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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Sayaka Murata's Earthlings: A Psychoanalytical Reading

Norah Alradaan

Independent researcher, Al-Kharj, Riyadh Region, Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: Author's Name, YOUANE Elie, E-mail: [N.alradaan97@gmail.com](mailto:N.alradaan97@gmail.com)

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#### ABSTRACT

Sayaka Murata is a Japanese author whose works are often considered shocking and controversial. She challenges the notion of normality through characters that are considered peculiar in the context of modern society, yet through them, conventional beliefs are deemed absurd. Sayaka's worldwide fame peaked with Takemori's English translation of her novel *Earthlings* in 2021, which was originally published in 2018 as *Chikyū Seijin*. However, not enough research has been done to unravel its depths. This paper aims to explore the complexities of the human psyche and the interplay of personal and collective consciousness. Through the main protagonist, Natsuki, the conflict between the Conscious and the unconscious mind is demonstrated, which results in outbursts of the repressed unconscious. This paper highlights the function of cannibalism in *Earthlings*, and it argues that the theme of cannibalism signifies the outburst of the unconscious and its triumph over the conscious mind. Cannibalism is a significant theme in Murata's *Earthlings* and has evoked various reactions and different interpretations from readers around the world. It has roots in human history, and over the years was utilized to serve different purposes in the literary field. Although the novel is recognized, it has been scarcely addressed in academic studies, therefore, this paper will bridge this gap.

#### KEYWORDS

Sayaka Murata, *Earthlings*, Carl Jung, Cannibalism, Unconsciousness, Shadow, Persona, Consciousness, Psychoanalysis, Japanese Literature

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### 1. Introduction

"I've been socialised, but if I hadn't been, maybe I could prepare a soup from my father's skeleton.", was Sayaka Murata's comment to the *Gentlewoman* magazine (Mesure, 2024). Reflecting what is often considered shocking and controversial about the works of this Japanese author. Her remark to the magazine reflects Murata's eccentric view of the world, which manifests in her works. She challenges the notion of normalcy through characters that are considered peculiar in the context of modern society, yet through them, conventional beliefs are deemed absurd. In her interview with Louisiana Channel, Murata talks about a "truth beyond the truth" (2022, 20:20) that she often reflects in her works. A dormant, unpleasant truth that resides in all of us beyond our comprehension. Through her novels, Murata searches for that truth that is extremely "dangerous to put into words" (2022, 21:20). She awakens in her characters a bleak and petrifying side of human nature. Murata (b.1979), who survived life through the power of stories and imaginary friends, writes protagonists who resemble her. Like Natsuki, *Earthlings'* protagonist, she "wanted to play the part of a human being better" (Channel, 2022, 17:49). The novel was initially published in Japanese in 2018 and later translated to English in 2020 by Ginny Tapley Takemori. It focuses on the struggles of a female protagonist named Natsuki, who grapples to conform to a society that rejects differences among individuals.

The novel highlights Natsuki's childhood traumas that she suppresses and her adulthood struggles to maintain her place in a traditional society. The novel ends with a shocking scene where Murata's protagonist, Natsuki, radically breaks all connections with societal norms. What started as mere questioning of social relations and construct, develops into a stark rejection of them.

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Clothes, sex, and normalized self-conduct behaviors are all abandoned, embracing a spontaneous way of living that results in chaos. This paper relies on Carl Jung's archetypes, focusing on the persona and the collective and personal shadow. Through Jung's archetype and theory of the unconscious mind, Natsuki's actions and mental conflict will highlight the interplay between the conscious and the unconscious. With the aid of Jung's insights, the significance of Natsuki's radical act of cannibalism will be unraveled by setting it into context with the events that preceded it. The act of cannibalism is one of the greatest taboos of today; however, throughout history, it was not a mere sign of savagery. This act was justified and debatably moral in some historical contexts according to some tribal rites. In literature, cannibalism has been used as a narrative and a metaphor of multiple meanings. It goes back to the literature of the colonial world that served ideological purposes and continues to appear in contemporary works to critique contemporary issues. This paper highlights the function of cannibalism in *Earthlings*, and it argues that the theme of cannibalism signifies the outburst of the unconscious and its triumph over the conscious mind.

