

AUTHENTICITY AND SPONTANEITY: EXPLORING FREEDOM OF CHOICE IN KAWAKAMI'S HEAVEN

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ABSTRACT

This study examines authenticity, spontaneity, and freedom of choice in Mieko Kawakami's Heaven. Through the lenses of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy and Laozi's concept of Taoist wu-wei, it explores the characters' struggles with agency and social pressures. This text poses questions about personal autonomy and the human desire for authenticity, portraying freedom as both a burden and liberation. This research bridges the gap between Western existentialism and Eastern Taoist philosophy by comparing Sartre's notions of freedom and choice with Laozi's focus on effortless action and harmony with nature. This research study analyzes moments of spontaneous rebellion and passive endurance, to highlight the tension between living authentically and conforming to oppression. The main aim of this research article is to explore freedom as a deeply personal construct shaped by internal and external factors. This article offers a close textual analysis of Heaven by using qualitative and descriptive methodology to uncover the themes of human existence, freedom, meaning of life and the fragile balance between authenticity and spontaneity within societal constraints.

Keywords: Existence, Taoism, wu-wei, freedom, choice, authenticity, spontaneity, agency, passive resistance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pain is not inherently tied to disgust or weakness; rather, it can serve as a gateway to profound self-awareness and growth. It embodies a self-constructed and subjective experience, often shaped by the existential realities we navigate in the world. Mieko Kawakami's novel *Heaven* offers a profound exploration of existential themes, blending Eastern and Western philosophical traditions to examine the human condition through the lens of adolescent experiences. This study delves into the intricate tapestry of authenticity, spontaneity, and freedom of choice woven throughout Kawakami's narrative, drawing parallels between Taoist concepts and French existentialist principles.

At its core, *Heaven* grapples with the complex interplay between pain, strength, and self-discovery. The novel's middle school setting serves as a microcosm for broader existential inquiries, challenging conventional notions of weakness and resilience. Kawakami invites readers to reconsider their understanding of pain as a potential catalyst for personal growth and self-realization by portraying characters navigating the gruesome situations of bullying and social marginalization. This research paper aims to illuminate the philosophical dimensions of

Kawakami's work, particularly the intersection of Taoist Wu-Wei concept and French existentialism's emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility. This unique synthesis of Eastern and Western thought provides a rich framework for examining the characters' journeys towards authenticity and self-discovery.

This study seeks to uncover the nuanced ways in which Kawakami's characters embody the principles of both Wu-Wei and existentialist philosophy. The analysis will focus on how these characters navigate their existential crises, making choices that reflect both the Taoist ideal of harmony with the natural flow of the universe and the existentialist emphasis on individual agency and responsibility. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the human condition by bridging Eastern and Western philosophical traditions through the lens of contemporary Japanese literature. This article examines Kawakami's *Heaven* to shed light on the universal struggle for authenticity and freedom of choice in the face of societal pressures and existential uncertainty.

1.1. Research Objectives

- Analyze how Kawakami's *Heaven* portrays the conflict between societal conformity and individual authenticity through the protagonist's choices and resistance to bullying.
- Examine the role of spontaneity and freedom of choice in shaping the characters' self-definition, vulnerability, and philosophical outlook on purpose in *Heaven*.
- Explore how Sartre's existentialism and Laozi's concept of wu-wei provide contrasting yet complementary perspectives on the protagonist's experience of suffering, resistance, and self-acceptance in *Heaven*.

1.2. Research Questions

- 1) How does Kawakami's *Heaven* illustrate the tension between societal conformity and individual authenticity through the protagonists' choices and their resistance to bullying?
- 2) In what ways do the concepts of spontaneity and freedom of choice contribute to the characters' self-definition and philosophical outlook on vulnerability and purpose in *Heaven*?

2. Literature Review

Sartre's concept of authenticity, Laozi's Taoist principle of *wu-wei*, and the idea of freedom of choice intersect with each other and offer a rich understanding of human existence and agency. This literature review explores key studies that shed light on these concepts and how they relate to one another.

Killinger (1961) explores the relationship between human freedom and authenticity in existentialism. In his article, "Existentialism and Human Freedom" Killinger highlights how existentialists distinguish between two types of being: the simple existence of objects and the conscious, choice-making existence which is unique to humans. The article also presents a psychological freedom in which the responsibility and anxiety always accompany authentic living. Furthermore, Killinger emphasizes the significance of existentialism in the present modern world where technological advancements threaten individual authenticity and it is very very crucial to preserve human freedom and dignity in this depersonalized world.

