

Temporal Gaps and Quiet Bonds: “Ma” and the Making of Intimacy in *Strange Weather* in Tokyo

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Abstract

This thesis transverses the artistry and narrative functions of silence in Hiromi Kawakami's *Strange Weather in Tokyo*. Hiromi Kawakami is a Japanese author where he implores minimalistic narrative style. He does not use the traditional conversational intimacy; he enhances the unspoken dialogue into something more meaningful and shows its deep hidden emotional intimacies. This paper applies the Japanese concept of Ma and Ernest Hemingway's Iceberg Theory to argue that silence is not an empty thing but a conscious thing that shows the 'slow intimacy' between the protagonists, Tsukiko and Sensei. Through the rituals of Izakaya, the representation of Sensei's briefcase and the consumption of alcohol acts as a supportive language. By analyzing these immersed narratives, the paper concludes that Kawakami's work serves as a mediator of urban alienation and the transience of time, proving that silence is the sincerest medium for bridging generational and emotional divides.

Keywords: Ma, Slow Intimacy, Minimalist Fiction, Mono no Aware, Urban Alienation, Japanese Aesthetics, Iceberg Theory

In the topography of contemporary Japanese literature, Hiromi Kawakami's unique aesthetic in Tokyo originally titled (*Sensei no kaban*), appears as an important study in modern novels, which focus more on mindful conversations and dramatic scenes and situations to portray rapport, but Kawakami's novels pivot on simple everyday life scenes. This novel delineates the evolving relationship between Tsukiko and Harutsuna Matsumoto. Tsukiko is a woman in her late thirties. Matsumoto is her former high school teacher. This paper analyses that their intimacy, or the relationship they developed, is not just an emotional connection but a manifestation of intimacy and the connected development of silence, and how strategically the silence is used throughout the book. This study inquires that the Japanese concept of Ma (meaningful emptiness and silence) and Hemingway's Iceberg Theory (the piece of what is left unsaid) show silence as a form of communication, as it bridges generational gaps and reduces the feeling of isolation in urban Tokyo.

To analyse this silence from a theoretical point of view, it focuses on two basic lenses. The first is the concept of 'Ma', which is the first lens. In Japanese aesthetics, 'Ma' is the 'gap' or the 'pause' between objects or sounds. This sensation holds silence and space filled with possibilities and meaning. The characters in the novels exist together without the compulsion of verbal conversation. Kawakami used Ma to make this possible. The long walk throughout the novel, a short pause over a glass of sake, or a slow walk without conversation in a park, are the places where Ma accelerates a deeper understanding than words ever could.

Ernest Hemingway's Iceberg Theory is intended to enhance the concept even more obviously. Hemingway says that there is more power in the story when certain things are omitted. The reader will find deep intimations when a writer omits the major 'emotions' and only shows ordinary human actions. Kawakami uses the minimalist 'Theory of Omission' to

perfection. The talks Tsukiko and Sensei share are very simple, such as seasonal snacks, weather patterns, and childhood memories. But the deep-down feelings under this simple everyday dialogue are a gigantic foundation of grief, longing, and the fear of mortality.

By crafting these concepts together, the following chapters will explore how particular non-verbal but routine events—such as alcohol consumption or casual talks about the daily weather—serve as the carrier voices of the characters. The architecture of “silence” in Kawakami’s work is not an obstacle to communication but a bridge that makes communication possible. Through these lenses, we find that the most valuable human connections are not found in what we say, but in the spaces where quietness exists.

To understand the soundness of silence in *Strange Weather in Tokyo*, Hemingway’s Iceberg Theory, also known as the Theory of Omission, states that the power of a tale lies not in what is clearly put down in the book, but in the vast number of subtexts that remain hidden deep below the surface. He argued that “if a writer omits things that he knows, the reader will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them.” In the context of Hiromi Kawakami’s prose, this “omission” is not a lack or a story with less dialogue or content, but a deliberate narrative strategy. The upper level of the novel—the visible “iceberg”—consists of mundane activities such as drinking beer, ordering appetizers, and commenting on the changing seasons. The remaining things which are under these boring everyday activities contain the intense emotional weight of the two individuals traversing the sunset of their lives.

Kawakami’s description of minimalist things is a direct application of Iceberg Theory by Hemingway. Kawakami uses short sentences to describe things, and her descriptions are skimpy, and she rarely gives internal monologue that explains Tsukiko’s or Sensei’s feelings. This leads the “Architecture of Silence” to do the heavy lifting, which carries the whole novel to serve its purpose for the reader. For instance, when sitting at the bar counter, Tsukiko and

Sensei converse mostly about the mushroom texture or the temperature of the sake. To a surface-level reader, this might look like little importance. But, when looked through the lens of Iceberg Theory, these little important things are visible tips of deeply seated yearnings.

The “mask” here is food that hides the “unmasking” of their weakness. The characters choose to speak about mundane things, and they do accept the profound but, in some way, respect the boundaries of their shown intimacy. The “unspoken history” of the characters is submerged, which is part of Kawakami’s iceberg. Sensei’s past—his marriage, his career as a teacher, his ageing—is almost never discussed, but it exists as a heavy pressure felt in the pauses of his speech. In the same way, Tsukiko’s separation from her family and her absence of traditional social anchors are not even discussed or made into a dramatic outcome. They are felt in her lonely walks and the routine visits to the bar. This “lack” creates a specific kind of tension in Western drama. This tension is not resolved by “climax” words, usually with an argument or a confession. But in *Strange Weather in Tokyo*, the tension is shared between Tsukiko and Sensei rather than resolved. The two “icebergs” touch without clashing, and silence becomes the shared space where their submerged emotions meet.

