

Between Wastelands and Wires: Urban Ecology, Postmodern Loss, and the Nonhuman Turn in Haruki Murakami's *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*

Minakshi Prasad Mishra

Department of Humanities, OTR, Bhubaneswar

Abstract

This paper undertakes an ecocritical reading of Haruki Murakami's 2013 novel *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*, situating it at the intersection of postmodern narrative technique and environmental humanities. Drawing on foundational frameworks established by Cheryl Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell alongside more recent interventions in urban ecocriticism (Hird; Iovino and Oppermann), the nonhuman turn (Wolfe; Bennett), and world-literary ecology (Heise; Ortiz-Robles), the paper argues that Murakami encodes ecological crisis as an affective, somatic, and spatial condition in his protagonist's body, relationships, and urban environment. The contested status of Murakami's fiction within world literature — its cosmopolitan appeal alongside charges of cultural superficiality — is examined through the lens of ecocritical world literature studies. Colour symbolism, the motif of sterility, digital mediation, and the uncanny hollowness of Tokyo's built environment are read as registers of a planetary environmental anxiety that the novel's postmodern form simultaneously symptomatises and critiques. The paper contributes to the growing field of Japanese ecocriticism and to broader conversations about aesthetics, affect, and ecological responsibility in contemporary global fiction.

Keywords: Murakami; ecocriticism; postmodernism; urban ecology; nonhuman turn; world literature; Japanese fiction

1. Introduction: The Ecological Unconscious in Global Postmodern Fiction

When Cheryl Glotfelty defined ecocriticism as a connective tool between literary aesthetics and the physical environment, it inaugurated a broad rethinking of how texts participate in the cultural construction and critique of human relationships with the natural world. Over subsequent decades the field has expanded dramatically, moving from an initial emphasis on nature writing and wilderness to encompass urban ecologies, toxic landscapes, nonhuman agency, and what scholars now call the Anthropocene — the geological epoch shaped decisively by human activity (Clark 1-22). Within this expanded critical terrain, Japanese fiction has begun to receive sustained ecocritical attention, though

Haruki Murakami, arguably Japan's most globally read living novelist, remains comparatively underexplored from an environmental humanities standpoint.

This paper argues that Murakami's 2013 novel *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* (henceforth *Tsukuru Tazaki*) rewards a sustained ecocritical reading, one that attends to the text's postmodern narrative strategies — fragmentation, metafictional layering, the destabilisation of interiority — as themselves performing an ecological critique. The novel's Tokyo is not merely backdrop but a built environment saturated with what Jane Bennett, drawing on materialist philosophy, calls "vibrant matter" — an assemblage of human and nonhuman forces whose vitality conventional humanism obscures (Bennett 1-19). Equally, the text's pervasive imagery of sterility, blighted land, bodily failure, and technological mediation constitutes what Lawrence Buell identifies as the "toxic discourse" of environmental risk — a register that contemporary Anthropocene fiction is increasingly obliged to inhabit (Buell 30-54).

The paper proceeds as follows. The second section contextualises Murakami's critical reception and its implications for ecocritical world literature studies. The third section performs close readings of the novel's colour symbolism and onomastics as an ecological semiotics. The fourth analyses the Tokyo cityscape as a posthuman wasteland through the framework of urban ecocriticism. The fifth examines sterility, bodily nonhumanness, and affective ecology. The sixth addresses digital mediation and the erosion of embodied environmental encounter. The final section situates the novel's qualified resolution within contemporary conversations about ecological agency and hope in Anthropocene fiction.

2. Murakami and the World-Literary Ecological Turn: Critical Contexts

Haruki Murakami's first work of fiction, *Hear the Wind Sing*, appeared in 1979; his international breakthrough came with *Norwegian Wood* in 1987. Subsequent novels — *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1994-95), *Kafka on the Shore* (2002), *1Q84* (2009-10), and *Tsukuru Tazaki* (2013) — have made him one of the most translated and widely read novelists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The body of critical work on Murakami is now substantial: Matthew Strecher's studies of surrealism and the unconscious, Masao Miyoshi's contextualisations of Japanese postmodern fiction, and Jay Rubin's biographical and textual investigations have collectively mapped the major coordinates of Murakami criticism (Strecher; Miyoshi; Rubin). What remains comparatively uncharted is the ecological dimension of his fictional imagination.

