

***Chado* in Murakami's *Sputnik Sweetheart*: Asymmetry, Boundaries and Chanced Meetings**

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Abstract The Japanese tea ceremony, also known as *chado*, embodies the values of impermanence, imperfection and incompleteness. These values are translated into the practices of the tea ceremony in a regulated manner, through the concepts of *sukiya*, *roji* and *ichigo ichie*. *Sukiya* which represents asymmetric characteristics is seen in the structure of the tea house and utensils, *roji* is expressed through boundaries for the purpose of signifying differences or creating intimacy and, *ichigo ichie* encapsulates the entirety of the experience as a single chance in a single meeting to receive a lesson about life. This article aims to show how the Japanese worldview, interpreted through the principles of the tea ceremony is appropriated in Haruki Murakami's novel *Sputnik Sweetheart* (2002). Through a symbolic encounter with the tea ceremony, the concepts of *sukiya*, *roji* and *ichigo ichie* are employed to analyse the characters in *Sputnik Sweetheart*. These concepts are appropriated to character study by examining their idiosyncrasies, relationships and the unique experiences they encounter. By this way, the novel transfers the Japanese tea ceremony and its underlying worldview to literature.

Key words tea ceremony; Haruki Murakami; *Sputnik Sweetheart*; Japanese

culture; Japanese worldview

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Introduction

The Japanese tea ceremony, known as *chado* in Japan, which began as a traditional practice amongst Japanese monks in the 12th century, has evolved over time and place to conform to the purposes of man. Reports capture the various reasons for engaging in the tea ceremony, which include, to symbolise peace between Japan and the United States of America in remembrance of the Pearl Harbour attack of 1941 and as a form of therapy to help the survivors of the Fukushima tsunami and earthquake tragedy bond with each other.¹

Undoubtedly, the tea ceremony holds within it meaningful properties which bring about reconciliation and healing in people, as its underlying principles are to create an awareness of the impermanence, imperfection and incompleteness of the world we live in. Japan manifests these tenets in its culture through various forms ranging from architecture, garden designs, flower arrangement, culinary and the cultural arts such as theatre and paintings. Each of these cultural activities has adapted the Japanese worldview in its own manner. Our focus is on the tea ceremony and we intend to discuss how its basic concepts are articulated through literature. To enable this, we will analyse the characters in Haruki Murakami's novel, *Sputnik Sweetheart* (2002), for the ways in which they express the Japanese worldview. The references to the Japanese cultural worldview in *Sputnik Sweetheart* is symbolically presented through the tea ceremony and will be traced through the principles of *sukiya* (asymmetry), *roji* (boundaries) and *ichigo iche* (chanced meeting).

Murakami, an outstanding contributor to the world of story-telling, is read in almost every continent, as his stories have been translated into 43 different languages (Rubin 6). Contemporary critics have assigned Murakami a global

status, and refer to him as a cosmopolitan cultural writer. His works appeal to the masses because they remain accessible, eluding the confines of time and place (Auestad 23). Murakami, moved by two major catastrophes in Japan; the Kobe earthquake and Sarin gas attack in 1995, realised that there were complexities within his society that he needed to understand. He then determined that his works would be more culturally and socially committed to Japan, and was prepared to do extensive research to “learn more about the Japanese as a “form of consciousness” (Murakami, 2001: 205). The resolution to engage with his society saw him shift the focus of his narratives from passive introspection to re-connecting with meaningful engagements in his culture. As a result, he ventured into writing *Underground* (2001), a journalistic essay about the Japanese psyche. Murakami's commitment to his cultural roots extended to his fictional work, as soon after, he wrote *Sputnik Sweetheart*, which Rubin comments carries within it “that sense of imperfection, the incompleteness of self-knowledge” (252). Arguably, the essence of the Japanese worldview permeates the novel and warrants an analysis.

In the following section, we will elaborate on the history of the tea ceremony, its fundamental principles and the adaptation of these principles to other disciplines.

