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11

The Healing Narratives: How Contemporary Japanese Novels Speak to Global Anxieties

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Abstract: *This paper examines the growing popularity of Japanese “iyashi-kei” or healing novels in contemporary global literary culture, particularly their resonance among younger generations facing heightened anxiety, social pressures, and mental health challenges. Drawing upon works such as *Sweet Bean Paste*, *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, and *More Days at Morisaki Bookshop*, the study explores how these narratives employ simplicity, forgiveness, and everyday aesthetics to offer readers a form of comfort and escape. The analysis situates these novels within larger discussions of affect theory, attachment, and bibliotherapy, highlighting how emotions circulate through texts and create spaces of belonging across cultures. The methods employed include close reading of primary texts alongside critical frameworks from thinkers such as Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed, and Rita Felski, while also considering sociocultural contexts such as globalization, soft power, and the visual economy of “aesthetic lifestyles.” Findings suggest that the popularity of these novels lies not only in their themes of compassion, forgiveness, and acceptance but also in their accessibility, portability in translation, and alignment with the digital-age pursuit of wellness. Ultimately, the paper argues that these texts represent more than escapist literature; they are cultural tools of emotional survival, enabling readers to negotiate personal and collective vulnerabilities in a turbulent global climate.*

Keywords: *Iyashi-kei, forgiveness, healing literature, bibliotherapy, Japanese fiction*

Objectives:

The primary objective of this study is to explore the rising global appeal of contemporary Japanese “healing novels” such as *Sweet Bean Paste* by Durian Sukegawa, *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* by Toshikazu Kawaguchi, and *More Days at Morisaki Bookshop* by Satoshi Yagisawa. Specifically, the research aims to:

1. Examine how themes of forgiveness, healing, and self-acceptance are articulated in these narratives.
2. Investigate the socio-cultural factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, global mental health concerns, and the aesthetics of escapism that contribute to their relevance and popularity.
3. Situate the novels within theoretical frameworks including affect theory (Ahmed, 2004), Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism” (2011), and Felski’s idea of “attachment” (2008).
4. Assess the therapeutic potential of these works, particularly in relation to bibliotherapy and their resonance with young adult readers.

Research Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive methodology, with close reading and comparative analysis of the selected texts forming the core of inquiry. These novels are analysed in translation to foreground their accessibility and global reach.

The method combines:

- Textual Analysis: A close examination of character development, narrative structure, and thematic motifs of forgiveness, resilience, and compassion.
- Theoretical Application: Engagement with critical frameworks such as affect theory, “cruel optimism,” and “sites of attachment” to interpret how the texts produce emotional resonance.
- Contextual Framing: Use of secondary sources, including psychological studies on depression, readership surveys, and cultural critiques, to situate the novels within broader post-pandemic mental health discourses.
- Reader-Response Elements: Consideration of how audiences, especially young adults, relate to and find comfort in these texts, aligning with concepts of bibliotherapy.

Introduction:

Escapism has long been a feature of literary traditions, functioning as a means through which readers distance themselves, however temporarily, from the contingencies of everyday existence. The term itself, although popularized in modern critical discourse, is traceable to medieval literature where works such as *The Faerie Queene* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* transported audiences into imaginative realms distinct from lived reality. This tendency illustrates a fundamental human desire: the search for solace in alternate spaces that momentarily suspend the restrictions of the mundane world. Importantly however, escapism does not necessarily indicate a rejection of reality but rather a negotiation with it—a temporary reprieve that enables renewal.

In contemporary era, escapism often acquires aesthetic dimensions, particularly through the rise of what might be termed “aestheticized” modes of living. Cafés designed with pastel interiors, book covers adorned with motifs of plants, cats, or fairy lights etc. signal a generational engagement with spaces and objects that embody comfort, familiarity, and tranquillity, described by Sianne Ngai as “aesthetic categories of late capitalism,” where cuteness, zaniness, and the everyday become affective markers of cultural consumption (Ngai, 2012). Digital platforms such as Pinterest make this kind of “aesthetic living” both accessible and aspirational. Within this context, literature that foregrounds comfort and minimalism resonates strongly with younger audiences.

One significant manifestation of this trend is visible in the growing international reception of Japanese and Korean novels. While these works enjoy established readerships in their native contexts, their translations have become international bestsellers. The novels often appeal to readers through covers featuring everyday motifs—bookshops, cherry blossoms, convenience stores, or even bowls of noodles—that differ sharply from the grandiose or abstract designs associated with canonical writers such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce or George Orwell. Central to this literary development in Japan is the genre of *iyashikei*, literally meaning “healing” or “comforting,” which has emerged as a distinctive mode within contemporary fiction.