This absence is partly a consequence of the terms in which Murakami's work has been debated. The familiar charge — advanced by critics including Kōjin Karatani and Yoichi Komori — is that Murakami produces what Dreux Richard memorably calls a 'pornography of depression': stylised, culturally unmoored fiction that speaks primarily to cosmopolitan consumers rather than to specifically Japanese or indeed planetary concerns (Richard n.pag.). From this perspective, Murakami's Tokyo is a kind of branded non-place — what Marc Augé would call a supermodernity of transit and anonymity — rather than an ecologically significant environment (Augé 75-115).

Yet this reading, compelling as it is in some respects, forecloses questions that a world-literary ecocriticism is well positioned to reopen. Ursula K. Heise's argument that contemporary environmental texts require a sense of "eco-cosmopolitanism" — an awareness of ecological belonging that exceeds local or national attachment — provides a productive framework for approaching a writer whose fiction is structurally transnational and whose thematics of loss, urban anomie, and bodily fragility map onto global environmental anxieties (Heise, *Sense of Place* 10-50). Alongside Heise's framework, the "material ecocriticism" developed by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann — which attends to the agency of matter, landscapes, and nonhuman actants as co-producers of narrative meaning — offers tools for reading the peculiar liveliness and deadliness of Murakami's urban environments (Iovino and Oppermann 1-22).

Moreover, Amanda Lewis's observation that Murakami's fiction insists on "the personal taking literary precedence over the political" need not foreclose a political — or ecological — reading but rather demands one that proceeds through the affective and somatic registers the novel itself privileges (Lewis n.pag.). The ecological is always also the intimate, the bodily, the psychic: this is precisely what ecocriticism in its more recent, affect-theoretical modes has sought to recover (Neimanis et al. 413-430).

3. Ecological Semiotics: Colour, Onomastics, and the Nonhuman Register

The novel's title — *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki* — establishes its central ecological proposition at the level of naming. Murakami's protagonist is defined, from the outset, by the absence of what his four closest friends embody. Their surnames map onto a chromatic natural world: Akamatsu ("red pine"), Oumi ("blue sea"), Shirane ("white root"), Kurono ("black field"). Tsukuru's surname — meaning "many peninsulas" — locates him at the interstitial edge between land and sea without anchoring him in either. This onomastic ecology is not incidental. In the tradition of Japanese literary naming, which carries what Norma Field calls a "semantic weight" that exceeds Western conventions of the proper name, the friends' surnames constitute a micro-ecology: forest, ocean, soil, and earth are present in every encounter, while Tsukuru remains, as he feels, "left out" of the natural order (Field 45; Murakami, *Colorless* 6).

Two pages after the novel's onomastic inventory, Tsukuru declares his singular attachment to train stations — not flowers, trees, or mountains, not even people, but the built infrastructure of transit (Murakami, *Colorless* 11). This is a foundational ecological move in the text. Tsukuru's displacement of natural affiliation onto the technological station echoes, at the level of individual psychology, the broader civilisational substitution that ecocritics identify as a defining condition of modernity: the progressive displacement of the natural by the infrastructural. As Timothy Morton argues in his influential theorisation of "dark ecology," the environments we inhabit in modernity are precisely those from which biological nature has been systematically evacuated, leaving what he terms the "mesh" of human-nonhuman entanglement to persist in uncanny, often disturbing forms (Morton 1-25).

The novel's colour symbolism extends and complicates this ecology. Colour in *Tsukuru Tazaki* functions not merely as psychological characterisation but as an index of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence" — the gradual, often invisible erosion of vitality that ecological degradation produces (Nixon 2-14). Tsukuru's colourlessness — his inability to claim chromatic belonging in the natural world — figures the broader desaturation of the urban environment. Tokyo in the novel is consistently rendered in

the muted, draining palette of an ecology under stress. The vivid reds, blues, whites, and blacks of the friends' names recede as Tsukuru moves deeper into metropolitan adulthood; what remains is the grey, amorphous texture of city life.