The Japanese Tea Ceremony

Jennifer Anderson in her book *An Introduction to Japanese Tea Ritual* traces the history of tea to A.D. 805-815 when Buddhist priests on their return from China introduced tea to the Japanese monasteries.² The monks served tea to each other as a form of spiritual renewal, joining in worship of purity and refinement. By the 11th century, the tea ceremony became a lavish event organised by the aristocrats and included a contest to find the best tea. Expensive Chinese utensils were utilised and rituals that complemented the Chinese culture were practised. Thereafter the tea ceremony spread to the courts and military and became a ritual infused with materialistic values. The elite warriors of Japan used the tea ceremony to enhance their status and power.

To establish a clear distinction between the tea rituals practised in the monasteries with that practised in the courts, Dogen Zenji (A.D. 1200-1253) a Buddhist priest dictated regulations to administer the preparation of tea in the temples. Murata Shuko (A.D. 1421?-1502) further enhanced these rules and was instrumental in imbibing the Japanese culture into the tea ritual by adding elements of Zen and aesthetics. By the 16th century, Sen no Rikyu (A.D. 1521-1591), noted as Japan's eminent tea master, revolutionised the tea ceremony by making it a simple ritual that required attention to detail. He too was inspired by the aesthetics

which celebrated the beauty and natural forces of nature. Anderson further explains that after World War II, the tea ceremony became a way of preserving and teaching cultural practices and values and continues to be embedded into the social fabric of Japan, evidenced through schools established by Rikyu's grandsons that teach the tea ritual dictated by his philosophy.

The tea ceremony is practiced continuously to master its rituals which fulfils a greater cause in mastering life itself. In present day Japan, most families seldom hold tea ceremonies in their houses. Instead, both men and women attend various tea persuasions which teach the practices of the tea ceremony and eventually perform the ceremony with members of these schools. The education consists of the preparation of tea including lighting the charcoal fire and caring for the utensils used. Students also learn the traditional art of poetry and drawing, wood craftsmanship, pottery and gardening.

In the book *The Japanese Tea Ceremony: Cha-No-Yu*, Arthur Sadler describes the elaborate preparations and steps involved in the tea ceremony.³ The tea ceremony takes place in an area that consists of a garden with a teahouse. The area is divided into three sections. The ritual begins with the guest gathering in the waiting room where they are served hot water. They then move to the middle section in the garden and wait in an arbour where the host will greet them. Following this, they proceed to wash their hands and mouth at a stone wash basin before entering the third section which is the teahouse. To enter the teahouse, they will have to stoop at the low entrance which is structured in such a manner to evoke humility and equality. They then kneel on the floor, greet their host and have a simple meal after which they return to the arbour. When the tea is ready to be served, they enter the tearoom again and observe the preparation of the tea after which they drink the tea. The guests then engage in conversations on the quality and beauty of the utensils and decorations.

The tea ceremony was established as a culture in appreciation of beauty through the Zen master Rikyu. Guided by the Japanese practice of transferring philosophical lessons to one another through feelings and action, rather than words, Rikyu endeavoured to create a deliberate and meticulous practice that ensured the time, place, exterior and interior paraphernalia as well as the steps in preparing tea captured the essence of Japanese aesthetics. In this study, only three aesthetic concepts will be discussed: *sukiya*, *roji* and *ichigo ichie*. The embodiment of the aesthetics in the tea ceremony is reflected through the architecture of the teahouse and the various utensils used in preparing tea, in the *sukiya* style. Okakura defines *sukiya* as “the abode of the asymmetrical” (74), elaborating that the

arrangement and construction of the imperfect room caused one to contemplate on its characteristics and imagine what it would look like if it were perfect. This experience strengthens the appreciation for the beauty of nature. The garden path which leads to the teahouse is known as *roji*. The aesthetics of *roji* is incorporated through the spatial arrangement of the garden which is carefully structured to create boundaries. Okakura explains that the *roji* “was intended to break connection with the outside world, and to produce a fresh sensation conducive to the full enjoyment of aestheticism in the tea-room itself” (82). The boundaries distinguish what lay outside their lines with what is inside. It creates a need to differentiate between these two entities. Boundaries also signal an awareness of moving closer to the tea house and drawing into the intimacy of its experience. The third aesthetic concept is *ichigo ichie*. The entire experience of participating in the tea ceremony incorporates this concept which means one chance, one meeting. Each ceremony is treated as a single unique experience as the time spent during the occasion is considered impermanent. Every ritual and movement is unhurried as it is steeped in etiquette and require observation and sensory prowess.