While the genre has its origin in 1990s manga and anime (Napier, 2006), it has acquired literary prominence in recent decades. A recurring thematic element in *iyashikei* novels is the subtle yet powerful presence of forgiveness as an act. Although rarely dramatized through overt moral declarations, forgiveness operates as a quiet undercurrent that structures both narrative progression and affective reception. The linguistic registers of these texts frequently establish a tone of relaxation from the outset—phrases describing “the sweetly scented breezes” or “time off from work” situate readers within atmospheres

of respite. This orientation toward calmness creates a framework in which reconciliation, acceptance, and compassion acquire narrative plausibility.

In these contexts, forgiveness is not simply naïve acquiescence; rather, it works as a narrative strategy that highlights resilience and empathy. Such representations suggest that kindness-- one of the foundational human dispositions, is rendered narratively consequential in these works.

Representative texts illustrate this function with clarity. In Toshikazu Kawaguchi's *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, the café setting operates as a liminal site of reconciliation where characters travel back in past to address unresolved grief, render apologies, or release lingering resentments leading to affective closure. Similarly, in Satoshi Yagisawa's *More Days at Morisaki Bookshop*, the character Momoko's return to her husband Sotaru is marked by apology, immediately reciprocated through Sotaru's forgiveness. The narrative acquires further poignancy when Momoko, aware of her impending death, seeks forgiveness once more on her deathbed for past mistakes. Here, forgiveness emerges as recognition that human lives are marked by missteps, reconciliations, and continual striving—an acknowledgement of fallibility as constitutive of human existence.

These novels exemplify how contemporary Japanese literature negotiates with themes of comfort, belonging, and reconciliation in ways that appeal to both domestic and global audiences. The worldwide popularity of these texts suggests that their affective strategies resonate with readers negotiating alienation and disconnection in modern life. By embedding forgiveness within everyday spaces *iyashikei* fiction transforms ordinary settings into sites of affective healing. Far from trivialising literature as mere comfort, these novels exemplify the enduring social role of fiction.

Durian Sukegawa's *Sweet Bean Paste* further exemplifies the ways in which contemporary Japanese literature frames forgiveness as a mode of healing. The novel, seemingly centered on the quotidian rhythms of a confectionary shop, acquires depth through the interaction between Sentarō, a man burdened by guilt, and Tokue, a former Hansen's disease patient who has endured systemic exclusion. Their relationship foregrounds the tension between self-reproach and the capacity for compassion. Initially, Sentarō treats Tokue with scepticism, even going so far as to dismiss her without any remorse. Yet as the narrative unfolds, Tokue gradually emerges as a transformative figure in his life, guiding him not only in the craft of dorayaki-making but also in reorienting his outlook towards meaning, forgiveness, and human connection.

Sentarō's inability to reconcile with his past—particularly his estrangement from his mother, whose death occurred during his imprisonment—renders him unable to forgive himself. His admission that “it weighs heavily on me” (Sukegawa, 2017, p. 98) encapsulates the affective weight of unprocessed guilt. Tokue's history, conversely, illustrates the social afterlife of disease: although the Leprosy Prevention Act was repealed, former patients continued to face ostracism, confinement, and dehumanization (Gibson, 2019). Yet Tokue embodies what Ahmed (2004) terms the “affective labour of reconciliation,” choosing to forgive both interpersonal neglect and structural violence. Her gentleness in response to Sentarō's lapses like when she accepts his apology for failing to visit during her illness signals forgiveness not as submission but rather as an assertion of dignity and resilience.

Through Tokue, the novel articulates a model of forgiveness as an ethical practice that resists the corrosive effects of resentment. Rather than submitting to social cruelty, Tokue reframes her suffering as an occasion for empathy. Her stance resonates with broader discourses in trauma studies that view narrative as a medium for transforming personal

affliction into shared ethical responsibility (Caruth, 1996). The novel thus positions forgiveness as a form of agency: the art of letting go not in order to forget, but to reconstitute the self and community through compassion.

It is a well-circulated maxim that “literature acts as a mirror to society,” and it is in moments of collective crisis that this reflection becomes most urgent. The COVID-19 pandemic, which struck the world unprepared, left individuals across demographics— young and old, male and female, adolescent and adult—vulnerable. Even after the immediate medical emergency subsided, the psychological consequences persisted: grief over lost lives, the isolating effects of quarantine, and the pervasive sense of chaos. The pandemic foregrounded the necessity of mental health awareness, thereby creating fertile ground for the proliferation of *healing narratives*.

