International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences
Vol-11, Issue-6; November-December, 2026

Peer-Reviewed Journal
Journal Home Page Available: https://ijels.com/
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijels



Gendered Spaces and the Uncanny: Negotiating Women's Subjectivity in Hiromi Kawakami's *Record of a Night Too Brief* and Hiroko Oyamada's *The Hole*

Shivani S

Department of English, Mar Ivanios College, Trivandrum, University of Kerala, India
shivanisivakuamr9901@gmail.com

Received: 05 Oct 2026; Received in revised form: 01 Nov 2026; Accepted: 05 Nov 2026; Available online: 10 Nov 2026
©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



Abstract— *This paper examines how surreal and uncanny spaces expose the pressures shaping women's subjectivity in Hiromi Kawakami's Record of a Night Too Brief and Hiroko Oyamada's The Hole. Although the works differ in form—Kawakami's collection moves through dreamlike transformations, while Oyamada's novella follows a woman's relocation from the city to the countryside—both unsettle the boundary between ordinary life and the inexplicable. The paper argues that these disruptions are not merely decorative instances of fantasy: they make visible forms of social pressure that realistic narration can leave difficult to name. In Kawakami, bodily metamorphosis, unstable time, and encounters with strange creatures loosen the narrator's relationship to a fixed identity and reveal the disturbing demands embedded in desire, social performance, and inherited conventions. In Oyamada, The Hole, the rural landscape, and the unidentifiable animal give material form to Asahi's uncertain position within domestic and familial structures after she leaves paid employment. A comparative close reading informed by feminist literary criticism and spatial theory demonstrates that both authors use the uncanny to challenge the assumption that home, marriage, and everyday routines are naturally stable or secure. Their protagonists do not arrive at simple liberation; instead, their ambiguous experiences reveal subjectivity as something negotiated within spaces that both constrain and enable. The paper concludes that these works create alternative ways of reading contemporary women's experience by making familiar social arrangements appear strange, provisional, and open to reinterpretation.*

Keywords— ***Gender, Japanese women's writing, spatiality, surrealism, the uncanny***

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Japanese women's writing frequently places ordinary routines beside moments of estrangement, allowing familiar environments to become difficult to interpret. A workplace, a family home, a rural path, or a seemingly ordinary encounter can turn uncanny without fully abandoning realism. Hiromi Kawakami's *Record of a Night Too Brief* and Hiroko Oyamada's *The Hole* exemplify this literary practice. Kawakami's book brings together three stories in which young women encounter transformations, absences, and nonhuman presences; Oyamada's novella follows Asahi, a woman who leaves her job and moves with her husband to a rural community where an unexplained animal and a hole in the ground disturb the surface of domestic life. Though different in structure and narrative movement, both works make the everyday strange in ways that unsettle the social meanings attached to women's bodies, work, marriage, and belonging.

The central argument of this paper is that the uncanny in these works functions as a critical method: it reveals the instability of identities and spaces that society presents as natural. In Kawakami, metamorphosis and dream logic make identity fluid and expose the difficulty

of communicating or controlling desire. In Oyamada, the move from urban employment to domestic life does not produce the peaceful belonging promised by conventional narratives of marriage and family. Instead, Asahi enters a space whose rules remain opaque, and the mysterious hole becomes a powerful figure for her uncertain social position. In both texts, the fantastic does not simply offer escape from social reality. It gives shape to the pressures, contradictions, and unspoken expectations that structure it.

The comparison is useful because the two works approach estrangement differently. Kawakami's stories often move through discontinuous episodes, sudden bodily changes, and dreamlike encounters; Oyamada's novella develops a slower unease from daily chores, family conversations, summer heat, and rural isolation. Yet both resist straightforward explanations. The reader is asked to inhabit uncertainty rather than resolve every strange event into a single symbolic meaning. This paper therefore reads the texts comparatively through feminist literary criticism and spatial theory, focusing on the body, domestic space, social roles, and the relationship between the ordinary and the uncanny.

II. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL APPROACH

The paper uses qualitative close reading to examine narrative patterns, images, settings, and character relationships in the two primary texts. It concentrates on the English-language editions supplied for analysis: Kawakami's *Record of a Night Too Brief*, translated by Lucy North, and Oyamada's *The Hole*, translated by David Boyd. Since translation mediates the reader's access to the original Japanese, claims here concern the English texts and their narrative effects rather than unverified claims about specific Japanese-language expressions.