## **2. Literature Review**

*Murata's Earthlings* has gained the attention of renowned magazines for its odd themes and plot. It was framed as "compellingly weird" (Williams, 2020), and "a tale of quiet desperation" (Self, 2020). The novel received a range of interpretations, with critics' emphasis on its tone and theme of alienation. Millet (2020) explored the impassivity and detachment of the narrative's tone, which stems from the protagonist's trauma. Her rebellion against societal demands appears mechanical and emotionless. Asserting that the emotional detachment of the protagonist's tone is an intended technique to underscore the emotional shallowness of the characters and their flimsy critique of societal norms. Hayes (2020) highlighted how Murata's characters recreate the society they endeavored to escape; however, more radical and drenched in amplified greed and savagery. Addressing how the novel's narration of disorderly events challenges readers to abandon conventional beliefs without offering moral guidance or an explicit counter-narrative.

Another study by Osborne (2017) investigated Amy Dunne as a femme fatale and justified her actions as a fight against patriarchy and misogyny in American society. Instead of solely exploring Amy's characterization in *Gone Girl*, Osborne also observed the way Nick's characteristics and actions in the story lead to Amy's radical response. The study claimed that in order to make Nick a real man, Amy's violent and devious scheme is necessary and crucial. Amy's portrayal as a femme fatale and her revolt against social norms are further investigated in Resti and Soelityarini's (2016) study. The authors applied Simone de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* (1949) regarding women being perceived as second-class citizens or the "other" and demonstrated that Amy, as a femme fatale character, defies societal demands and the traditional view of women as less capable than their male counterparts.

Cannibalism is a significant theme in Murata's *Earthlings* and has evoked various reactions and different interpretations from readers around the world. It has roots in human history, and over the years was utilized to serve different purposes in the literary field. Throughout history, ancient societies and tribes performed cannibalism for spiritual purposes, medicinal, honoring the dead, and many more, which are considered noble by the standards of ancient societies. (Guest, 2001). Later on, Ideological urges have evoked early depictions of cannibalism in literature. According to Brown (2013), the cannibal symbol reappears in different representations, mainly as an expression of cultural fears, and identifies three major phases of metaphorical functions of cannibalism in the artistic expression, each reflecting a distinct set of societal anxieties. It started with the colonial cannibal phase, which embodies cultural and racial fears, often used as an ideological tool to justify colonization by depicting the indigenous as different and inferior "other" and the West as the civilized superior culture, as seen in Robinson Crusoe and *Heart of Darkness* (pp. 17–54).

In the regional cannibal phase, the focus is shifted from colonial settings to national contexts, reflecting social and class-based anxieties, particularly those tied to poverty, rural isolation, and economic decline, exemplified in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes* (pp. 107–152). Furthermore, Brown (2013) illustrated how the cannibal becomes a symbol of internal, self-reflective fear in urban settings, tied to capitalist excess and bourgeois moral decay, as represented by characters like Hannibal Lecter, created by Thomas Harris, and Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* (pp. 153–214). Cannibalism became a powerful metaphor used in movies and literature to investigate issues such as human consumption and appetite, themes of madness, overpopulation, consumerist culture, sexuality, hierarchies, and power dynamics.