The appeal of retreating into a private sphere with a cup of coffee, the comfort of solitude, and a gentle narrative should not be mistaken for mere indulgence. Rather, such practices resonate with the universal human desire to withdraw temporarily from external pressures and to construct a parallel world of safety and reassurance. Recent health data underscores the urgency of this cultural turn: according to global research and national health data, young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 report the highest rates of depression globally. Significantly, this is the demographic most actively engaging with contemporary Japanese and Korean “healing novels” in translation.

In a global order where economic strength increasingly dictates geopolitical power, cultural hegemony often manifests through forms of *soft power*. The dissemination of music, cinema, literature, cuisine, and lifestyle standards constructs aspirational models of beauty and success, particularly for younger generations. However, these idealized cultural frameworks frequently impose unattainable expectations. When youth are unable to conform to such standards, the result can be feelings of inadequacy, isolation, and diminished self-worth, occasionally leading to extreme consequences. Slavoj Žižek, in his lecture at Oxford Union, has described this phenomenon as a form of “soft fascism”: not an overtly authoritarian regime, but rather a subtler mechanism of ideological control that pervades everyday life.

The contemporary “aesthetic economy” exemplifies this dynamic. Visual culture— pastel-toned book covers, depictions of cats, cozy cafés, bookshops etc. has become a commodity aligned with Instagram, Pinterest, and TikTok aesthetics. Within this environment, Japanese “healing novels” achieve particular resonance. For Generation Z, a demographic more attuned to mental health than previous generations, such works offer a legitimate means of withdrawal and self-preservation. This generation frequently emphasizes the setting of boundaries and intentional retreats from overwhelming social or professional demands. Comfort literature thus becomes a textual extension of these practices.

The popularity of these novels is also sustained by the mechanics of global publishing. Readily available translations especially in English, the lingua franca of international readership, ensure accessibility. This cyclical relationship of supply and demand is evident in the sense that publishers expand production in response to reader interest, and wider distribution further stimulates consumption.

Yet the appeal of these works cannot be reduced to aesthetics or availability alone. At their ethical core lies the theme of forgiveness, a universal human impulse that transcends cultural boundaries. Such narratives model compassion as an act of moral courage, inviting readers to reflect on their own capacities for empathy and reconciliation.

This universality becomes even more salient against the backdrop of ongoing global crises. Unnecessary wars and the continued persecution of minority communities

worldwide create an atmosphere of uncertainty and despair that almost lead us to the brink of WWII. In such surroundings, healing novels assume an urgent relevance: they provide literary spaces unmarked by warfare, discrimination, or prejudiced ideologies. Instead, they affirm the value of compassion and the beauty found in imperfection.

Even the titles of these works evoke feelings of familiarity and a subtle sense of belonging. Words like *bookshop* in *More Days at Morisaki Bookshop*, *sweet* in *Sweet Bean Paste*, *coffee* in *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, or *convenience store* in *The Convenience Store by the Sea* immediately capture the reader's attention and invoke intimate, everyday spaces. Such lexical choices reinforce the affective pull of these novels, making readers feel welcomed into the worlds they depict. This affective attachment can be further understood through Lauren Berlant's concept of *cruel optimism*, in which individuals form emotional bonds with objects or practices that sustain hope and pleasure, even if they do not resolve real-world anxieties (Berlant, 2011). The gentle narratives, cozy settings, and ethical modelling of forgiveness provide precisely this kind of sustaining affect, explaining why readers repeatedly return to these novels. Building on this Sara Ahmed, in her work *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) explains the Affect theory and emphasizes that emotions are not merely individual experiences but circulate socially and culturally, shaping attachments, affinities, and alignments (Ahmed, 2004). In the context of healing novels, the feelings of comfort, reassurance, and ethical reflection are not confined to a single reader; they travel across communities, through social media, book clubs, and word-of-mouth recommendations. The novels themselves become sites of affective production, generating shared emotional worlds where warmth, hope, and the desire for forgiveness are reinforced collectively. This circulation of emotions helps explain the sustained global popularity of these texts, as readers continuously re-encounter and propagate the affective experiences these novels offer. This further connects to Rita Felski's concept of literature as a "site of attachment" which illuminates the appeal of healing novels (Felski, 2008). These texts operate as spaces where readers form enduring emotional and ethical bonds, returning repeatedly to the familiar settings, characters, and gentle moral landscapes. The titles, narrative tone, and everyday imagery reinforces these attachments, offering a sense of belonging and continuity.