The tea ceremony encapsulates the reality of the Japanese worldview revealed through the appreciation of the ephemeral nature of time, and the contemplation of the imperfect and incomplete, making the ceremony a valuable experience for life.⁴ Due to its intricate association with the Japanese culture, the tea ceremony has been explored by various disciplines and has been found to be closely associated with psychological and spiritual growth as it requires quiet contemplation away from the busyness of life. Fling suggests that the tea ceremony which is an elaborate event requires repeated actions that are associated with mind and body coordination.⁵ Mastery of these rituals eventually creates a sense of calmness and is a form of stress-management.

Anthropological studies have discussed the religious aspects of *chado*, by analysing its symbolic rituals and connecting it to the larger framework of existence of human life. Anderson asserts that the practice of tea is a mediator between the cosmos and man, and that its rituals transcend religious beliefs, reiterating the grandmaster Sen Soshitsu XV's statement that “Tea is the practice or realization of religious faith, no matter what you believe in” (495). Kondo further points out that the rituals which include repetitions, sequences, sensory media and boundaries are imbibed for the sake of creating an experience apart from the regular routine of the world.⁶ In modern day Japan, weekly classes on the tea ceremony cater to a large proportion of the Japanese population. Both men and women take meticulous care in studying the rituals for the attainment of self-actualization. Mori who did a focus

study on women and their purpose for studying *chado* reveals that the tea ceremony fulfils the plan for self-development.⁷ It helps to prepare women for marriage, use time productively and develop creative skills.

The tea ceremony has also impacted architectural studies as the specific requirements for the tea setting which include its physical environment and the way it interacts with the environment, alludes to sustainable elements in designing. Isozaki, et al. argue that architects have used these principles in designing space by incorporating engagement with the five senses and the use of building materials which embody the aesthetics of the tea ceremony.⁸ Tschirky and Ikawa developed a framework incorporating the values of the tea ceremony for the service industry.⁹ They introduced concepts on the mental attitude required while serving tea and the idea of equality of status between host and guest as accorded by the ceremony, to improve the quality of service in hotels.

During the medieval period, Japanese literature was greatly influenced by Zen Buddhism and themes were dedicated to the philosophy of impermanence captured through the creative works.¹⁰ The classical literature, mostly written as poems were dedicated to enhancing the beauty of nature. The power of the language and sounds in the poems worked on the principles of suggestion, irregularity, simplicity and perishability.¹¹ These ideals were transferred to other artistic forms such as paintings and theatre. The tea ceremony which was one of the symbols of culture imbibed some constructs of the Japanese aesthetics found in literature.

Sputnik Sweetheart

In this article, we aim to show how the tea ceremony shifts from a tangible setting to a fictional setting in the form of a narrative. The study of *chado* from the perspective of various disciplines have sought to explain the meaning of the ceremony, the reasons for engaging in it, and the aesthetic principles, which can be adopted and assimilated through behaviour or creative production. These elements also appear to be replicated in fiction, which is another form of communication within culture. Following Geertz's suggestion that culture is a "historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life" (89), the literary text, can also be taken as one of these symbolic forms. Analysing a literary text for the concepts of the tea ceremony suggests a new way of appreciating the culture. It provides a new encounter of participating in the tea ceremony by reading a novel.

In *Sputnik Sweetheart*, Murakami interweaves three concepts of the tea

ceremony: *sukiya*, *roji* and *ichigo ichie*. At the outset, Murakami creates the setting for the tea ceremony by demarcating the inner world and outer world through the narrator K. Similar to the *roji* that signals one is entering a different world, *Sputnik Sweetheart* begins with a young man stepping out of his present thoughts to enter into an altered premise filled with memories. In his recollection, K details the story of Sumire, a girl he secretly loves, and the events that lead to her disappearance. The narrative begins with a description of Sumire feeling “a love of truly monumental proportions” for Miu (Murakami, 2002: 3), a woman 17 years older than her and the eventual rejection by Miu, when this love is expressed. K, through his observations, highlights the *sukiya* or unsymmetrical attributes within himself and that of Sumire and Miu. He also describes experiences of crossing boundaries or *roji* to initiate intimacy, and *ichigo ichie* moments which reveal a new understanding of the self for each of them.

