

The Impact of Social Alienation toward the Main Characters' Action in Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*

Gilang Ramadhan, Thohiriyah

English Literature, Faculty of Languages and Arts,

Universitas Negeri Semarang

gilangramadhan@students.unnes.ac.id

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15294/eltlt.v2i.638>

QRCBN 62-6861-2530-756

ABSTRACT

This study examines the social alienation experienced by the characters Kafka Tamura and Nakata in Haruki Murakami's novel *Kafka on the Shore*, using Melvin Seeman's theory of social alienation. The purpose of this study is to analyze the forms of alienation experienced by both characters, which include alienation from themselves, other people, and society, as well as its influence on their actions in the story. This study uses a qualitative descriptive analysis with a close reading approach. The results show that social alienation affects the psychological development of both characters, who are isolated both physically and emotionally. Kafka struggles with his search for identity and his broken family relationships, while Nakata is alienated due to his communication limitations. This study concludes that although their alienation stems from external factors, both characters ultimately overcome it by accepting their fate and finding strength within themselves. This study contributes a new perspective on understanding alienation through Seeman's dimensions in the context of modern literature, as well as providing insight into how individuals overcome alienation through self-acceptance and responsibility.

Keywords: *acceptance, isolation, modern literature, social alienation*

INTRODUCTION

Despite having become the subject of conversations and observation for several decades, alienation remains a unique phenomenon. According to Gilabert, alienation is used to refer to a state or process of separation or division of lack of unity, harmony, or connectedness. Individuals who experience alienation syndromes can vary, regardless of age, gender, social position, education, or even time itself (Gilabert, 2020). Several stories or records from ancient, medieval, enlightenment era, and modern times become proof that even before Karl Marx popularized the term “alienation,” this phenomenon probably had existed before. Alienation has many forms that originated from many aspects, such as economy, politics, and society (Aguessy et al., 2023). Because alienation is coined in people’s minds, so there may be many causes for similar problems. Aytekin and Dogan even argue that children with rough childhoods or growing up in bad environment tend to develop alienation symptoms at an early age (Doğan & Aytekin, 2021).

According to Rautio et al, children and teenagers who experience alienation in their lives tend to become individuals that have toxic behavior when interacting with people they know (Rautio et al., 2025). This is because they were conditioned to think that their parents were not harmonious with each other and thus antagonized them. Their experience with alienation can cause them to avoid people around them, making them feel depressed, increasing their violent behaviors, and many more.

Today, to achieve real development and freedom, society is rapidly overcoming these alienation processes, resolutely overcoming the existing difficulties (Ran, 2025). As a result, society can develop in a healthy setting if various alienation processes in social life are eliminated faster based on knowledge and harmony. Also, the problem of alienation has been accepted as a strong obstacle to educational success (Korumaz et al., 2020) as it affects learning behavior and school performance negatively, as well as affecting teacher-student relations and school career negatively, increasing school dropouts. Conceptualizing the alienation process involves a diminished sense of belonging, which means a loss of satisfaction with learning, and participation in relationships

with teachers and classmates at school (Morinaj et al., 2020). In other words, alienation is closely related to the weakening of an individual's sense of belonging and involvement in their social environment. To analyze this phenomenon more closely in literary works, this article uses Melvin Seeman's theory of social alienation as the main framework.

Melvin Seeman views alienation as a state in which a person feels “disconnected” from their own life as if the decisions, values, and social relationships that usually give direction feel distant, vague, or even unreliable. To explain this experience more concretely, Seeman divides it into five dimensions: powerlessness (feeling no control over the direction and outcome of one's life), meaninglessness (life feels empty because goals and meaning are difficult to understand), normlessness (social rules no longer make sense, so individuals tend to follow their “own rules”), isolation (feeling disconnected from others and losing a sense of belonging), and self-alienation (feeling alienated from oneself, uncertain of who one is and what one truly wants) (Seeman, 1972). This framework is helpful because it helps us understand alienation not simply as “loneliness,” but as an experience that takes different forms and can be traced through the actions and words of characters. Therefore, this article uses Seeman's theory of alienation as the main framework for analyzing Kafka Tamura and Nakata in *Kafka on the Shore*, linking quotations from the novel to these five dimensions so that the discussion remains sharp, focused, and does not stop at a summary of the story.