González (2024) expanded on Brown's idea and introduced contemporary examples of the theme of cannibalism as a narrative. He highlighted how Lapvona by Moshfegh critiques the late-stage capitalist system through a feudal society with similar socio-economic features. In the novel, cannibalism is utilized to highlight social identity and inequality, where gender, class, and disability are the deciding factors to indicate who is more human. Similarly, Summers's *A Certain Hunger* follows the story of Dorothy Daniels, a food writer who narrates her own story through a fictional memoir after being convicted of serial killing and eating men. González (2024) critiques the novel by focusing on the main protagonist's motive behind the act of flesh-eating. He highlights how Dorothy's memoir is a reinforcement of the worldview that classifies people into categories. The novel depicts and

challenges the worldview through the radical acts of men eating. It highlights the consequence of overlooking individuality and categorizing people into fixed types that would become a justification for violence (González, 2024).

Furthermore, Bazterrica's *Tender Is the Flesh* is another work that utilizes the theme of human meat. In this novel, the world is struck by a pandemic that made animals inedible; therefore, human meat is legitimized. González (2024) highlights how Bazterrica, through the themes of cannibalism, critiques the systems of oppression that dehumanize and legitimize exploitation through language and discourse. In the novel, silence is what validates a human's meat consumption. The silent ones are the "meat", asserts González (2024), which parallels wider societal propensity to impose identities such as gender constructions through systematic dismissal of certain voices and denial of individuals' autonomy to maintain socially constructed categories. Hence, through the theme of cannibalism, Bazterrica evokes ethical debates by blurring the line between what is human and what is not. Similarly, González argues that cannibalism in Sayaka Murata's *Earthlings* signifies the characters' desire to transcend their bodies, which they view as sites of trauma. Hence, this paper argues against this by tracing the protagonist's behavioral patterns that indicate the influence of repressed desires and memories on the final scene of cannibalism.

### 3. Methodology

Sayaka Murata's *Earthling* is a bold novel that evoked many uncomfortable reactions from readers worldwide. However, not enough research has been done to unravel the depths of it. This paper aims to explore the complexities of the human psyche and the interplay of personal and collective consciousness. This study relies on Carl Jung's analytical psychology, specifically his theory of the psyche, by examining the novel through this framework, the analysis explores the dynamic between the conscious and unconscious mind. Through the main protagonist, Natsuki, the conflict between the Conscious and the unconscious mind is demonstrated, which results in outbursts of repressed contents of the unconscious mind. Therefore, the study highlights the eventual destruction of the main protagonist, which is caused by the repressed events and their resulting emotions of violation and anger, and the untamed universal instinctive unconscious of humankind. The horrors of mankind's dark potential manifest in the final act of cannibalism, which signifies the shadow's dominance over the conscious.

According to Carl Jung, the Psyche is divided into the Ego and the Unconscious, which are contained in the Self, the totality of the psyche. The Self is an organizing centre of the psyche, and it is in a constant process called "individuation" to "liberate" the person of the "conflict of opposites" contained in the Self (the conscious and unconscious) (Jung, 2014, p.727). The ultimate goal of individuation is to integrate all aspects of the psyche into a balanced, cohesive, and harmonious whole. To further illustrate, while the ego is the centre of consciousness and realized aspects of the personality, the unconscious consists of two: the personal and the collective. The collective unconscious consists of many archetypes. However, this paper will focus on the Shadow and Persona archetypes.

Jungian archetypes are defined as the "primordial images" that reside in every human being (Jung, 1964, p.67). They are the characteristic patterns and symbols of humans' common primary motivations, inherited "archaic remnants" from our prehistoric ancestors (Jung, 1964, p.67). The collective Shadow has no direct connection to our personal traits and experiences, but rather, it is related to the unknown side of one's society and culture. In the Collective Shadow, Jung asserts that "instincts are impersonal, universally distributed" (Jung, 1964, p.43). Unlike the personal shadow, which is related to repressed undesired personal qualities and lived experiences, the collective consciousness contains "hereditary factors" of a stimulating influence, "which very often fail so completely to reach consciousness" (Jung, 2014, p.43). Everyone has a shadow; when repressed and isolated from reaching consciousness, it is more probable that it will "burst forth suddenly in a moment of unawareness" (Jung, 2014, p.76).