The novel *Sputnik Sweetheart*, will be discussed by examining the three main characters, Sumire, K and Miu. The characters will be analysed for their inner and outer attributes which reflect asymmetrical qualities in relation to the aesthetics of *sukiya*. When the characters engage in a relationship with each other, the boundaries that are demarcated in the relationship will be compared to the concept of *roji*. And finally, selected experiences similar to *ichigo ichie* that have impacted the characters will be analysed. On the whole, all these concepts personify a tea ceremony ritual through fiction.

***Sukiya*: The Asymmetrical Attributes of Sumire, Miu and K**

Murakami creates characters that complement the tone and mood of the tea ceremony through the qualities of *sukiya* which embody the essence of asymmetry. *Sukiya* commands the ability to draw one's attention to participate in understanding the beauty and harmony of asymmetry. *Sukiya* appears as physical or abstract embodiments in the characters and are described through their appearance and behaviour.

Sumire, the main character is described by K as not “exactly a beauty” (Murakami, 2002: 6). Her mouth was too wide and her nose too small and she was “as thin as one of those war orphans” (4). She dressed up awkwardly, like a male character in Kerouac's novel, with oversized coat, rough boots and unmatched socks. The description of her outward appearance exemplifies the quality of *sukiya* that Sumire possesses. Her facial features are alluded to asymmetric qualities as her mouth and nose do not appear to be proportionate on her face. Her body weight is below normal although she is from a working-class family living in the city.

Comparing her to a war orphan creates a distorted image. And, although a woman, she opts to cross dress and in addition, selects clothes that do not compliment her body. Here, the appearance of Sumire is exaggerated to show her jagged traits.

Additionally, Sumire's internal characteristics further strengthen the idea of *sukiya* as seen through the fragmented perception that she has of herself. K explains that Sumire's mother, mesmerised by Mozart, named her after the title of his piece, which means violet in Japanese. When Sumire discovered that the lyrics spoke of "a callous shepherd's daughter trampling down a hapless little violet in a field" (ibid. 19), she detested her name. Her name represents a delicate flower and is connected to her mother's love. However, when she chooses to associate it with violence, the hatred for something which she owns, inadvertently creates an irregular identity. This further transfers into her inability to stay focused, as she quits college to become a writer, but, lacks the discipline to produce substantial work. Her asymmetrical perception of herself also leads her to develop sexual desires for the same sex as seen in her attraction towards Miu, "Here I am in love for the first time in my life, aged 22. And the other person just happens to be a woman" (ibid. 37).

The quality of *sukiya* is further enhanced through the other female character, Miu. When Sumire unabashedly tells Miu that she wants to be like her, Miu startles her by responding "Fourteen years ago I became half the person I used to be. I wish I could have met you when I was whole" (ibid. 51). Miu narrates how an encounter she had in her past has caused her to become the asymmetrical person that she is with the inability to reveal her true self:

I was still on this side, here. But another me, maybe half of me, had gone over to the other side. Taking with it my black hair, my sexual desire, my periods, my ovulation, perhaps even the will to live. (172)

Although sexually desirable, her sexual desires were abated and caused an imbalance in her life. She says "I haven't been able to give myself to anyone in this world" (128). She marries to live up to the norms of society but is unable to live a fulfilling married life. Her innate talent for music is suppressed to build a career in business. A few months after Sumire's disappearance, K happens to catch a glimpse of Miu in Tokyo and sees in her "an empty shell" (224). Once again Miu evokes a sense of asymmetry as the void in her personality creates a sense of intrigue, even as she continues to exist.

The sense of asymmetry is represented by the final character K, a school teacher, whose professional behaviour is questionably wanting. K reveals his

instinctive sexual desire for the opposite sex and explains that he gratifies his needs when the opportunity arises, having many partners whom he has sexual relationships with, including a student's mother whom he meets twice a month. K confesses "If people discovered I was sleeping with the mother of one of the kids in my class, I could lose my job" (197). K is conflicted as he realises that what he is doing is unethical yet he resigns to it.