The novel *Kafka on the Shore* by Haruki Murakami tells the journey of Kafka Tamura, a 15-year-old teen who fled his home in Nakano, Tokyo to avoid his neglectful father and also finding his lost mother and sister. He fled into Takamatsu city, a city in Shikoku Island where he took residence around a library where he met an eccentric librarian named Oshima and his superior librarian, Miss Saeki. At the same time, this novel also has a story about Nakata, an old man who experienced a mysterious incident during his childhood in World War II. Currently, his mind is damaged, but he is suddenly able to communicate with cats. One day, when Nakata was trying to locate a lost cat, he suddenly encountered a supernatural event

that endangering cats in his neighborhood. While in the beginning those two stories didn't seem connected, the two main characters will have parallel story that will answer what caused them to become isolated from the society (Murakami, 2002).

Several previous studies on alienation have been conducted. The first study is *Estranged Bodies, Alienated Minds: Grotesque Aesthetics and Resistance in Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar* by Simona Porro. This article suggests that the tension between conscious alienation and bodily materiality creates a form of resistance against prevailing social norms (Porro, 2025). The next study is *Alienation and Identity Crisis on Fictional Characters in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's The River Between*. The author explores the psychological dimensions of alienation and identity crisis faced by characters such as Waiyaki and Nyambura, who are caught between loyalty to traditional culture and acceptance of the dominant Western influence (M, 2022). Next is *A Study of Alienation in Toni Morrison's Sula: Passive Patriarchy, Marriage and Female Friendship*. This article examines alienation in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, focusing on female friendships, particularly between Nel and Sula. This article shows how black female friendships function as a response to alienation caused by racial discrimination and patriarchy (Ahmad, Mahmood, et al., 2020). The next study is *Parental Hunger and Alienation in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye*. This article analyzes the theme of alienation in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, focusing on the alienation of the main character, Pecola Breedlove, is discussed in the context of how traumatic experiences and the inability of parents to provide sufficient affection affect the psychological development of children (Ahmad, Chaudhary, et al., 2020). The last study is *Alienation in the Character of Namik Sultan*. This analysis reveals how Sultan's internal conflicts and alienation are important elements in his work, providing a deeper understanding of the character's psychological development and the thematic exploration of alienation in modern literature (Younis & Fathy, n.d.).

After reviewing several previous researchers' works and related materials, the researcher concluded that alienation topic is very vast and still needs to be learned further. Although

research on alienation has been conducted, studies applying Seeman's dimensions of social alienation are still rare. This study highlights how the two main characters experience alienation in more complex ways, namely through dysfunctional families and communication difficulties, which have not been widely discussed in previous studies. By exploring alienation phenomenon as reflected in *Kafka on the Shore*, the researcher intended to give insight about the impact of social alienation on Kafka Tamura and Nakata and how they overcome that problem.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative descriptive analysis method to analyze social alienation phenomenon that the researcher found in the story of “*Kafka on the Shore*” novel as the primary source for this study. The researcher also uses close-reading approach to collect the data found from the novel, as well as from journals similar to the research objectives. This research examines social alienation phenomenon which affected the main characters of the novel as well as the causes of said phenomenon; such as impacts of divorced parent, parental expectation, and lacks of communication on family. According to Creswell, qualitative descriptive is well-suited to studies that involve mixed methods or questionnaire design (Creswell, 2007).

The researcher collected various data on this research by using these steps, 1) Reading “*Kafka on the Shore*” novel by Haruki Murakami. 2) Analyzing the novel’s story, theme, hidden message, etc. 3) Focusing the analysis on the topic of social alienation that affected the main characters of the story. 4) Searching and collecting journals, articles, and related studies that explained social alienation. 5) Showing how the main characters of “*Kafka on the Shore*” overcome their social alienations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Social Alienation in the Story

1.1 Overview of the Social Alienation in the Novel

In the novel *Kafka on the Shore*, both Kafka Tamura and

Nakata experience profound social alienation. This is in line with Melvin Seeman's theory of social alienation. Seeman identifies several dimensions of alienation, including alienation from oneself, from others, and from society (Seeman, 1972). The following is a description of the alienation experienced by the two main characters based on quotes from the novel.