Feminist literary criticism provides a framework for asking how gender roles are represented, naturalised, or unsettled. Rather than assuming that every strange event has one fixed feminist meaning, this approach attends to the relationship between women's choices and the social structures around them. Asahi's resignation from paid work, her designation as a wife and daughter-in-law, and the assumptions made about her future show how gender can be produced through ordinary practices rather than explicit commands. In Kawakami, female characters' relationships to desire, embodiment, family, and social convention are rendered unstable through transformations and strange encounters.

Spatial theory is useful because both works give unusual importance to where characters live, move, and are seen. Space is not treated as a neutral background: the city, countryside, house, path, hole, and dreamscape shape the possibilities available to the characters. A home may offer shelter while also organising women's labour and social identity. A rural setting may appear to promise calm, yet it can intensify isolation and make local expectations harder to escape. The uncanny is understood here as the unsettling return of strangeness within what should be familiar. In these works, it emerges not only through supernatural events but also through ordinary situations that cease to make social or emotional sense.

The argument proceeds thematically rather than treating each book in isolation. It first considers the instability of bodies and identities, then examines domestic and rural spaces, and finally compares the forms of social pressure and ambiguity that the works expose. The aim is not to claim that Kawakami and Oyamada make identical arguments, but to show how their different narrative strategies make women's subjectivity visible as a process shaped by place, relationships, and the limits of explanation.

III. THE UNCANNY BODY AND UNSTABLE IDENTITY

In *Record of a Night Too Brief*, the body rarely remains a secure boundary between self and world. The title story opens with the narrator experiencing night as something that fastens to and consumes the body. The narrator then runs like a horse, loses the ability to speak normally, and becomes an object of fascination for onlookers. This transformation is disturbing partly because the crowd does not respond with fear or concern; it applauds. The narrator's altered body becomes a spectacle, while the inability to speak prevents an effective response. The scene therefore links bodily transformation to a social situation in which the individual is watched, interpreted, and made entertaining for others (Kawakami, 2016, pp. 1–2).

The horse episode can be read as an estrangement of identity rather than a simple fantasy of becoming another creature. The narrator does not choose the transformation, and the crowd's naming of the "Night Horse" helps turn a private bodily crisis into a public identity. The episode asks who has the authority to define a person: the person experiencing change, or the audience that converts it into spectacle? The narrator's failure to communicate intensifies this problem. The body speaks through movement and sound, but not in the language the narrator intends. In this way, the story makes visible the gap between inner experience and the social labels imposed from outside (Kawakami, 2016, pp. 1–2).

Other episodes in the title story continue to dissolve boundaries between bodies. In one sequence, the narrator's encounter with a girl becomes a process of shrinking, absorption, and uncertain separation. The girl eventually becomes pearl-like, and the narrator can no longer clearly distinguish where one self ends and the other begins. Such imagery complicates the familiar idea that intimacy necessarily produces mutual understanding. Desire can be absorbing and transformative, but it may also blur the difference between attachment and possession. The episode does not offer a stable moral lesson; its disturbing beauty depends on the way intimacy changes the participants beyond their ability to explain what has happened (Kawakami, 2016, pp. 8–9).

The other stories in Kawakami's collection extend this interest in unstable identity through absence, family relations, and shape-shifting. The fantastic intrudes into everyday life without providing a clear set of rules. Larson (2017) observes that Kawakami's work places contemporary settings alongside folklore and mythic elements, allowing the modern and the fantastic to coexist.

In *The Hole*, bodily uncertainty is quieter but no less important. Asahi's life changes when she leaves paid employment and moves to her husband's rural hometown. Her body is newly situated within an environment of oppressive heat, insects, long stretches of unstructured time, and repeated domestic tasks. The setting affects how she experiences herself: she is no longer primarily a worker moving through an organised workplace but a wife whose days seem to lack an externally recognised purpose. Her social identity shifts before she has fully decided what that identity means to her (Oyamada, 2020, pp. 1–4, 6–8). (Oyamada, 2020).