On the other hand, the personal Shadow is the dark side of one's personality; Jung refers to it as "the thing a person has no wish to be" (Jung, 2014, p.262). It is the total sum of unpleasant qualities in our personality that we refuse to acknowledge. Furthermore, Persona is an integral part of Jung's archetype, and it is a "compromise between individual and society"; it is how the individual conducts himself in society to fit in and be accepted (p.158). While it is not entirely false, it is a "two-dimensional reality" (p.158). Jung refers to it as a "mask", which is intended to make a specific impression upon others and to "conceal the true nature of the individual" (Jung, 1971, p.192). Jungian archetypes and his theory of the unconscious serve as beneficial tools to analyze the interplay between the conscious and unconscious mind manifested in the protagonist's actions. With special emphasis on the cannibalistic acts, this research underscores its significance as a violent outburst of the unconscious.

### 4. Analysis and Discussion

Sayaka Murata's *Earthling* follows important events in the childhood and adulthood of a female named Natsuki. In childhood, she struggles to fit in with her own family, believing that she is an outsider who disturbs the harmony of the family. The only happy days of her life were those spent up in the mountains in her grandmother's house in Akishina, enveloped by darkness

and her uncle Teuyoshi's stories. Her teacher, Mr. Igasaki, sexually abuses Natsuki, and later on, she kills him while he is asleep in his house. Yuu, Natsuki's cousin and only source of comfort, exchanged rings and marriage vows with her during childhood, but they faced severe backlash after being discovered in a compromising situation. Imagination and dissociation were her coping mechanisms to survive the severity of her trauma and the maltreatment of her mother.

Years later, she married Tomoya, an asexual, with whom she agreed to be formally married and share nothing but space as an escape from society's curious gaze. Natsuki, who is in her 30s, loses her imagination and, consequently, her coping abilities. After years of separation from Yuu, she meets him in the empty house of their deceased grandparents, and she introduces him to her husband, Tomoya. They spend days in the remote town despite the family's constant interventions. When the marriage facade is exposed, the 3 unleash their instincts to live as primitives as a revolution against the society they struggled to belong to. Natsuki retrieves her painful memories, and she faces them after killing her teacher's parents, who suspected her involvement. The novel ends with Tomoya, Yuu, and Natsuki eating each other's flesh.

From the start of the novel to its end, Akishina to Natsuki is described as a refuge, a place where she would not seem different, like she does in the city. When she is abused, she retreats and clenches her fists and imagines the darkness of Akishina "inside [her] hands" and "behind [her] eyelids". She sought the darkness and the starry nights of Akishina, where familiar stars glimmer (Murata, 2021, pp.47-33-57). Akishina was not merely an escape from social norms; it provides a critique of human nature. When Natsuki, her husband, and Yuu spent their days isolated in Akishina, they were constantly debating what is rational and what is not. Their isolation from society reshapes not only their mentalities but also their actions and, therefore, their adopted identities. As Carl Jung (1971) emphasizes the role of the Persona as the conducted behaviour in society, a mere appearance to fit in, Murata's characters are separating themselves from their adopted personas and their facade relationships, e.g., Tomoya and Natsuki's marriage as their personas.

The main characters, Tomoya, Yuu, and Natsuki, were longing to feel like normal humans, although normal in their sense would be debated. Tomoya resented cities because they did not provide essential knowledge to human beings (Murata, 2021, p.96), which emphasizes that he views himself as a human being. On the other hand, Natsuki believed that she was a human being but a "hopeless" one (p.22). Society's opposition to difference is fierce, and so is the trio's reaction caused by accumulated repressed desires and reactions after years of attempted conformity. This violent societal refusal that overlooks individuality strips humans of their humanity. The characters' different views of life marked them as peculiar outcasts who are unable to blend into society, and this ostracism compelled the characters to question their humanity.