The central idea of *sukiya* is to facilitate inspection into what is conceived as beautiful and is only revealed when one comes to terms with its uniqueness. Like the tea-room that is built from rough material or the tea bowl that is uneven and flawed, beauty can only be found when these qualities are appreciated. This essence of *sukiya* is represented through Sumire's irregular physical features and her conflicted self, making her intriguing and endearing. When K chooses to describe these asymmetrical features in her, in actual fact he has learnt to value her beauty on a personal level. Through Miu, attention is drawn to her asymmetrical existence as she continues to live through the routine of life. Through this observation, the beauty of life amidst its harshness is learnt to be appreciated. And finally, K personifies the asymmetrical values that society lives by. Having this distorted ethical conduct causes K to inspect himself. He reasons that in order to understand the self, he has to decide "How important the world outside is to me, how I maintain a sense of equilibrium by coming to terms with it. That's how I'd grasp a clearer sense of who I am" (60).

The three characters individually represent a distinctive quality of *sukiya*, which when placed together fortify and create an atmosphere similar to the tea ceremony. The following section discusses the concept of *roji* in *Sputnik Sweetheart*.

***Roji*: Crossing Boundaries, Building Boundaries**

As mentioned, the tea ceremony takes place in a setting that is demarcated by symbolic boundaries. The boundaries in the garden path signal leaving the outside world to enter into an inner world. The boundaries systematically create a need to segregate what is on either side of the line as it sets limits on the behaviour and emotions. As the participant approaches the tea house, the boundary between the garden and an intimate place is created by the tea house. The tea-room in the house, has low ceilings, small entrances and subdued lighting, making it a secluded physical vacuum, designed for intense contemplation. Here, intimacy is contained and preserved. When the host and the guest engage in drinking tea, intimacy is also created as they exchange conversations and discuss the entire experience.

The relationships that are formed in *Sputnik Sweetheart* centre on Sumire who is the common person with whom K and Miu share a bond. The triangular relationship in which K is attracted to Sumire and Sumire to Miu signifies boundaries in the relationships which create an intimate and dynamic exchange, resulting in a new way of understanding life.

K and Sumire are first acquainted at college. K is immediately drawn to her and becomes her confidante. The relationship crosses the first boundary, moving from being casual friends to close friends when Sumire chooses to sleep over at his apartment occasionally. Within the confines of this friendship, their conversations become broader and deeper as they spend hours talking about various topics and intimate details. However, K laments that Sumire does not cross the sexual boundary as she has no hint of “romantic feelings [for him] let alone sexual interest” (64). K’s attraction to Sumire however, does not disrupt the harmony in the relationship, even when he “is seized by a violent desire” (72) to make love to her. Indeed, he admires her from afar, saying that there is “something special about her” (6). He even longs for the oddly timed phone calls he receives from her, as conversations with Sumire enables him to find answers about himself. The relationship suggests the interdependent motives that point to the fact that Sumire enables K to understand that these boundaries are inevitable and yet hold within them the potential to change K’s perspectives and respect himself.

K is realistic in his views, noting that when you “remove everything pointless from an imperfect life...it’d lose even its imperfection” (4). As such, his relationship with Sumire and the boundaries created, defines his being. As mentioned earlier, Sumire had the ability to make K change his perspective on his future plans. When he realises that she had decided to forgo the past and not be entrenched in despair, he resolves to do the same.

On his return to Tokyo, his student’s mother who is also his lover asks him to accompany her to a supermarket where her son Carrot, had been caught shoplifting. After the incident, K spends some time talking to Carrot privately, but admits that he is actually using Carrot as a decoy, to “think aloud” (211). As he examines the boundaries in his life, he begins to differentiate between what is right and wrong. By doing so, he symbolically creates boundaries to understand himself better by getting into the core of his being and evaluating his values. Through his encounter with Carrot, he realises that “unless you find the fundamental cause and treat that, the same problem will surface later on in a different form” (206). When he meets Carrot’s mother again, he resolves to end the affair, and learns to segregate and respect his profession by erecting boundaries in his sexual pursuits,

as he realised the consequences it may have on Carrot and himself. K says, "I don't think it's right that I'm part of the problem. I can't be part of the solution if I'm part of the problem" (217).