Owosho (2016) examines Sartre's idea of existential freedom as a pathway to individual and national authenticity. In his article, "An Appraisal of Existentialist Notion of Freedom: A Recipe for Authentic Nation Building" Owosho explores how freedom enables individual and nations to resist external control. According to Owosho, existential freedom is not merely about rejecting oppression but also about embracing a conscious and deliberate effort to grow based on

one's cultural and historical contexts. Furthermore, Owosho highlights the importance of existential freedom especially for African nations, such as Nigeria, who can actively shape their destinies to achieve independence and authenticity by embracing Sartre's notion that existence precedes essence.

Spiegelman's (2021) *New York Times* review of Kawakami's *Heaven* highlights societal injustice and the resilience of vulnerable individuals. Through the story of bullied narrator Eyes and his connection with Kojima, the novel examines themes of vulnerability, purpose, agency and passive resistance. Spiegelman also notes that the novel's climax serves as a meditation on the beauty and meaning of life amidst suffering. Furthermore, Spiegelman's states that Kawakami offers an emotionally rich and thought-provoking narrative that invites readers to reconsider how adversity shapes human connections and personal identity.

Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* (1993) reflects existential themes, including self-awareness, purpose, suffering, and commitment, as necessary steps in the pursuit of true freedom. Cahya and Prastiwi (2022) explores Santiago's journey in the novel towards existential freedom and emphasize how personal growth and self-discovery are integral to attain autonomy. In their article "Picturing Existential Freedom in *The Alchemist*" Cahya and Prastiwi argue that Santiago's journey is not just a fantastical adventure but a metaphor for the struggles individuals face in search of their meaning of existence.

Elikwu (2024) explores the philosophical intersections between Taoist *wu-wei* and Sartrean existentialism, and emphasizes their focus on spontaneity and authenticity. In the study "Harmony and Existential Fulfillment: A Comparative Study of Wu-Wei Philosophy and Jean-Paul Sartre's Perspectives" Elikwu examines how *wu wei*, the Taoist principle of effortless action and alignment with the natural flow of the universe intersects with Sartre's idea of radical freedom, which states that individuals must define their own essence through conscious choice and responsibility. Furthermore, Elikwu's work encourages deeper cross-cultural dialogue, by bridging Taoist thought and existentialist philosophy.

Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) is an exceptional work which emphasizes that by embracing the absurd and continuous struggle, one can achieve and existential freedom. Stepien (2024) explores Camus's concept of the absurd and its impact on autonomy. In his article, "Social Constraints and Personal Freedom in *The Myth of Sisyphus*" Stepien argues that external forces like societal norms limit freedom, but embracing the absurd allows individuals to assert their values through resistance and creativity. According to Stepien, a continuous act of self-expression within constraints is crucial to attain freedom.

Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* (2009), a short story collection presents a story *Saleema* in which the protagonist struggles with internal conflicts, loneliness and responsibility to attain authenticity. Salman, Rasool, and colleagues (2024) analyze existential themes in Mueenuddin's *Saleema* to illustrate how Saleema's life reflects the broader tension between individual agency and societal constraints. Their research uses Sartre's and Frankl's theories to investigate Saleema's tragic suicide which serves as the tension between personal aspirations and societal expectations, that emphasizes the significance of existential freedom.

Sartre's existentialism and Laozi's Taoist "wu-wei" have been studied individually but their intersection remains underexplored in literary contexts, especially in works like Mieko Kawakami's *Heaven*. The present study focusses on societal injustice, and the interplay of spontaneous rebellion, passive endurance, and their philosophical relevance. Furthermore, the role of freedom as a dual construct, both liberating and burdensome, has not been explored in

Heaven. This article creates a balanced integration of Eastern and Western philosophies through close textual analysis which explores the themes of authenticity, agency, and the fragile balance between personal autonomy and societal constraints.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

This study examines the intersection of Sartre's existentialism and Laozi's Taoist *wu-wei* in literary contexts. It follows a qualitative research approach and a close textual analysis to analyze philosophical themes in Mieko Kawakami's *Heaven*. This study explores how characters in *Heaven* navigate authenticity, agency, and freedom both as liberating and burdensome. A comparative framework is used to highlight the convergences and divergences between existentialism's radical choice and responsibility and Taoism's principle of effortless action which is termed as *wu-wei*. Through this approach, the present research aims to explore how Eastern and Western philosophies converge in literature to illuminate broader existential struggles.