Kafka feels alienated from himself and his identity. He wants to escape from home because of his bad relationship with his father, which makes him feel alienated from his family and himself. In his wanderings, he tries to find himself through physical and metaphorical journeys. One quote that illustrates this is when Kafka reflects, *"I was sure that somewhere I'd run across the entrance that would take me to that other world."* (Murakami, 2002: 132). Kafka's search for this different world can be seen as an attempt to overcome his feelings of alienation from the world he knows, especially his conflicting relationship with his father.

Nakata experiences a more extreme form of alienation, which is alienation from society and his inability to communicate properly. After an accident, he lost his ability to read and write. This situation isolated him from many aspects of social life that rely on these skills. For example, in a conversation with a police officer, Nakata explains, *"I don't know about characters. I'm sorry, but I can't write. Or read, either."* (Murakami, 2002: 115). He also feels alienated because he cannot communicate with people normally, even though he has the ability to talk to cats. His inability to connect with the human world fully demonstrates the social alienation he experiences.

Both characters exhibit strong alienation, both from themselves, from others, and from society at large in different contexts. Kafka struggles with his search for identity and broken family relationships, while Nakata is alienated because of his limitations in communication and his disconnect from common social experiences.

1.2 Forms and Dimensions of Social Alienation Experienced by the Main Characters

In analyzing the social alienation experienced by the characters Kafka Tamura and Nakata, this study uses Melvin

Seeman's theory of social alienation, which divides alienation into five main dimensions, which are, powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, normlessness, and self-alienation (Seeman, 1972). Each dimension is analyzed through textual indicators that appear in the narrative, dialogue, and inner reflections of the characters.

Powerlessness

Kafka felt alienated from himself and powerless to face his future, especially because of his father's curse that follows him. He felt unable to control his own life. "I don't have a goal. I'm not going anywhere. I don't know where I'm going, but I have to keep going." (Murakami, 2002: 120). This quote shows Kafka's powerlessness in determining his future. This makes him feel weak and out of control. Meanwhile, Nakata, feels he has no control over himself or the world around him because of his disability. He cannot remember his past or function like other people in society. "Until I was nine I could read and write, but then there was an accident and after that I can't. Nakata's not too bright." (Murakami, 2002: 115). This quote shows that Nakata lost his cognitive abilities after an accident, which made him unable to read or write anymore. The loss of these abilities affected the way Nakata interacted with the world around him. According to Seeman, powerlessness refers to a condition in which individuals feel they have no control over the direction of their lives and the decisions that affect them (Seeman, 1972). Individuals believe that their actions have no bearing on the outcomes they will receive. Kafka's statement shows that he lived his life without a sense of personal agency. He acted not out of conscious choice, but out of compulsion. This is in line with Seeman's concept of powerlessness, as Kafka feels unable to determine his future or stop the course of his life. Meanwhile, in Nakata, powerlessness arises from cognitive limitations that make him completely dependent on situations and other people. Both characters experience powerlessness, but from different causes. Kafka from a psychological perspective and Nakata from a structural and biological perspective.

Meaninglessness

Kafka often felt that his life was empty and meaningless. He felt trapped in a search for himself that never found

certainty. *"I don't really know what I want. But I know I have to find it."* (Murakami, 2002: 41). This quote reflects the emptiness of Kafka's life and his inner void. Similarly, Nakata, who lives without memories and lacks a deeper understanding of the world, feels that his life has no clear meaning. *"I can't remember anything about it, but I feel like I've been here before. It's like it happened in a different world."* (Murakami, 2002: 58). This quote describes Nakata's feeling of uncertainty about the world around him, as well as his feeling of alienation from the life he lives. Without the ability to remember or understand what happened, Nakata's life becomes something that has no clear meaning. According to Seeman, meaninglessness occurs when individuals are unable to understand the purpose of life or the meaning of their experiences, resulting in actions that feel empty and directionless (Seeman, 1972). Kafka's quote shows that he lived his life in a state of aimless searching. He knew he had to "search," but did not understand what he was searching for, which reflects meaninglessness. In Nakata's case, memory loss causes his life experiences to be fragmented and meaningless. Without memory and causal understanding, Nakata's life loses its personal narrative, so he cannot construct a complete meaning of life. Both of these conditions are in line with Seeman's dimension of meaninglessness.