4. The Postmodern Wasteland: Tokyo as Urban Ecological Text

Urban ecocriticism — developed by scholars including Hird, Platt, and more recently Foreman and Paden — insists on the city as a site of ecological significance rather than its negation (Hird and Roberts 5-20). The built environment, the social infrastructure of transit and residence, the embedded nonhuman actants of urban life: all constitute an ecology, if one profoundly marked by human intervention, toxicity, and loss. Murakami's Tokyo in *Tsukuru Tazaki* is precisely such an environment — one whose ecological texture the novel renders in its most concentrated form in the passage that gives this paper its revised title:

All around him, for as far as he could see, lay a rough land strewn with rocks, with not a drop of water, nor a blade of grass. Colorless, with no light to speak of. No sun, no moon or stars. No sense of direction, either. At a set time, a mysterious twilight and a bottomless darkness merely exchanged places. A remote border on the edges of consciousness. At the same time, it was a place of strange abundance. At twilight birds with razor-sharp beaks came to relentlessly scoop out his flesh. But as darkness covered the land, the birds would fly off somewhere, and that land would silently fill in the gaps in his flesh with something else, some other indeterminate material. (Murakami, *Colorless* 33)

This passage is remarkable in the scope of its ecological negation. Water, grass, sun, moon, stars, direction: the full apparatus of natural orientation is withdrawn, producing an environment that does not simply lack natural features but has been actively stripped of them. The "strange abundance" that remains is horrific rather than nurturing: flesh consumed by avian predators, gaps refilled by "indeterminate material." The passage performs, at the level of literary imagination, what scientists of the Anthropocene describe as a planetary process: the substitution of diverse biological matter by standardised, often synthetic material (Steffen et al. 614-621).

Significantly, the passage is embedded in Tsukuru's experience of Tokyo specifically — not of an abstract or surrealist other-world but of the actual urban environment he inhabits. As Matthew Strecher notes, Murakami's surreal landscapes characteristically perform a "double duty," functioning simultaneously as psychological interiority and as realistic social space (Strecher 19). In *Tsukuru Tazaki* this double duty is at once psychic and ecological: the barren land that Tsukuru inhabits is Tokyo, and Tokyo is a barren land. The two registers are, in the novel's logic, inseparable.

This inseparability points toward what Stacy Alaimo theorises as "transcorporeality" — the condition in which the human body and the environment are not discretely bounded but continuously interpenetrating (Alaimo 2). Tsukuru's bodily deterioration — the "old man's body" he develops while ostensibly still young, the mechanical quality that the narrative repeatedly assigns to him — is inseparable from the ecological deterioration of his urban environment. In the terms of material ecocriticism, the city

writes itself on and through the body, and the body in turn externalises and intensifies the city's ecological condition.

Heise's framework of eco-cosmopolitanism is equally relevant here. Her insistence that contemporary environmental texts work through a sense of planetary belonging, rather than local rootedness, captures something essential about Murakami's ecological imagination. The wasteland he renders is not specifically Japanese but consciously global: the title reference to Franz Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage* positions the novel's ecological itinerary within a European Romantic tradition of wandering in degraded yet still charged natural landscapes, and Tsukuru's eventual journey to Finland amplifies the sense that ecological loss is a condition no geography escapes (Heise, *Sense of Place* 10-50).

5. Sterility, the Nonhuman Body, and Affective Ecology

One of the most insistent ecological registers in Tsukuru Tazaki is the motif of sterility and infertility, which pervades the novel's treatment of bodies, relationships, and environments alike. Ecocritical attention to reproductive futurity — to what critics such as Sarah Ensor and Catriona Sandilands have examined under the heading of queer ecology — has illuminated how literature encodes environmental anxiety in the disruption of biological reproductivity (Sandilands and Erickson 1-47). Tsukuru Tazaki, while not an explicitly queer text, participates in this ecology of frustrated reproduction.