3.2. Theoretical Framework

This study examines the protagonist's journey through the lens of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism and Lao Tzu's concept of *wu-wei*. Sartre's existentialism emphasizes radical freedom, responsibility, and the individual's creation of meaning through choices. Key concepts include "existence precedes essence," the "absurd," "bad faith" (self-deception), and the anguish of freedom. Individuals are "condemned to be free" and must confront the inherent lack of preordained purpose. Authenticity is achieved through conscious, self-aware choices, even in oppressive circumstances. Taoism, through *wu-wei* ("non-action"), advocates for effortless action, simplicity, and harmony with the Tao, the universe's natural force. *Wu-wei* involves yielding and non-interference, propagating flexibility and acceptance. The interplay of yin and yang highlights the importance of balance. While Sartre focuses on conscious choice, Taoism emphasizes alignment with the natural world. Both philosophies, however, ultimately guide individuals towards freedom and authenticity. The research is fueled by the following assumptions;

1. The protagonist's experiences can be meaningfully interpreted through the frameworks of existentialism and Taoism.
2. The protagonist confronts issues like identity, self-definition, and the burden of choice.
3. The protagonist's environment presents oppressive circumstances that challenge their freedom.
4. The concepts of radical freedom and *wu-wei* offer contrasting yet complementary approaches to navigating these challenges.
5. The protagonist's journey reflects a struggle towards authenticity and self-discovery.

4. ANALYSIS

Mieko Kawakami's *Heaven* presents a nuanced exploration of freedom, identity, and existential meaning through the experiences of its young protagonist and his friend Kojima. This analysis examines how Kawakami's narrative interweaves concepts from Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism and Laozi's Taoist principle of *wu-wei* to portray a complex understanding of freedom amidst oppression and suffering. It offers a profound exploration of freedom,

authenticity, and choice through the intersection of Eastern and Western philosophical traditions. The narrative follows two bullied middle school students whose journey illuminates the complex relationship between personal agency and acceptance.

4.1. Authenticity

Authenticity is a central theme in Kawakami's *Heaven* and it plays a crucial role in the protagonist's journey towards self-discovery and freedom. The concept of authenticity, as explored in the novel, aligns closely with Sartre's existentialist philosophy. Sartre's existentialism posits that humans are "condemned to be free" and they must constantly make choices that define their essence, even in the face of constraints. This concept resonates throughout *Heaven* as the protagonist grapples with his identity and response to bullying. The unnamed narrator, known as "Eyes," embodies this existential dilemma as he grapples with his identity and the meaning of his suffering. His internal monologue about being hurt and scared often reflects Sartre's concept of "anguish," the awareness of one's absolute freedom and responsibility. The protagonist's small acts of resistance, like secretly reading Kojima's notes, exemplify Sartre's notion of exercising choice despite oppressive circumstances. This reflects the existential imperative to "act within one's situation" (Sartre, 1946) and affirm oneself even in adversity. However, the protagonist often struggles with what Sartre terms "bad faith" which means denying one's fundamental freedom by viewing oneself as determined by circumstances. Yet his relationship with Kojima offers glimpses of authentic, self-assertive existence through conscious acts of resistance.

The existential burden of creating one's essence through choices is evident in the protagonist's reflections when he blames himself for writing all the letters to Kojima resulting in her being trapped by the bullies. This internalized guilt exemplifies Sartre's concept of the "anguish" that accompanies the weight of freedom and responsibility for one's actions. The protagonist's hesitation to act on his feelings for Kojima further illustrates the existential dread of choice: "If I could I would. This wasn't good or bad, only whether I could or couldn't" (Kawakami, 2009, p. 135). This paralysis in the face of freedom echoes Sartre's assertion that being free is also a burden, as each decision carries the weight of defining one's identity.

Sartre argued that in an indifferent universe, humans must create their own meaning through choices and actions. The protagonist's contemplation of life's randomness when pondering the reality of mortality according to which humans are mortal and die sooner or later, reflects this existential perspective. Furthermore, he also begins to embrace the responsibility of self-definition, as seen in his decision to undergo eye surgery which represents a step towards authenticity and self-determination in the face of societal pressures.

Momose's character in the novel serves as a complex philosophical counterpoint, embodying a nihilistic worldview that challenges the protagonist's understanding of bullying and existence. Introduced as a detached observer who participates in the bullying, Momose argues that life has no inherent meaning or morality. He tells the protagonist, "there's no hell. It's all made up...If there is a hell, we're in it. And if there's a heaven, we're already there. This is it" (Kawakami, 2009, p.105). This perspective aligns with Sartre's concept of radical freedom, where individuals must create their own meaning in an absurd world.

