



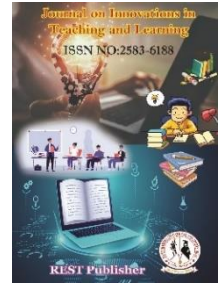
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Cafe as Chronotope: Spatial-Temporal Fixity and Emotional Freedom in Toshikazu Kawaguchi's *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* Through the Lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's Chronotopic Theory

¹M. Swathi, ²R. Dhayalakrishnan

Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.

Corresponding Author Email: swathimadhavan99@gmail.com

Abstract: This study explores the intricate relationship between space, time, and emotional healing in Toshikazu Kawaguchi's novel *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotopic theory. At the novel's heart lies a seemingly ordinary cafe in Tokyo where customers are offered the opportunity to travel back in time, under rigid spatial and temporal rules. While the cafe remains physically fixed and temporally confined, visitors must return before the coffee gets cold; it paradoxically enables immense emotional mobility, introspection, and reconciliation. This paper argues that the cafe functions as a chronotope, a narrative unit where time and space intersect meaningfully to shape characters' existential journeys. This study aims to examine how Kawaguchi's treatment of space (the cafe) and time (the past that cannot be changed) offers a new narrative model for addressing human regret, memory, and emotional resilience. By employing Bakhtin's concept of chronotope, the study demonstrates that the cafe becomes a liminal, sacred space. This temporal threshold permits characters to revisit emotional wounds, not to alter their past, but to reinterpret and accept it. The interplay between spatial fixity and emotional fluidity becomes a metaphor for how we process grief, loss, and reconciliation as individuals and as a society. This research contributes to contemporary literary and cultural discourse by illustrating how literature can offer alternative frameworks for healing and empathy, particularly in a post-pandemic era marked by isolation, regret, and emotional disconnection. It emphasizes that emotional freedom need not rely on physical change, but can be born within the constraints of time and place, redefining the role of narrative space in literature and in real-life psychological processes. Ultimately, the study invites readers to reflect on the untapped power of stillness, ritual, and memory in an age of relentless motion.

Keywords: Chronotope, Mikhail Bakhtin, Time and Space in Literature, Emotional Healing, Liminal Space.

1. INTRODUCTION

"No matter what difficulties people face, they always have the strength to overcome them, as long as they have someone to love."

— Toshikazu Kawaguchi, *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*

Toshikazu Kawaguchi's *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* (2015) is a quietly profound and emotionally resonant novel that explores the fragile interplay between time, memory, and human connection. Set in a small, unassuming Tokyo cafe called Funiculi Funicula, the story unfolds around a magical yet rule-bound premise: customers can travel back in time, but only under particular conditions, and they must return before their coffee gets cold. Unlike conventional time-travel narratives driven by action or

paradox, Kawaguchi's approach is introspective, emphasizing emotional closure over temporal change. Although time travel in the novel cannot alter the course of events, it allows characters to find personal redemption, offer unspoken apologies, or gain clarity about unresolved relationships. Thus, the cafe becomes more than a physical location—it emerges as a sanctuary for memory, regret, and healing. Published originally as a stage play before being adapted into novel form, *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* received global acclaim for its minimalist prose, emotional depth, and universally relatable themes. Its quiet narrative asks hauntingly beautiful questions: *If you could return to a moment you once lived, what would you say? Who would you meet? What truth would you finally face?*

This study explores the novel's spatial and temporal dimensions through Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotopic theory, focusing on how the fixed setting of the cafe paradoxically enables emotional freedom. By examining this liminal narrative space, the research aims to show how literature can reflect and respond to human longing, especially in times of emotional uncertainty and cultural transition. In *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, Toshikazu Kawaguchi reimagines the concept of time travel not as a tool to change fate, but as a gentle instrument for emotional healing and reconciliation. Unlike traditional science fiction narratives that focus on altering the past or shaping the future, Kawaguchi's portrayal is deeply introspective and humanistic. The novel introduces a peculiar cafe where time travel is possible, but with strict limitations: the traveler can only meet someone who has visited the cafe, cannot change the past, and must return before the coffee cools. These rules strip time travel of its fantastical power, grounding it instead in emotional realism.

This constrained form of temporal movement becomes a metaphor for how humans revisit memory, not to rewrite what has happened, but to find meaning, closure, and peace.

Characters return to express unspoken love, apologize for past actions, or understand someone they lost. In doing so, they do not escape their pain but confront it in a liminal space where time stands still, allowing emotional clarity to emerge. In Kawaguchi's world, the past is unchangeable, but the present self can be transformed through reflection. The novel thus offers a unique literary exploration of how revisiting emotional wounds can foster healing, emphasizing that growth often lies not in erasing the past but in understanding and embracing it. At first glance, the setting of *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* appears deceptively simple, a small, dimly lit cafe tucked away in a quiet Tokyo alley. Bound by rigid rules and spatial limitations, the cafe does not permit unrestricted journeys through time. Instead, it enforces a strict framework: travelers must sit in a specific seat, interact only with people who have visited the cafe, and return to the present before their coffee gets cold. These constraints raise a central and compelling paradox: how can a confined, rule-bound space become a site of profound emotional transformation?