K moves on to recall Miu, whom Sumire was attracted to. Sumire encountered Miu for the first time at a wedding reception and "in the instant Miu touched her hair, Sumire fell in love" (9). Despite Sumire's declaration that she "isn't much to look at" (21) Miu who is drawn to Sumire's alluring irregular features, pulls her chin, gazes at her face and assures her that she is very attractive. When asked to describe her practical skills, Sumire lists all her negative traits. Despite this, Miu offers her a job and when the intrigued Sumire queries, Miu explains "I like your face, the way you look" (26). When they meet again, Miu holds Sumire's hand and persuades her to work for her.

Miu initiates the boundary for the purpose of creating an atmosphere of closeness that empowers Sumire to explore her inner self. When Miu gazes at Sumire, Sumire sees her reflection in Miu's eyes and feels "her soul being sucked into the other side of the mirror" (42). Though exciting, she is intimidated by it. Miu has the capability of drawing Sumire into an empty space that creates the impetus for quiet, inward-inspection. In this vacuum, Sumire attempts to change herself, explore her sexual desires, and eventually disappears into another space in the world to continue her journey of endless opportunities.

The intimate space created by Miu firstly, enables Sumire's entire outward appearance to change. Miu hands down some used but fashionable clothes, shoes and cosmetics for Sumire to wear to work. Sumire also begins to overcome her smoking addiction. All these prove to be a struggle for her as when she meets K again, who remarks that she is hardly recognisable, she expresses her fear of losing herself and of not knowing what the future may hold. This fear is repeated in a letter she writes to K while on tour in Europe with Miu. She says, "I have this strange feeling that I am not myself anymore" (77). Forced into a place of intimacy, every action, thought and feeling that Sumire has, magnifies and her desire for sexual intimacy escalates as she increasingly becomes attracted to Miu. She observes Miu "coming out of the bath with a towel wrapped around her... of her changing her clothes" (80) and her body on the beach, where they spend time swimming and sun-bathing in the nude, and this leads her to have sexual fantasies.

The relationships that the characters develop with each other once again reveals the crossing of boundaries to create intimacy or the need to build boundaries to demarcate differences that result in a change of perspective. Confronted with reality, the characters learn to embrace the challenges, decide on what the

boundaries signify in the relationships that they have and seek to understand the values each holds and through them, develop a deeper understanding of the self. The final section is on the *ichigo ichie* experience described in the novel that support the idea of one chance, one meeting for a revelation of the impermanence of life.

Ichigo Ichie: A Chanced Meeting for Self-reflection

Murakami narrates an *ichigo ichie* experience for all three characters in the novel for various reasons that ultimately support the concept of the transient nature of time. The tea ceremony is valued as an *ichigo ichie* experience as the encounter may never be repeated, at another time or place, or with another person, making it a meaningful, reflective experience.

Miu the oldest of the three characters, experienced an *ichigo ichie* moment when she was studying piano in France. She took leave for a business trip in a small town in Switzerland where she met an elderly Latin man and felt sexually threatened by him. The feeling overpowered her to the extent that she felt delusional and sensed the whole town turning against her. Late one night, she rides the Ferris wheel at the amusement park and is abandoned by the attendant. The experience of being stuck in a Ferris wheel forced Miu to encounter a defining moment in her life. The space she was caught in was high in the air away from the ground. The time was after midnight, surrounded in darkness.

From high up, she was able to view her apartment through a pair of binoculars and was horrified to see herself in her apartment, having sex with the Latin man she detested. “I was right here, and another me was over there. And that man — Ferdinando — was doing all kinds of things to me over there” (Murakami, 2002: 170). The experience was so mortifying to the degree that a permanent record of this encounter was imbedded in her; she explains “it was meaningless and obscene, with only one goal in mind — to make me thoroughly polluted” (170). When she is found the next morning, she is taken to the hospital and treated for shock. Upon seeing herself in the mirror, she faints as she realizes that “the white-haired woman staring back at her was herself” (172). At that point, Miu ‘vanished’. She though was uncertain “which me, on which side of the mirror, is the real me?” Miu accepted the fact that “something was missing from [her]. Something absolutely critical, though [she] didn’t know what” (173).