Momose's philosophy echoes Sartre's notion of authenticity, advocating for embracing the arbitrary nature of existence and acting without regard for societal norms. He states, "Good and bad don't enter into it. Everyone does whatever they feel like doing, whatever works" (Kawakami, 2009, p.105). This view challenges readers to confront the anguish of freedom and

the responsibility that comes with making choices in a world devoid of inherent meaning. Momose's stance represents a form of active nihilism, contrasting with Kojima's more passive approach to suffering.

Kojima's character serves as a counterpoint, embodying a radical form of authenticity. Her unwavering acceptance of her circumstances and refusal to conform to societal norms challenges the protagonist to question his own choices and motivations. Through their relationship, Kawakami explores the complexities of maintaining authenticity in the face of oppression and social pressure. Kojima's philosophy challenges conventional notions of resistance: "Living with this weakness, accepting it completely, that's the greatest strength in the whole world." (Kawakami, 2009, p.113). This perspective aligns with both existential authenticity and Taoist non-resistance, suggesting that true strength and freedom can be found in embracing one's vulnerabilities.

4.2. Spontaneity

Spontaneity in *Heaven* is closely tied to the Taoist concept of wu-wei, or "non-action." This principle focuses on aligning oneself with the spontaneous flow of life without forceful interference. Kawakami presents this idea through the characters' responses to their challenging circumstances. The protagonist's initial passive acceptance of bullying reflects a form of spontaneity, born out of fear and helplessness. As he develops a relationship with Kojima, he begins to embrace a more intentional form of non-resistance. This shift represents a growing understanding of wu-wei, where spontaneity becomes a conscious choice rather than mere inaction.

The protagonist's post-surgery experience exemplifies a moment of pure spontaneity and acceptance: "I inhaled and surrendered to the flow... What I saw was beautiful, because everything was beautiful." (Kawakami, 2009, p.144). This scene represents a convergence of existential self-realization and Taoist alignment with the natural flow of life. The protagonist's newfound ability to see clearly becomes a metaphor for his philosophical awakening. Kojima's spontaneous acts of defiance, such as undressing before her tormentors, demonstrate a powerful fusion of wu-wei and existential freedom. Her actions, while seemingly passive, carry a profound weight of intentionality and self-assertion. Through these moments, Kawakami illustrates how spontaneity can be a form of resistance and self-expression.

Kojima's character particularly embodies wu-wei through her calm acceptance of suffering and rejection. Her perspective on their shared suffering when she insists the protagonist to come to school always despite all the bullying and letting it happen intentionally, highlights her belief in enduring pain without resistance. She insists that they must accept the bullying without seeking help or retaliating, suggesting that facing their tormentors every day is a form of quiet strength. This stance represents a dignified resistance beyond fear, aligning with Laozi's teaching that true strength comes from yielding rather than forcing.

Momose's character serves as a complex philosophical counterpoint, embodying a nihilistic worldview that challenges the protagonist's understanding of bullying and existence. Momose's chilling rationalization of bullying is evident when he tells the protagonist: "Nobody does anything because they have the right. They do it because they want to... People do what they can get away with." (Kawakami, 2009, p.99). This perspective starkly contrasts with Kojima's belief in the transformative power of enduring suffering. Momose's stance represents a form of active nihilism, challenging the protagonist to navigate between despair and hope. The juxtaposition of Momose's and Kojima's philosophies in *Heaven* explores the spectrum of human

responses to suffering and the search for meaning. This amoral perspective starkly contrasts with Kojima's belief in the transformative power of enduring suffering

4.3. Freedom of Choice

The concept of freedom of choice is central to both Sartre's existentialism and Laozi's wu-wei, and Kawakami skillfully explores the intersection of these philosophies in *Heaven*. The protagonist's journey is marked by a series of choices that shape his identity and relationship with the world around him. His decision to meet Kojima in secret represents an exercise of existential freedom, choosing connection over isolation despite the risks involved. Similarly, his contemplation of eye surgery embodies the weight of choice in defining one's essence, as posited by Sartre. However, Kawakami also presents freedom of choice through the lens of wu-wei. Kojima's choice to endure bullying without resistance reflects a different kind of freedom — the freedom to accept and align oneself with circumstances beyond one's control. This paradoxical freedom challenges traditional notions of choice and agency.