Isolation

Kafka chooses to distance himself from others and interacts more often with himself than forming social relationships. *"I don't need anyone. I'll be fine by myself."* (Murakami, 2002: 65). His comfort with himself makes him reluctant to interact with others, resulting in self-isolation. Nakata is also isolated from society, even in the most basic things such as talking to other people or understanding the social world around him. *"I can't really understand people,"* This quote illustrates that Nakata has difficulty interacting with humans and feels more comfortable communicating with cats, which shows his social isolation. He does not fully understand the human social world around him. According to Seeman, isolation refers to an individual's disconnection from meaningful social relationships and a sense of not belonging to a community (Seeman, 1972). Kafka's isolation is voluntary, as a defense mechanism against family trauma and emotional

conflict. In contrast, Nakata's isolation is involuntary, caused by cognitive and communication limitations. Although the causes are different, both fulfill Seeman's concept of isolation because social relationships are no longer a source of support, but rather a source of distance.

Normlessness

Kafka felt detached from existing social norms. He avoided the rules or expectations set by society and chose his own path, even if it meant breaking existing norms. *"Doing this gives a visible message to the forest: I'm not afraid anymore. That's why I chose to be totally defenseless"* (Murakami, 2002: 131). This quote illustrates that Kafka deliberately left behind objects that could have helped him, as a form of resistance against rules or dependence on things considered conventional. This shows Kafka's avoidance of social norms and his desire to find his own way of life. Nakata lives outside the social norms expected by society, which makes him feel disconnected from the world around him. His limitations exacerbate this. *"I can't really understand people,"* (Murakami, 2002: 113). This quote shows that Nakata finds it difficult to understand and connect with other people, which leads to his social isolation. He feels that understanding humans is more difficult and chooses to understand cats as his social companions. According to Seeman, normlessness occurs when individuals abandon or no longer adhere to prevailing social norms because they consider them irrelevant or meaningless (Seeman, 1972). Kafka's decision to live "without protection" reflects his abandonment of the norms of security, social dependence, and conventional life structures. This shows that Kafka no longer sees social norms as a guide for life, thus fulfilling Seeman's definition of normlessness. Nakata also lives outside the norms of modern society, but not because of conscious rejection, but rather because of his inability to follow those norms.

Self-alienation

Kafka often feels alienated from himself, such as when he feels trapped by his father's curse and unable to be his true self. He struggles to find his true self amid his inner turmoil. *"It's not that I don't like myself. I just don't know who I am."* (Murakami, 2002: 78). Nakata also experienced severe self-

alienation, as he lost most of his identity after an accident that turned him into a figure separated from the world and himself. "Nakata's like a library without a single book. It wasn't always like that." He feels that he is empty, like a library without books. Before the accident that damaged his cognitive abilities, he felt normal, but the event disconnected him from his identity and meaning in life. This quote shows how Nakata feels alienated from himself, a condition exacerbated by the accident that caused damage to his memory and identity. Self-alienation is a condition in which individuals feel separated from their true identity, desires, and self. Kafka experienced self-alienation because his identity was shaped by trauma, his father's curse, and fear of destiny. He did not hate himself, but he was unable to recognize himself. Nakata experienced a more extreme form of self-alienation due to the loss of his memory and past identity, rendering him existentially "empty." Both characters demonstrate self-alienation as defined by Seeman.