Tsukuru's sexual encounters are systematically marked by non-creativity. His relationship with a woman already committed to another man produces no possibility of offspring — she is on the pill precisely to ensure that "nothing could be 'made' or 'created'" (Murakami, *Colorless* 108). His encounter with Sara, the novel's most significant affective relationship, is interrupted by his own bodily failure at a moment of intimacy: the penis becomes "as lifeless as the city" (Murakami, *Colorless*). The equation is not euphemistic but structural: the text consistently identifies individual bodily fertility with ecological vitality, and both with the capacity for human community and creativity.

Shiro's death — mutilated, mysterious, arising from a false accusation against Tsukuru and a consequent pregnancy and abortion — is the novel's most concentrated figure of ecological dying. Shiro, as Tsukuru comes to understand, "could never kill a living thing": her hyperbolically attuned sensitivity to life makes her unable to survive in the world the novel depicts (Murakami, *Colorless*). In the ecological allegory the novel sustains, Shiro figures as a kind of embodied biosphere — hyper-vivid, hypersensitive, destroyed by forces she cannot understand or survive. The parallel to what scholars of the Anthropocene call "ecological grief" — the affective register of species loss, habitat destruction, and environmental collapse — is precise (Cunsolo and Ellis 275-281).

Tsukuru's own nonhumanness is developed across the novel with particular care. Murakami consistently describes him through the idiom of manufactured objects: he is a "container" whose "contents had been replaced," a "brand-new" entity whose substance is "totally replaced" (Murakami, *Colorless* 37, 42). The term "brand-new" is, as the original paper notes, unusual for a human being; it belongs to the vocabulary of the commodity. Reading this through Donna Haraway's "cyborg" figuration — the posthuman subject constituted at the boundary of the organic and the mechanical — Tsukuru's

nonhumanness is less a pathological condition than a diagnosis of what Haraway terms the "informatics of domination": the systemic replacement of living matter by reproducible, exchangeable things (Haraway 149-181).

This reading connects productively to Toshio Tazaki, Tsukuru's father, whose name means "man who profits" and whose career in real estate — a career dedicated to the conversion of land into speculative capital — renders him, as the novel emphasises, "far removed from anything having to do with making things" (Murakami, *Colorless* 48). Heise's observation that environmentalism critiques modernity's presumption "to know the natural world scientifically, to manipulate it technologically and exploit it economically" applies with particular force to Toshio's trajectory: his death from lung cancer at sixty-four enacts the bodily price of an economic system whose relation to the natural world is extractive rather than reciprocal (Heise, "Hitchhiker's Guide" 507).

6. Digital Mediation and the Erosion of Embodied Environmental Encounter

A third ecological register in the novel concerns what might be called the "digital displacement" of embodied environmental encounter. In the ecological humanities, scholars including David Abram and, more recently, N. Katherine Hayles have attended to the ways in which digital and screen-mediated environments restructure human sensory and affective relationships with the material world (Abram 22-70; Hayles 1-47). Murakami's novel anticipates and reflects on these processes with a precision that is easily overlooked if the text is read primarily as psychological realism.

Tsukuru and Sara maintain their fragile connection almost entirely through digital communication: when he emails her, "her reply came from Singapore" — a spatial displacement that renders their relationship perpetually provisional, always potentially elsewhere (Murakami, *Colorless* 79). The anecdote is brief but symptomatic. The intimacy that Murakami's earlier fiction imagined through the physical co-presence of bodies — in Norwegian Wood's forests and dormitory rooms, in the underground spaces of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* — has here been largely sublimated into digital exchange, which is to say into a mode of connection that is simultaneously global and deeply abstract.