The incident caused her to delve into herself and she realizes that what she lacked was “human warmth” (174). In her pursuit of excellence, she had no sympathy for those who were under achievers. The *ichigo ichie* experience was a

revelation of the impermanence of life for Miu, the reality that physical appearance and capabilities are temporary and can vanish without warning. As such, Miu had to learn to appreciate each day of her life.

Sumire's *ichigo ichie* experience occurred when her suppressed sexual desires for Miu were finally revealed. Late one night, on the Greek island they were vacationing on, Sumire enters Miu's room after encountering a nightmare. Miu allows Sumire to share her bed in order to comfort her, but Sumire overcome by her sexual desires, begins to caress Miu. Although Miu allows this momentarily, she eventually resists Sumire. Sumire apologises saying, "It's just that I like you. I've worried about it for so long, and I had to try"... [Sumire, then] "sobbed into her pillow for the longest time" (129) after which she left the room to be alone. That night, Sumire disappears. Sumire's confrontation with her own self about her desires towards Miu, is revealed in this experience. She dares to express her feelings for Miu and acts on them. Unable to face the outcome, she disappears. After reading her documents, K concludes that Sumire expressed "the will to move forward, the struggle to make a new start" (180). She had found an "exit ... from this side to the other" (182). This scene signifies the essence of impermanent feelings and the ability and opportunity to begin something new when these feelings are not reciprocated. Miu further concurs by stating that:

in the end [we are] no more than lonely lumps of metal on their own separate orbits...when the orbits of these two satellites of ours happened to cross paths, we could be together. Maybe even open our hearts to each other. But that was only for the briefest moment.in the next instance we'd be in absolute solitude. Until we burned up and became nothing. (129)

The description by Miu of them being satellites, reinforces the nature of a chanced meeting between strangers who for that brief moment are required to value the experience as it may never recur.

After K is informed that Sumire had disappeared, he travels to the Greek island to search for her. Late one night, he hears music coming from a mountain and decides to investigate. As he approaches the source of the music, he encounters a strange *ichigo ichie* experience of losing himself, "my real life had fallen asleep somewhere..." (Murakami 186). He is sucked into the deep ocean surrounded by sharp images which he refuses to look at to understand as he says "meaning is fixed to the temporal, and the temporal was trying to force me to rise to the surface" (186). K did not want to accept the meaning of the moment at that point.

K returns home dejected. Late one night, he receives a mysterious phone call from Sumire, weeks after her disappearance. She asks him to fetch her from the phone booth that she used to frequent. Seconds later, the call disconnects. At that moment of *ihcigo ichie*, one chance, one meeting, he realises that even though he had not seen her for some time and was worried that she had been missing, he had not actually lost her because they were still attached in many other ways. The memories that he had were prominent reminders of her. He comes to realise that nothing is permanent, that “a feeling of immeasurable emptiness” (225) is all that is left behind. People will not be permanent in our life, but memories of them will live on. In the last few paragraphs of his narrative he concludes:

Maybe, in some distant place, everything is already, quietly, lost. Or at least there exists a silent place where everything can disappear, melding together in a single, overlapping figure. And as we live our lives we discover – drawing towards us the thin threads attached to each other – what has been lost. (226)

Finally, he says, “I’m in no hurry. There’s no need to rush. I’m ready. I can go anywhere” (228). The appreciation for the transience of existence and the fact that Sumire is cherished because she is evanescent, brings the tea ceremony to an end as K has come to understand that this is the reality of life.

Concluding Remarks

Clearly, a reading of Murakami’s work which appropriates the concepts of the tea ceremony, reveals a deeper understanding of the way of life from a Japanese perspective. The novel illustrates the interdependent relationship between the characters and how they represent the principles of the tea ceremony. In its essence the beauty of life can be found in imperfection which Murakami identifies through Sumire. When the oddity of Sumire’s looks and behaviour are prized, she becomes exceptionally endearing and special. Miu represents the resilience of imperfect characters that strive to be a part of this world, and that warrant appreciation. And K personifies the imperfect behaviour of humans, a reality which needs to be acknowledged and duly addressed.