1.3 Factors Causing Alienation

Several key factors causing alienation in Kafka and Nakata can be traced back to their past experiences, particularly those related to family divorce and parental dysfunction.

a. Family Divorce

Kafka grew up in a chaotic and conflicting family. His parents' divorce and his father's emotionally abusive role shaped Kafka's feelings of alienation towards his family and himself. This can be seen in the following implied quote: "I've known this for a long time, but I was a child. Where else could I go?" (Murakami, 2002: 111). This quote reflects Kafka's alienation in his chaotic and emotionally violent family. Kafka's father, who should have been a figure of authority and affection, created deep trauma. Kafka felt that there was no safe place in his family, which ultimately drove him to escape.

Kafka also felt alienated because his father, who should have provided love and guidance, instead became a source of trauma and suffering. Kafka realized that his father saw him only as a "work of art" that could be shaped and destroyed according to his father's wishes: "To my father I'm probably nothing more than one of his sculptures." (Murakami, 2002:

111). This shows how Kafka saw his father not as a protective figure, but as a source of chaos and trauma that further alienated him from himself and the world around him.

b. Parental Expectation

In the case of Nakata, although he did not experience divorce, was cut off from his family and healthy upbringing after an accident that turned him into an isolated figure. *“Nakata’s parents—totally focused on their children’s education—ignored him and turned their attention to his younger brothers.”* (Murakami, 2002: 116). This quote shows that Nakata did not receive enough attention from his parents. This happened after he had an accident, causing him to feel alienated from his own family. Akehurst (2015) argued that parental insensitivity to the child’s physical and emotional needs can hurt the children’s emotion. That is because those children are under pressure to maintain academic scores without questioning why they are doing it.

Thus, both main characters experienced social alienation caused by internal and external factors. These included broken families and an inability to connect with their social environment.

2. The Impact of Social Alienation

2.1 Identity Crisis

In Seeman’s theory, self-alienation and meaninglessness directly contribute to a loss of self-orientation and meaning in life, which ultimately triggers an identity crisis. This condition is clearly seen in Kafka Tamura, who constantly questions who he is and the direction his life should take. Kafka experienced alienation from himself, which caused him to experience an identity crisis and feelings of alienation. Kafka expressed his confusion about his identity: *“It’s not that I don’t like myself. I just don’t know who I am.”* (Murakami, 2002: 78). This quote shows that Kafka did not experience self-hatred, but rather a disconnect from understanding his true self. This is in line with Seeman’s concept of self-alienation, in which individuals feel separated from their own identities and desires. Furthermore, Kafka’s confusion about the purpose of his life, as seen in his statement, *“I don’t know where I’m going, but I have to keep*

going" (Murakami, 2002: 120), reinforces the dimension of meaninglessness that he experienced. As a result, Kafka lived his life in a state of ongoing identity crisis. Nakata also experienced an identity crisis. After the accident, he cannot remember his former self and is disconnected from his previous self. "*Nakata's like a library without a single book...*" (Murakami, 2002: 167). This quote illustrates that Nakata feels empty and does not recognize himself. This metaphor emphasizes that Nakata experiences extreme self-alienation. Without personal memories and narratives, he is unable to construct a complete identity, so his identity crisis is a direct result of self-alienation.

2.2 Loss of Self-Confidence

According to Seeman, powerlessness causes individuals to feel they have no control over their lives, which in the long term can erode self-confidence (Seeman, 1972). In Kafka's case, feelings of powerlessness towards the future and his father's curse caused him to withdraw from social interaction. Kafka felt alienated from the social world around him, causing him to lose his self-confidence to mingle with society. He avoided interacting with others and preferred to remain within himself. "*I'll be fine by myself*" (Murakami, 2002: 65). This quote shows that Kafka tried to live his life alone. This statement shows that Kafka not only chose isolation, but also built emotional distance as a form of self-protection. This isolation is not a sign of healthy independence, but rather a reflection of a loss of confidence in building social relationships. Thus, Kafka's loss of confidence can be understood as the result of a combination of powerlessness and isolation.