Natsuki reacts to her family's mistreatment by being silent and "unnoticed" (Murata, 2021, p.15). Despite her willingness to improve at being a productive member of society, her attempts are met with further victimization at school when her teacher sexually assaults her. Natsuki develops another coping mechanism: dissociation, an "out-of-body experience" (p.142) to protect herself from the surge of painful emotions. Near the novel's end, the adult Natsuki unravels what had happened to Mr. Igasaki. He was brutally murdered by a scythe by Natsuki, but she was convincing herself that she had killed a "wicked witch" to save the world (p.147). So when the news spread about the incident, she convinces herself that somebody had used her scythe to kill him. The magic powers and Piyuut -her imaginary doll friend- were symbols of her conscious mind trying to protect her from the severity of her actions. When she begins to suspect her involvement, she finds reassurance in her imaginary friend, who dismisses her worries. The incident played an impactful role in her final downfall.

Carl Jung addresses how unpleasant feelings and memories, if repressed without consideration, will not be "corrected" and, hence, will further aggravate the outcomes (Jung, 2014, p.76). This is evident in the course of Natsuki's story. Her negative feelings were growing, so she feels the need to confess to a church, but finally resolves to talk to her girlfriends in search of support and sympathy. Instead, the girls reproach her for failing to take decisive action that signals honest disapproval, condemning her for refraining from engaging in relationships with male peers. Natsuki's urge to go to a church in the first place indicates a sense of guilt that follows the commitment of sin. This sense of guilt has multiple possible stimulations: the blame brought upon her by her female colleagues, her mother's violent reaction to her hinting accusations to Mr. Igasaki, and the fact that she killed her teacher and suppressed the memory to avoid its brutality. Her negative feelings are growing worse because of the unsympathetic reactions of others to her turmoil. So she represses her shame and anger, along with her dark memories of unacknowledged crime and its lingering guilt.

Natsuki, whom society perceives as peculiar, views human society as strange and animal-like. In her descriptions of the surroundings, she draws a parallel between the way of life of animals and humans' way of life to blur the line between humans and animals. In *Earthling*, Natsuki makes unusual remarks, indicating her awareness of the existence of humans in the place by the smell they exude, just like animals. On occasions, it would become hard for her to recognize the source of odors, whether they emanate from humans or animals (pp.10-125). Furthermore, Natsuki, who feels most free at Akashina, in the darkest nights among

the mountains, has a sensation of “the presence of nonhuman creatures”. In the wild nights of Akashina, the protagonist’s “feral cells were throbbing” (p.26). This kind of outlook brings forth Jung’s (2014) assertion about a primal instinct shared between humans and animals (p.43). Natsuki, who at first felt alienated and different, does not believe she is something other than human. She envies her cousin Yuu, whom she believes to be an alien who belongs to another planet because, unlike him, her differences signal her failure to belong to anything. However, as the novel proceeds, when Natsuki grows older, and the nature of her marriage is exposed, the couple’s families strive to pull them back to societal conformity. Natsuki, who fails at joining the traditional way of living, starts to believe that she is an alien after all.

Along with her husband and cousin, they shut themselves away from society in Akishina’s mountain house. Their seclusion detached them from the influence of society. They began questioning the rationality of prevalent norms, which opened doors to further questioning the reasons behind established universal taboos like cannibalism and incest. They resolve to adhere to a new system ungoverned by “Earthling knowledge”, but rather living according to their desires, “listening to [their] bodies” and merely satisfying their natural calling (Murata, 2021, p.219). In Akishina, they started rejecting the necessity of clothes and the natural order of the house, and the rationality of beds was reconsidered. Natsuki’s “body was awakening” as a result of this radical break from societal norms (p.223). Her “flesh had been restored” after years of numbness caused by the violation of her body by her teacher (p.223). The trio’s criteria for the validity of one’s actions is consent. Incest, albeit a red line in almost all human societies, its prohibition seemed ridiculous. Likewise, cannibalism became a dominant obsession for Natsuki, Yuu, and Tomoya. When they run out of food supplies, they search for food across the empty houses in the town, and suddenly, the idea of eating humans does not seem so repulsive.