All three characters bond intimately through the relationships they forge. Sumire’s filial relationship with K empowers him to understand the impermanence of life and the need to be accountable. Sumire made an impact on K’s life because she was within reach yet impossible to possess. The thoughts that she leaves him with make him realise that he should change to be a better person and a role

model to his students. Miu invites Sumire into the confines of a small and empty space which offers opportunities for her to achieve self-realisation in privacy. The experience though is not the sum of life and creates a sense of incompleteness as she realises that life must continue and the experience must be used as an impetus for the next step in the discovery of life. The *ichigo ichie* moment that the characters experienced serves to reveal a deeper understanding of the impermanent nature of life. As nothing could be held onto, be they personal attributes, emotions or people, the one message that is consistent is the need to trudge forward and embrace life. *Sputnik Sweetheart* which first appears as a love story with sexual desires gone awry offers a deeper and subtle understanding of the Japanese worldview. Not only does the novel bring to life the qualities of the tea ceremony, it also gives a new perspective to this cultural ritual, in this respect reflected through the characters.

Finally, a close inspection of the title of the novel alluding to the Sputnik space shuttle further strengthens the ideals of the Japanese worldview. The title creates an imagery of an object orbiting in the dark void, rotating in an infinite vacuum, to signify the very essence of impermanence that the Japanese culture embraces, similarly embodied by the bowl in the tea ceremony that represents the cycle of life. The Sputnik space shuttle also represents the teahouse, as similarly, it is located in a space isolated from the “outside” world. The shuttle also is a cramped and confined space which creates an intimate ambience for reflection and contemplation on the imperfection and incompleteness of life. Murakami has subtly infused *Sputnik Sweetheart* with the Japanese culture and engaged the reader in viewing life through the Japanese lens. As a result, a broadened frame of reference to the Japanese worldview is constructed. What is revealed in the end is that the tea ceremony influences every action and behaviour, and continues to be reconstructed through various ways to fortify the Japanese way of life.

Notes

1. See Francis Markus, “Two years on, new psychological stresses emerge amongst survivors of Japan’s triple disaster,” The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 9 March 2013, 30 May 2015. (<<http://www.ifrc.org/fr/nouvelles/nouvelles/asia-pacific/japan/two-years-on-new-psychological-stresses-emerge-amongst-survivors-of-japans-triple-disaster-61021/>>); Dan Nakaso, “With tea ceremony, hope rises to heal wounds of war,” *Star-Advertiser*, 20 July 2011, 2 August 2015 (<<https://www.staradvertiser.com/hawaii-news/with-tea-ceremony-hope-rises-to-heal-wounds-of-war/>>).

2. See Jennifer L. Anderson, *An Introduction to Japanese Tea Ritual* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1991) 21.
3. See Arthur L. Sadler, *The Japanese Tea Ceremony: Cha-No-Yu* (Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2002) 92.
4. See Yuriko Saito, "Everyday Aesthetics", *Philosophy and Literature* 25.1 (2001) 87.
5. See Sheila Fling, "Psychological Aspects of the Way of Tea," *Japan Studies Association Journal* 2 (1998) 32.
6. See Dorinne Kondo, "The Way of Tea: A Symbolic Analysis," *Man London* 20:2 (1985) 302.
7. See Barbara L.R. Mori, "The Tea Ceremony: A Transformed Japanese Ritual," *Gender & Society* 5:1 (1991) 89.
8. See Arata Isozaki, et al., *The Contemporary Tea House: Japan's Top Architects Redefine a Tradition* (Japan: Kodansha International, 2007) 29.
9. See Kotara Nakamura, Hugo Tschirky and Yasuo Ikawa, "Dynamic Service Framework Approach to Sustainable Service Value Shift Applied to Traditional Japanese Tea Ceremony," *Management of Engineering & Technology. PICMET 2008 (Portland International Conference, 2008)* 2439.
10. See Graham Parkes, "Japanese Aesthetics" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2011, 14 June, 2015 (<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/japanese-aesthetics/>>).
11. See Donald Keene, "Japanese Aesthetics. Philosophy East and West," *Symposium on Aesthetics East and West* 19:3 (1969) 294.

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