Tsukuru's refusal to take a camera to Finland is correspondingly significant. "What good were photos?" he asks. "What he was seeking was an actual person, and actual words" (Murakami, *Colorless* 197). This small act of rejection — of the photographic mediation that has become the default relationship to experience in the age of social media — is the novel's most explicit comment on digital displacement. In the context of environmental humanities, it resonates with arguments made by scholars such as Donna Haraway and Rob Nixon that the proliferation of representational technologies does not necessarily produce better environmental knowledge or more sustaining environmental relationships — it may, rather, substitute the image for the encounter (Nixon 2-14; Haraway 149-181).

Tsukuru's professional vocation as a builder of train stations — complex infrastructural environments that mediate the relationship between the human body and the city — is itself a figure of this ambivalence. Stations are simultaneously technological constructions and sites of embodied encounter: they are where bodies arrive and depart, where the rhythms of human movement intersect with

the schedules imposed by capital. As Tsukuru himself reflects, the station is the place where people “come and go” (Murakami, *Colorless* 11); its ecology is transitional, liminal, always in process. In this sense his vocation positions him, from the novel's first pages, as a figure whose life-work is the construction of threshold environments: spaces that stand between the natural and the mechanical, the embodied and the abstract.

7. Ecological Agency and Qualified Hope in Anthropocene Fiction

The novel does not conclude in ecological despair. Eri's counsel to Tsukuru — “Let's say you are an empty vessel. So what? What's wrong with that? You're still a wonderful, attractive vessel. . . . So why not be a completely beautiful vessel? The kind people want to entrust with precious belongings” — enacts what Donna Haraway, in a different register, calls “staying with the trouble”: the refusal to resolve difficulty into either utopian hope or paralyzing despair, and the insistence instead on continuing to inhabit, creatively and responsibly, the impaired environments we occupy (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 1-16; Murakami, *Colorless* 260).

The vessel metaphor is ecocritically significant. A vessel is at once empty and potentially full — it holds rather than creates, receives rather than produces. In the terms of material ecocriticism, Eri's counsel repositions Tsukuru as what Bennett calls a “vibrant” rather than passive material actor: not the self-sufficient humanist subject who imposes form on an inert world, but a relational being whose vitality depends on his connections to others and to environments (Bennett 1-19). The resolution the novel achieves — tentative, qualified, contingent on Tsukuru finally calling Sara — is of a piece with what scholars of Anthropocene fiction identify as the characteristic temporality of ecological hope: not triumphant, not guaranteed, but persistently possible (Clark 153-175).

The progression from “colorless” to “wonderful, colorful person” (Murakami, *Colorless* 264) is not the recovery of an original plenitude but the creation of something new from the materials of loss. In this the novel participates in what Heise, following Ursula Le Guin and others, identifies as the ecological imagination's core task: not the nostalgic recovery of a pristine nature that never quite existed but the creative reimagining of relationships between the human, the nonhuman, and the built worlds we collectively inhabit (Heise, *Imagining Extinction* 1-30).

8. Conclusion

Tsukuru Tazaki is, among much else, an ecological text — a novel whose affective and formal strategies encode, in the register of postmodern individual experience, a searching critique of the urban-industrial environments that late modernity has produced. Murakami's achievement is to render global environmental anxiety as intimate, somatic, and psychic experience: the barrenness of the planet appears in the barrenness of the city; the city's barrenness appears in the barrenness of the body; the body's barrenness appears in the failure of human relationships. This cascade — from global ecology to individual interiority — is what the novel's postmodern techniques of fragmentation, de-realisation, and non-linear temporality are uniquely equipped to perform.

The paper has sought to demonstrate that the ecocritical frameworks of material ecocriticism, urban ecology, transcorporeality, eco-cosmopolitanism, and the nonhuman turn together open the text in ways that neither the psychological nor the purely formal criticism of Murakami has hitherto achieved. In doing so, it contributes to the nascent field of Japanese ecocriticism — a field whose urgent importance is underlined by Japan's fraught environmental history, from Minamata to Fukushima — and to broader scholarly conversations about the responsibilities and possibilities of global postmodern fiction in the Anthropocene era.

Murakami, it turns out, has been attending to ecological questions all along. The critical vocabulary to hear him clearly has simply taken time to arrive.

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