The characters who first strived to be accepted in human society start distinguishing themselves from humanity as a whole, referring to humans as a different entity. By detaching themselves from the spectrum of humanity, it becomes easier to ask if the flesh of “Earthlings [is] edible” (Murata, 2021, p.234). Imposing questions like: if humans are “relatively clean animals”, why not eat them?. Natsuki, who kills two humans in self-defence during the search for food, leans towards Yuu and Tomoya’s opinion to eat the corpses before they rot, but with fear of never “being accepted into the Earthling fold again” (p.234). The protagonist and her fellow culprit characters explicitly suggest that the environment is a critical influence on human behavior.

In the same vein, Jung suggests that “The so-called civilized man never suspects that his own hidden and apparently harmless shadow has qualities whose dangerousness exceeds his wildest dreams” (Jung, 2014, p.267). Natsuki’s dismissal of her ability to inflict harm and her disregard for the hidden potentials within her have caused them to grow unruly and unchecked, bursting violently. The protagonist’s first violent outburst was caused by repressing her unpleasant feelings and undesired memories, and it was in the form of murder. By continuing the act of repression, the protagonist commits the world’s biggest taboo of the modern world: Cannibalism. This act signifies the outburst of the characters’ collective shadow. When Natsuki, Tomoya, and Yuu decide to eat each other to survive further societal oppression. They assert that their “form [...] is also dormant within” all of us, “even if it isn’t evident now. It can infect [us] at any time” (Murata, 2021, p.246). The characters yield to their abilities as humans, which are often restricted and regulated by societal rules of conduct. The ending embodies the innate nature of humans, and the extent to which they could go when uncontrolled by regulative rules and actions.

## 5. Conclusion

Murata’s distinctive outlook on life and societal conventions has influenced her writing. Her novels depict protagonists who challenge notions of normality. *Earthlings* is one of her most controversial works that tackles themes of alienation, trauma, and abuse. The characters’ eccentric ideas and chaotic events have evoked worldwide reactions and attempts to unpack the underlying meaning of the work. The protagonist Natsuki’s descent into cannibalism is not a descent into savagery, but a symbolic rebellion, a violent expression of psychic rupture brought about by repression, trauma, and societal refusal to accommodate difference. Natsuki’s final act, framed within the isolated landscape of Akishina, dramatizes the moment when the shadow overrides the persona, dismantling the illusion of control and the notion of normalcy imposed by society. This reading complicates the interpretation of Murata’s cannibalism as merely grotesque or nihilistic. Instead, it reveals a layered metaphor for the psychic toll of forced conformity, unacknowledged violence, and emotional silencing. In Jungian terms, when the shadow is denied integration, it returns not as a manageable truth but as monstrous rebellion.

While this study focused primarily on the function of cannibalism as a metaphor of psychological collapse and unconscious eruption, *Earthlings* also opens broader ethical and existential questions about identity, otherness, and what it means to be human. Cannibalism, among other themes in the novel, can be disturbing for some readers. However, its historical context, which suggests various cultural implications, does hold significance worthy of unraveling. It draws on a historical and literary tradition where eating human flesh serves both as a narrative device and a form of critique.

Hence, Sayaka Murata's *Earthlings* is a rich text brimming with motifs and layers of themes worthy of exploration. , yet this paper focuses on the causes and significance of cannibalism. Through Carl Jung's theory of the unconscious, the final scene of human flesh consumption signifies the shadow's triumph over the conscious mind, leading to the protagonist's psychic disintegration, and eventually, her destruction. The character's break from societal constraints holds roots in the belief in the pre-existence of primal instincts common to all human beings. Further research should include broader scopes to include wide-ranging themes and overlooked aspects that were not addressed in this paper, such as gender or posthumanism, which remain outside the limits of this paper.

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