Kojima ardently believes that getting bullied is a "sign" of something good awaiting them, seeing herself and the protagonist as designated empaths. Her approach reflects the Taoist idea of aligning oneself with the natural flow of the universe rather than actively resisting or intervening. The painting titled *Heaven* serves as a central metaphor for freedom through acceptance. Kojima's interpretation of the artwork reveals the possibility of transcendence through suffering: "After everything, after all the pain, they made it here. It looks like a normal room, but it's really Heaven" (Kawakami, 2009, p. 36). The unnamed narrator's development illustrates the synthesis of existential choice and wu-wei. His decision regarding eye surgery represents both an assertion of agency and an acceptance of change. In the end of the novel, after surgery, he finds that everything is glowing around him and he tries to believe in that fascinating scenery. This moment encapsulates both the assertion of self through choice and the wu-wei-like surrender to life's inherent beauty.

The novel ultimately suggests that true freedom of choice lies in the synthesis of these philosophies. The protagonist's final embrace of the world's beauty after his surgery represents a choice that combines self-assertion with acceptance. This nuanced portrayal of freedom invites readers to reconsider the nature of choice and its role in shaping our identities and experiences.

4.4. Intersectionality and the Freedom Paradox

The intersection of existentialism and wu-wei in *Heaven* creates what can be termed a "freedom paradox." This paradox is exemplified in the protagonist's journey, where he must balance the active responsibility of existential choice with the passive acceptance of wu-wei. The protagonist's decision to undergo eye surgery represents this paradox. It is both an assertion of existential freedom (choosing to change his circumstances) and an acceptance of societal norms (aligning with conventional standards of appearance). Kojima's reaction to this decision highlights the tension: "If that's what you want to do, go fix your eyes and follow the other kids." (Kawakami, 2009, p.117). This moment encapsulates the complex nature of freedom in the novel, where choices are never simple and always carry philosophical implications. Kojima emerges as a philosophical guide, embodying both resistance and acceptance. Her approach to bullying when she tells the protagonist that they are just scared because you are different and unique because of your eyes and they can just normal beings, demonstrates how freedom can exist within apparent powerlessness.

Kawakami depicts spontaneity and authenticity in the small, everyday actions of her characters. The protagonist's ritual of checking for Kojima's notes becomes a form of quiet

resistance and self-affirmation: "checking each morning for a new note became my little ritual." (Kawakami, 2009, p.06). These small acts of connection and self-expression represent a spontaneous assertion of identity within the constraints of their oppressive environment. *Heaven* explores the nature of freedom in situations where external choices are limited. Kawakami presents freedom as an internal state, achievable even in the face of oppression. The novel presents a complex interplay between active choice and passive acceptance. This tension is exemplified in the protagonist's relationship with Kojima and their shared experience of bullying. Their secret correspondence and meetings represent both a choice to resist isolation and an acceptance of their circumstances. Her spontaneous acts of defiance, such as undressing before her tormentors, demonstrate a powerful fusion of Wu-Wei and existential freedom. Her actions, while seemingly passive, carry a profound weight of intentionality and self-assertion. Through these moments, Kawakami illustrates how spontaneity can be a form of resistance and self-expression.

Paradoxically, the novel also presents freedom as a form of acceptance, aligning with the Taoist concept of Wu-Wei. Kojima's philosophy embodies this idea: "They need to learn about themselves from what they've done to me. That would be enough to justify my life." (Kawakami, 2009, p.63). This perspective suggests that freedom can be found in accepting and finding meaning in one's circumstances, rather than fighting against them. Kawakami's novel creates a dialogue between Taoist principles and existentialist ideas, exploring how characters navigate their existential journeys through a combination of self-determination and acceptance.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Mieko Kawakami's *Heaven* presents a rich tapestry of philosophical ideas, weaving together existentialist concepts of freedom and choice with Taoist principles of acceptance and non-action. Through the experiences of its young protagonists, the novel explores the complexities of authenticity, spontaneity, and the paradoxical nature of freedom. It challenges readers to consider how they navigate their own existence in the face of cruelty, meaninglessness, and personal responsibility, suggesting that true freedom may lie not in the absence of constraints, but in how we choose to respond to our circumstances whether through resistance, acceptance, or a nuanced combination of both. By creating a dialogue between Eastern and Western philosophical traditions, Kawakami offers a unique perspective on the human condition, inviting readers to reconsider their understanding of freedom, choice, and identity, and presenting a vision of existence where authenticity and spontaneity can coexist with acceptance and alignment with life's natural flow. Ultimately, *Heaven* offers a profound vision of freedom as both a struggle and a release, inviting readers to embrace the complexity of human existence.

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