The strange animal that Asahi follows is difficult to classify. It appears familiar enough to resemble a mammal, but it does not fit an available category. Its uncertainty mirrors Asahi's own position: she is physically present in the community but does not fully understand its social arrangements or the histories that shape them. When she falls into a hole, the landscape becomes bodily immediate. She is lowered beneath the level of the grass, surrounded by insects, soil, and sound, and must struggle to climb out. The event is not simply a supernatural interruption; it alters her position in relation to the environment and makes her vulnerability tangible (Oyamada, 2020, pp. 19–21, 40–46).

The contrast between the texts is revealing. Kawakami makes identity unstable through rapid and often spectacular transformations; Oyamada makes it unstable through routine, disorientation, and a gradual loss of familiar reference points. In both, however, the body registers pressures that the characters cannot fully articulate. The uncanny gives those pressures a form without reducing them to a single explanation (Kawakami, 2016, pp. 1–9; Oyamada, 2020, pp. 1–4, 40–46).

IV. DOMESTIC SPACE, WORK, AND GENDERED EXPECTATIONS

The Hole places gendered social expectations at the centre of its ordinary plot. Asahi's move is presented as a practical response to her husband's transfer and the availability of a house owned by his family. Because the couple can live there without paying rent, the arrangement appears financially sensible. Yet the apparent benefit comes with a substantial change in Asahi's life: she quits her job, loses regular contact with colleagues, and becomes increasingly dependent on the domestic environment. The decision is made within a family structure in which her husband's employment determines the couple's location, while her own employment is treated as more easily relinquished (Oyamada, 2020, pp. 1–4). (Oyamada, 2020).

Oyamada makes the gendered implications of this change visible through conversations that sound casual but carry assumptions about what a married woman should want. Asahi's former colleague imagines that she will enjoy being a housewife, with time for baking and gardening. The comment treats domesticity as a desirable release from paid work, while overlooking the loss of income, independence, social contact, and professional identity. Asahi herself is not entirely sure what she wants. She does not present a simple rejection of marriage or family, but neither does she experience domestic life as the fulfilment of an obvious desire. The gap between the ideal of housewifely freedom and the actual experience of empty time is central to the novella's unease (Oyamada, 2020, pp. 5–8).

The family house is also not fully Asahi's own space. It belongs to her husband's family, and her mother-in-law lives next door. The arrangement gives the couple material security but places Asahi within an established network of family relationships, habits, and expectations. Her surroundings are already meaningful to others before she understands them. She must learn the geography of the place while also negotiating the less visible geography of family authority. The home is therefore both a shelter and a system of relations that restricts privacy (Oyamada, 2020, pp. 1–3, 23–24).

The title's hole condenses this contradiction. After Asahi follows the strange animal, she falls into a narrow opening in the earth and finds that climbing out is difficult. The hole is a physical space, but it also suggests the position into which Asahi has been placed: bounded,

confusing, and seemingly shaped to fit her. Maloney (2020) similarly reads the hole as a metaphor for the restrictive social environment surrounding Asahi.

The house and hole operate as contrasting spaces. The house is familiar to the husband's family but unfamiliar to Asahi; the hole is physically unfamiliar but becomes a site where she encounters the limits of what she knows. The domestic space expects her to settle into a role, while the hole interrupts that settlement. Yet the interruption does not automatically liberate her. It brings her into contact with a world she cannot fully understand. Oyamada thus avoids a simple opposition between oppressive home and liberating nature. Both spaces are ambiguous: one is socially organised but emotionally uncertain, while the other is open to discovery but also disorienting (Oyamada, 2020, pp. 1–3, 40–46).

Kawakami's *Record of a Night Too Brief* approaches gendered expectations less directly through employment and marriage, but its strange worlds similarly expose the pressure of social roles. In the title story, crowds, ticket collectors, gentlemen at a banquet, and other groups organise the narrator's movement and behaviour. The narrator is repeatedly drawn into situations whose rules are unexplained but must be followed. At the banquet, the narrator is encouraged to eat beyond comfort while the gentlemen watch and evaluate each choice. Hospitality becomes coercive because the guest cannot simply stop. The episode makes politeness and social performance feel threatening: a convention that appears generous becomes a demand that overrides bodily autonomy (Kawakami, 2016, pp. 6–8).