2.3 Inability to Communicate

The dimension of isolation in Seeman's theory also has a direct impact on an individual's ability to communicate effectively. Nakata had difficulty communicating with others. He cannot read or write. As a result, he does not feel connected to humans and chooses to communicate with cats. "*But I'm learning to talk to the cats. It's something special.*" (Murakami, 2002: 113). Nakata's communication limitations are not merely technical problems, but reflect a deeper social disconnect. His inability to read and write distances Nakata from the communication systems of modern society, leading him to

choose to communicate with cats as an alternative form of social interaction. This decision underscores how isolation and self-alienation have affected the way Nakata interacts with the world.

Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that the impact of social alienation on Kafka and Nakata is not singular, but interrelated. Identity crisis, loss of self-confidence, and inability to communicate are logical consequences of the various dimensions of Seeman's social alienation experienced by both characters. Alienation not only separates them from society, but also from themselves, thus shaping patterns of behavior and actions throughout the novel's narrative.

3. Strategy to Overcome Social Alienation

3.1 Acceptance of Fate and Self-Limitation

One of the main strategies Kafka used to overcome alienation was acceptance of his past and destiny. In the context of Seeman's theory, this acceptance served to reduce self-alienation and meaninglessness, as the individual stopped rejecting the reality that shaped his identity (Seeman, 1972). Kafka discovered that Miss Saeki was his mother after researching her past. This came as a great shock to Kafka because he was in a relationship with Miss Saeki. Knowing that he was in a relationship with his mother meant that his father's curse about Oedipus had come true. However, Kafka was able to come to terms with this situation. *"Miss Saeki, if I really do have the right to, then yes—I do forgive you."* (Murakami, 2002:137). From this quote, Kafka forgave and began to accept his fate. This act of forgiveness shows that Kafka is no longer running away from his past. By accepting his traumatic experiences, Kafka begins to reconstruct the meaning of his life and integrate his past into his identity. This process marks a reduction in self-alienation, as Kafka begins to recognize and accept himself as a whole person. Meanwhile, Nakata chose to accept the fate and responsibility given to him. One of these responsibilities is to help Hoshino and search for the truth. *"I promised Miss Saeki I wouldn't, and my job is to keep that promise."* (Murakami, 2002: 223). From this quote, Nakata feels that he can still live his life by keeping his promises and

responsibilities. This attitude reflects an acceptance of his position in the world, which helps Nakata reduce meaninglessness by giving direction and meaning to his actions.

3.2 Finding Inner Strength

In the dimension of powerlessness, Seeman explains that alienation can be reduced when individuals begin to regain control over their actions. Kafka experienced a significant change when he stopped running away and began to confront the external forces he had previously feared. "*What I want is the kind of strength to be able to absorb that outside power, to stand up to it.*" (Murakami, 2002: 174). This statement shows a shift from a passive attitude to an awareness of self-agency. Kafka no longer positions himself as a victim of a curse or circumstance, but rather as an individual capable of facing and processing life's pressures. This process directly reduces powerlessness and allows Kafka to regain control over his life.

Seeman states that alienation can be reduced when individuals are able to construct new meaning through relationships, responsibilities, or personal goals (Seeman, 1972). In this novel, neither Kafka nor Nakata completely overcome their social isolation, but they succeed in reconstructing the meaning of life within that alienation.

CONCLUSION

The social alienation experienced by Kafka Tamura and Nakata in *Kafka on the Shore* reflects the dimensions described by Melvin Seeman, such as alienation from oneself, others, and society. Kafka struggles to find direction in his life, while Nakata feels disconnected from the social world and himself after the accident that changed him. This alienation affects their mental health, leading to an identity crisis and difficulty communicating with others. However, both Kafka and Nakata try to overcome this alienation by accepting their fate and finding the strength within themselves to accept the reality. This shows that self-acceptance and responsibility are steps that can be taken to escape the process of alienation. The alienation experienced by Kafka and Nakata can only be faced and resolved by themselves. This study provides new insights

into how alienation is not only rooted in external factors such as social and family relationships, but is also closely related to the search for identity and meaning in life in conditions of isolation. Furthermore, this study also enriches our understanding of how individuals attempt to overcome their alienation through self-acceptance and the search for inner strength, which can be applied in real-life contexts, particularly in overcoming identity crises and communication difficulties that are often faced by many individuals in modern society.

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