The Iceberg Theory also explains the significance of the title *Strange Weather*. Weather acts as a surface-level observation, and it signifies emotional shifts that are deep and intense. The concept of “love” is omitted, yet it permeates the narrative as an unspoken presence. This omission forces readers to construct meaning, achieving the ultimate success of the minimalist framework. Together, the Japanese concept of *Ma* and Hemingway’s Iceberg Theory form an academic bridge: *Ma* provides the space for attachment to grow, while the iceberg theory supplies the intensity that fills that space. The weight of the unsaid rises to the surface, proving that silence has always been the most important part of their story.

Alcohol often serves as a social requirement in the city space, a mask to show professional politeness and a tool to create bonding together. In *Strange Weather in Tokyo*, alcohol is regarded as a medium, a “liquid intimacy” that Sensei and Tsukiko use in the bar not to escape reality but to move into a deeper one. This space allows them to summon their submerged emotions to rise without the need for unsettling verbal confessions.

When the novel starts, the “teacher-student” social scale acts as an intense mask. Sensei is formal, with his “Showa-era” stiffness, while Tsukiko shows skeptical, modern-day detachment. Alcohol softens these masks of identity. Tsukiko, after many drinks, notes that the distance between her chair and Sensei didn’t seem so vast anymore (Kawakami 49). This comfort is made possible by the psychological relaxation the alcohol provides. They drink beers at the beginning, which actually clears social anxieties, and the warm sake (*atsakan*) they have afterwards actually makes their emotions deep. The alcohol makes them more comfortable with the space between them, and it makes them talk less.

The Japanese ritual *O-shaku*, which is called the act of pouring for another, is where the intimacy of Sensei and Tsukiko began. The act of watching Sensei’s cup and refilling it before it becomes empty is overattentive. It is a non-verbal way of saying that she is present with him. All these rituals create a silent dialogue throughout the novel. And when Sensei pours for her, the paternal and romantic care for her is revealed. The “unmasking” process is subtle, and through alcohol it provides a “safety net,” whereas the immersed portions of their lives—Sensei’s agony of separating from his wife or Tsukiko’s fear of being lonely—can be acknowledged through a sigh, a look, or a slight change in tone. The “liquid intimacy” takes hold—the silence is no more a barrier but becomes a “medium” to connect with each other. Alcohol provides a sensory state. Ultimately, Kawakami suggests that the most authentic “self” is not the one who pours out when sober but the one who is content to sit in the induction of alcohol and appreciate the enchantment of the limited moments.

“Architecture of Silence” is a term described in the narrative as the characters find alternative channels to communicate. Tsukiko and Sensei’s silence is supported by certain external elements—the physical objects they carry and the meteorological shifts they observe—which act as surrogate voices. The most “silent character” in the novel is the briefcase. This briefcase acts as more than a leather bag for Tsukiko. This actually is the physical presence of Sensei’s identity. Kawakami notes, “the briefcase was always there like a silent third party at our table” (Kawakami 52). The briefcase holds a space of Sensei’s past within their Ma space. It contains Sensei’s immersed past and his organized life—his academic background and his wife’s memory. It remains closed, representing their boundaries. When the briefcase is finally handed over, the act of confession of love, trust, and respect is proved. This shows that the object can carry the weight of words that the character cannot speak.

The “strange weather,” the term from the title, is a representation of the unexpected human connection which cannot be predicted. The weather directly represents their connection. When the air becomes thick with humidity or a sudden rainstorm occurs, it actually reflects the internal tension between them. Kawakami uses the seasons to point out the growth of their bond. The scorching hot summer reflects their early, thirsty “quenching” curiosity, while the cold winter reflects they are closer than before. This seasonal representation is deeply rooted in the Japanese concept of Mono no Aware, which means “the pathos of things” or empathy toward things. The weather gives the “background noise,” which makes their stillness feel deliberate instead of accidental.

The “framework of silence” in Hiromi Kawakami’s *Strange Weather in Tokyo* serves a major role in the power of narrative control via the Japanese concept of “ma” and Hemingway’s “Iceberg Theory,” which are the two theories Hiromi Kawakami uses to build a slow intimacy where the absence of dialogue actually produces more meaning than the

spoken word. The ‘culinary phonetics’ and the ‘liquid intimacy’ actually bring their immersed past to move on the same track without the pressure of compulsion of talking. The objects such as the briefcase and the weather of Tokyo act as replacement voices to articulate the brevity of their bond. This study ends by concluding that the novel is a representation of “Mono no Aware”—a meaningful but short connection. The silence remains even after the death of Sensei; the memory remains, and it did not collapse. Thus, ultimately, the most authentic form of love is found in the pauses, the gaps, and the comfortable silences that exist between two people. Hence, silence, in this framework, is not an absence of communication but the loudest and most enduring form.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all the authors, declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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