychoanalytic terms, can embody the unresolved emotional burdens that led her to project her internal fear onto the external event.

The fifth story in the collection, "Super-Frog Saves Tokyo", is an exploration of the manifestation of trauma in the aftermath of disaster. Katagiri's hallucination about the Frog and the impending earthquake that the Frog tries to prevent is the result of his turmoil arising out of dissociation and a fragmented sense of identity, accentuated by the quake. Murakami employs surrealism to frame the narrative about the overwhelming, symptomatic experience of the earthquake. Katagiri's hallucination about the Frog and his conversation with him blur the lines between fantasy and reality. Frog, a figment of Katagiri's imagination, sees and acknowledges Katagiri's contribution to the job. The Frog sees what the world has refused to see or ignored in Katagiri. The glorious image of the self that the Frog offers to Katagiri is overtly opposite to his self-constructed image of the self:

I have always had the profoundest respect for you, Mr. Katagiri. For 16 long years, you have silently accepted the most dangerous, least glamorous assignments - the jobs that others have avoided - and you have carried them off beautifully. I know full well how difficult this has been for you, and I believe that neither your superiors nor your colleagues properly associate your accomplishments. They are blind, the whole lot of them. But you, unappreciated and unpromoted, have never once complained. (89)

This identity of Katagiri, acknowledged by the Frog, is juxtaposed with the reality where he is often overlooked or ignored in his profession. The dissonance between two perceptions that reveal a deep fissure in his identity points to the ontological bridge that restores Katagiri's image through the hallucination:

I don't have a single person who likes me, either at work or in my private life. I don't know how to talk to people, and I'm bad with strangers, so I never make friends. I have no athletic ability, I'm tone-deaf, short, phimotic, nearsighted - and astigmatic. I live a horrible life. All I do is eat, sleep, and shit. I don't know why I'm even living. Why should a person like I have to be the one to save Tokyo?" (93).

The Frog serves as the projected alterity to Katagiri, a timid loan officer who struggles with an identity crisis. The Frog, everything he is not — intense, scary, powerful, intellectual, and heroic — is a projection of his repressed desires to be identified as a hero. The qualities that he likes to embody in himself, and even unconsciously thinks the frog to be the alter ego of his persona. He sees himself as a failure or a misfit without any redeeming qualities. His hallucination of the Frog approaching him for the fight against the Worm, who can cause an earthquake in Tokyo, restores his sense of self.

The Frog mirrors the turbulent psyche of Katagiri after the quake. The anthropomorphic representation of the repressed desires through the Frog denotes the intense desire to be acknowledged and appreciated. The hallucination also corresponds to Cathy Caruth's concept of *latency*, in which repressed thoughts take shape and return in unexpected ways. The symbolic representation of Katagiri's unresolved identity conflict through the hallucination of the Frog is akin to Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene. The sleepwalking of Lady Macbeth and Katagiri's surreal encounter with the Frog in his hallucinating sleep both allude to what Freud referred to as repression. The doctor who treats Lady Macbeth in the drama comments, "Infected minds to their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets" (*Macbeth* 93). The volatile psychic transition that Katagiri experiences through the hallucination is parallel to the earthquake, which lies beneath the surface, active and ready to erupt.

The last story in the collection, "Honey Pie," postulates that people can experience secondary trauma even when they are not directly affected by the catastrophe. The images

of destruction become embedded in the collective unconsciousness of people and continue to haunt them. Sala, a young girl, is haunted by images of destruction in her dreams, and her sleep is disrupted by the nightmares of the earthquake man, a symbolic representation of her fears. The archetypal symbols of being trapped or buried nightmares become the girl's way of processing the catastrophe and making sense of the traumatic experience. She wakes up every day at the same time the quake occurred and searches for the earthquake man, refusing to sleep until she has searched every corner of the house. The anxiety and dread she experiences are reflective of the collective trauma.

In conclusion, this paper argues that the narratives in the collection establish the links between disasters and identity. It examines the stories in light of various psychological theories to uncover their psychological resonances. It corroborates that individual trauma does not exist as a remote, unrelated experience but is subjected to the dynamics of collective history and memory. It elaborates on the reshaping of trauma by the occurrence of a disaster, echoing old wounds. It also highlights how the narrative practices heal the psychological sufferings caused by catastrophes and offer alternative possibilities of speaking about trauma.

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