Tokue forgives the society that excluded and dehumanized her, exemplifying what can be understood as moral courage: the ability to resist allowing external injustices to dictate one's behaviour. The reader immediately forms an emotional and ethical bond with her resilience and gentle demeanour. The simplicity and clarity of her dialogue, coupled with the quiet dignity of her actions, render her accessible across cultural and linguistic boundaries. A distinctive aspect of Tokue's character is her sustained engagement with nature. Ostracized from society, she turned to the natural environment as a source of solace and grounding, often encouraging her friends to "listen to the sounds of nature." Sentarō describes her act of making sweet bean paste as if she talks to the beans to get to know them better, as if they speak to her. Tokue thus exemplifies the therapeutic potential of literature. Her story provides a model of navigating trauma with ethical reflection and emotional generosity. It is through her the novel achieves a dual function: it comforts readers while simultaneously challenging them to consider the transformative potential of forgiveness and compassion in their own lives.

Similarly, a minor character in *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, Tomoko, also struggles through guilt and trauma from the past and it is through her character we understand that the art of accepting oneself begins with forgiving ourselves.

The therapeutic potential of these novels can also be framed through the lens of bibliotherapy, a practice in which reading is used to support psychological and emotional well-being. By engaging with characters who model forgiveness, resilience, and ethical reflection, readers experience a form of emotional processing akin to guided therapy. Yet another impulse in these healing novels is the desire to return to past; not necessarily to alter it but to dwell momentarily in its familiarity. The past offers a peculiar form of safety: it is fixed, mapped, and already endured. By contrast, the future confronts us with the anxious weight of possibility, an open horizon in which anything might occur. The appeal of the past, then, is that it cannot surprise us; its contours are already known, its losses and joys already absorbed. In *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, characters seek to revisit the past not to re-script their lives, which they know they cannot, but to inhabit once more the tenderness of a remembered gesture or the clarity of a final farewell. The café's time-travel motif dramatizes this psychology-- the comfort lies less in rewriting than in the stillness of revisiting what is certain. Similarly, Tokue's storytelling in *Sweet Bean Paste* draws the protagonist back into an unbearable past, but when retold, gains coherence and meaning. Both novels suggest that consolation resides not in erasing the pain but in reframing it. By lingering in the past, these stories offer a counterweight to the anxious clutch of futurity, providing readers with a therapeutic rehearsal of how to live with uncertainty.

The contemporary popularity of healing novels does not arise in a vacuum; it can be productively read as part of a longer literary lineage that values consolation, domestic space, and nature as sources of moral and psychological renewal. The pastoral tradition repeatedly frames nature and the home as corrective to social turbulence. Wordsworth's poems into natural reflection, the nineteenth-century domestic novel's emphasis on household reconciliation, and the sentimental scenes of Dickensian repair or Jane Austen's domestic spaces all share resemblances with today's *iyashikei* texts: they imagine literature as a venue for moral rectification even in ordinary settings.

Several other important shifts distinguish *iyashikei* from its predecessors. For example, the narrative economy of *iyashikei* tends toward minimalism, that is, short sentences, restrained scenic description, and aphoristic moments, which contrasts with the rhetorical expansiveness of much Victorian sentimentalism. This stylistic economy not only increases relatability but also mirrors the therapeutic clarity sought by a readership coping with psychological vulnerability. In this sense, the popularity of such novels is not incidental but indicative of a broader cultural and psychological need. Also, as discussed earlier, the current global circulation of these comfort novels is conditioned by visual culture and social media aesthetics in ways that earlier classical texts were not.

Conclusion:

The contemporary rise of Japanese "healing novels" underscores literature's enduring capacity to provide solace, ethical reflection, and a sense of community in turbulent times. Far from being mere escapist diversions, these texts reveal the profound role of forgiveness, self-acceptance, and compassion in navigating modern precarity. By embedding themes of reconciliation within ordinary settings like bookshops and cafés *iyashikei* fiction demonstrates that everyday spaces can become sites of affective healing and moral courage. Their resonance with global readers, particularly young adults negotiating alienation, anxiety, and mental health crises, highlights the therapeutic potential of literature as a form of bibliotherapy. Moreover, the global circulation of these works reflects not only the aesthetic economy of late capitalism but also a shared human desire for renewal and gentleness amidst ongoing crises. In foregrounding forgiveness as both a personal and collective act, these novels remind us that literature does not merely

mirror society—it actively participates in reshaping our emotional landscapes. Ultimately, the popularity of healing fiction affirms the relevance of storytelling as a universal medium of survival, resilience, and hope in the 21st century.

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