The comparison shows that gendered power does not always appear as direct prohibition. It can be embedded in apparently benevolent arrangements—hospitality, family assistance, marriage, or the promise of domestic freedom. In Oyamada, the offer of rent-free housing comes with an unspoken restructuring of Asahi's life. In Kawakami, the banquet's generous hosts turn eating into a performance from which the guest cannot withdraw. Both works make familiar social practices strange enough for their coercive potential to become visible (Oyamada, 2020, pp. 1–4; Kawakami, 2016, pp. 6–8).

V. RURAL AND DREAM SPACES: ISOLATION, MOVEMENT, AND ALTERNATIVE KNOWLEDGE

Space in *The Hole* is marked by a tension between visibility and obscurity. The rural environment seems open, with riverbanks, grass, roads, houses, and sky, but Asahi repeatedly encounters things she cannot explain. The open landscape does not give her a clear view of the social world. Instead, it produces a particular kind of uncertainty: the more she explores, the more she realises that the place contains histories and relationships hidden from her. The strange animal, the old well, the holes in the ground, and the family's silences all suggest that the visible landscape is layered with meanings that are not immediately accessible (Oyamada, 2020, pp. 19–23, 40–47).

This is especially important because the countryside is often imagined as the opposite of urban pressure: quieter, slower, and closer to nature. Oyamada does not simply reject that ideal; she shows its limits. The slower pace leaves Asahi with fewer structures through which she can understand her own value. In the city, her employment may have been poorly paid and unrewarding, but it gave her a schedule, colleagues, and a defined place within an institution. In the countryside, she gains space and time but loses many of the relationships and markers that previously organised her days. Her isolation is therefore not merely geographical. It is also social and temporal (Oyamada, 2020, pp. 5–8, 19–23).

The insects and summer heat intensify this experience. Nature is not a soothing background but a force that presses on the body and shapes perception. Cicadas produce a continuous sound; the heat makes time feel heavy; paths and riverbanks become sites of strange encounters. This sensory environment destabilises the distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary. The landscape seems to contain a life of its own, not fully organised around human purposes. Asahi's encounter with the hole temporarily changes her perspective: from below, familiar grass and sky look different, and the ordinary scale of the world becomes strange. The event gives her an alternative vantage point, although not a secure explanation (Oyamada, 2020, pp. 19–23).

Kawakami's spaces are even less stable. In the title story, the narrator is carried through crowds, squares, banquets, rooms, trees, and dreamlike settings in which scale and time continually change. Movement does not guarantee progress or escape. Crowds flow in organised directions, and the narrator is repeatedly absorbed into collective activity. The girl who accompanies the narrator warns against running because it might produce chaos; later, people are carried into the night. These episodes suggest that social order can appear natural only while people move according to its rhythms. Once the narrator questions where the crowd is going, the apparent order becomes strange (Kawakami, 2016, pp. 2–8).

The night itself acts as a space that absorbs the familiar world and rearranges its rules. It is not simply

darkness or danger; it allows transformations that would be impossible in daylight reality. Yet this alternative space does not offer complete freedom. Its inhabitants and events exert their own pressures, and the narrator is frequently unable to understand what is happening. The night therefore resembles Oyamada's rural landscape: both unsettle established categories and offer access to experiences beyond ordinary explanation, but neither guarantees a stable alternative identity (Kawakami, 2016, pp. 2–8).

In both texts, spaces become ways of knowing. The home reveals gendered expectations; the hole reveals the fragility of Asahi's social position; Kawakami's dreamscape reveals the instability of the body and the social world. These spaces do not merely symbolise an internal psychological state. They shape what characters can perceive and do. Their significance lies in the way they create alternative viewpoints from which apparently natural arrangements become questionable (Oyamada, 2020, pp. 1–3, 40–46; Kawakami, 2016, pp. 1–9).

VI. NARRATIVE FORM, AMBIGUITY, AND THE LIMITS OF EXPLANATION

The different forms of the two works contribute to their treatment of the uncanny. *Record of a Night Too Brief* is built from stories and episodes that do not always resolve into a single continuous explanation. Its title story moves through a sequence of surreal scenes, while the collection as a whole includes different kinds of absence, transformation, and nonhuman presence. This fragmented structure encourages readers to make connections without assuming that all events belong to a unified allegorical system. The narrative's gaps are part of its meaning: identity and experience remain provisional because the form refuses to close them into a single account (Kawakami, 2016, pp. 1–9).

The fantastic in Kawakami is not an escape from contemporary life into a fully separate mythic world. Ordinary details and strange transformations coexist. As Larson argues, the collection brings contemporary settings into contact with folklore and older imaginative traditions. That mixture unsettles a clean division between modern rationality and premodern belief. The modern world is not shown to have eliminated mystery; instead, mystery continues to emerge from within its spaces, institutions, and relationships. The uncanny consequently challenges the reader's confidence that social life can be understood through stable categories alone (Larson, 2017).

Oyamada's narrative is more continuous, but it also withholds certainty. Asahi's observations are precise, yet they do not produce reliable knowledge about the strange animal, her husband's family, or the rural community. She often does not know what to ask, how to interpret what she sees, or whether a question would change anything. The narrative stays close to her limited perspective, allowing readers to share her uncertainty. The result is not simply suspense about a supernatural creature; it is a sustained experience of not knowing how to read the world one inhabits (Oyamada, 2020, pp. 19–23, 40–47).

This formal ambiguity is ethically significant. A conventional realist narrative might explain the animal, clarify the family's hidden relationships, or state what Asahi learns from her experiences. Oyamada instead allows unresolved elements to remain. The refusal to explain everything prevents the reader from turning Asahi's situation into a neat lesson about personal choice or social oppression. She is neither simply trapped nor clearly emancipated. The ambiguity mirrors the complexity of everyday life, where structural pressures are real even when their workings are difficult to name (Oyamada, 2020, pp. 19–23, 40–47).

The same caution applies to Kawakami. Her transformations can invite interpretations involving desire, social conformity, embodiment, or the uncanny, but no single interpretation exhausts them. Their force comes partly from their resistance to ordinary logic. The reader's task is not to decode each creature into a fixed symbol, but to notice how the narrative disrupts the categories that normally make experience intelligible.

Taken together, the texts suggest that uncertainty can be a form of critique. When familiar spaces and social roles become strange, readers are prompted to see that what appears natural is often organised by conventions, habits, and unequal expectations. The uncanny creates a critical distance from those arrangements without pretending that distance alone provides a solution.

VII. CONCLUSION

Record of a Night Too Brief and *The Hole* use the uncanny to examine the unstable relationship between women's subjectivity and the worlds they inhabit. Kawakami's dreamlike transformations unsettle bodily boundaries, expose the pressures of public observation, and make social rituals appear coercive. Oyamada's restrained narrative shows how a seemingly practical move into a family-owned rural home can reorganise a woman's identity around domesticity, dependence, and isolation. In both works, the fantastic emerges from the ordinary rather than replacing it.

Their different spaces—the night, the crowd, the banquet, the house, the riverbank, and the hole—shape the

characters' experiences and reveal the limits of established roles. These spaces are neither wholly oppressive nor simply liberating. They create moments of estrangement through which the characters encounter possibilities beyond the familiar, but they do not provide complete answers. This ambiguity is a strength of both texts: the reader must remain attentive to the contradictions that persist within ordinary life.

A comparative reading therefore shows that the uncanny is not merely a stylistic feature in contemporary Japanese women's writing. It can function as a method of social and feminist inquiry, making the structures that organise bodies, labour, marriage, and belonging newly visible. Kawakami and Oyamada do not offer a final model of liberation; instead, they challenge the assumption that identity and domestic space are fixed, natural, or transparent. By opening gaps in everyday reality, their works invite readers to reconsider how women negotiate the places and roles through which they are recognised.

REFERENCES

[1] Kawakami, H. (2017). *Record of a Night Too Brief* (L. North, Trans.). Pushkin Press.

[2] Larson, M. W. (2017, July 19). The folkloric and the fantastic: Hiromi Kawakami's "Record of a Night Too Brief." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Los Angeles Review of Books

[3] Maloney, I. (2020, September 26). 'The Hole': A fitting metaphor for a restrictive society. *The Japan Times*. The Japan Times

[4] Oyamada, H. (2020). *The hole* (D. Boyd, Trans.). New Directions. (Original work published 2014)