This question challenges traditional literary and psychological assumptions that healing and change require freedom, movement, or the ability to alter circumstances. In Kawaguchi's narrative, however, transformation emerges not from external change but from internal reflection. The characters do not rewrite their histories; instead, they engage in brief, emotionally charged encounters that allow them to say what was left unsaid, feel what was once repressed, and view the past from a new emotional perspective. The static cafe thus becomes a sanctified emotional space, not because it alters fate, but because it offers stillness, intentionality, and presence. Understanding how such a physically and temporally restricted setting facilitates psychological and emotional growth requires a deeper exploration of the relationship between narrative space, memory, and identity. The challenge lies in interpreting the narrative not through the lens of what changes externally, but through what evolves internally. This study addresses this problem by applying Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotopic theory, which examines how space and time are interwoven in literature to reflect and construct meaning. By viewing the cafe as a chronotope, a fixed node of space-time charged with emotional potential, this research seeks to uncover how Kawaguchi redefines transformation as deeply relational, introspective, and narrative-bound, rather than physical or temporal.

This study aims to explore how Toshikazu Kawaguchi's *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* portrays time and space as intertwined emotional dimensions by applying Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotype. Through this lens, the research aims to reveal how the novel's confined cafe setting becomes a powerful narrative space where emotional healing, memory, and introspection unfold despite the strict

temporal and spatial constraints. Three central research questions guide this study. First, how does the cafe function as a chronotopic space in Kawaguchi's *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*? This question seeks to uncover how the fixed and rule-bound setting of the cafe becomes a dynamic narrative space where meaningful emotional encounters occur. Second, the study asks, in what ways does temporal fixity enable emotional freedom in the novel? By exploring the paradoxical relationship between strict temporal limitations and internal liberation, this question examines how confinement can catalyze personal growth. Finally, the research addresses the role that memory and regret play within the spatial-temporal structure of the narrative. Here, the focus is on how past experiences are revisited within a confined time-space, allowing characters to confront unresolved emotions and arrive at healing, despite their inability to change the past.

This study offers significant contributions across multiple fields. In terms of literary theory, it brings fresh attention to Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope in the context of contemporary Japanese fiction. By applying this theory to Kawaguchi's work, the research expands the critical understanding of how narrative space and time shape emotional and psychological depth in fiction. From the perspective of emotional psychology in literature, the study emphasizes the therapeutic potential of storytelling and how fiction can offer models for confronting grief, regret, and emotional stagnation. In postmodern narrative analysis, the novel's minimalist yet profound engagement with time, memory, and human connection reflects broader cultural concerns with fragmentation, ritual, and the search for meaning in the everyday. The study deepens our understanding of how constrained settings can paradoxically enable expansive inner journeys.

This research is grounded in Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope, which refers to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships in literature. Bakhtin argues that every narrative constructs its own "chronotope," a specific configuration of time and space that shapes plot development and character experience. In *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, the cafe emerges as a chronotope where temporal limitations and spatial stillness do not hinder transformation but rather structure it. This theoretical lens enables a focused exploration of how Kawaguchi weaves past and present, memory and moment, in a narrative space charged with emotional intensity. The study employs a qualitative textual analysis method, rooted in literary theory. It involves a close reading of Toshikazu Kawaguchi's *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, focusing on narrative structure, character interaction, and thematic content. Drawing from Bakhtin's chronotopic theory, the analysis identifies how space and time are represented and how they interact with emotional motifs such as regret, memory, and healing. Secondary sources, including theoretical texts, journal articles, and cultural studies on time travel and Japanese literature, support the interpretation. The methodology is interpretive in nature, aiming to uncover deeper symbolic and structural meanings rather than empirical generalizations.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Critics such as Yoko Yamada (2021) argue that *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* functions as a form of literary therapy, where characters, though unable to change the past, achieve emotional resolution by confronting long-held regrets. The cafe acts as a confessional space where emotional clarity replaces action. In his analysis of Japanese minimalism, Hiroshi Tanaka (2020) highlights Kawaguchi's novel as an example of "still-time storytelling," where time travel is not a vehicle for change but a narrative device for introspection. He emphasizes that the novel defies Western sci-fi norms by making the emotional journey more important than the temporal mechanics.

Literary scholar Rebecca Lin (2022) explores how memory in Kawaguchi's narrative is not static but interactive. She notes that the characters engage with their memories as if revisiting a living space, reconstructing meaning, altering perspectives, and reshaping emotional outcomes. In her comparative study, Priya Nair (2023) examines the global success of the novel, noting its resonance across cultures due to universal themes of love, loss, and second chances. She observes that despite being set in a culturally specific Tokyo cafe, the novel transcends national borders by tapping into shared human emotions. Tomoko Sato (2019) approaches the story from a Japanese aesthetic perspective, aligning its

treatment of time with the principles of *mono no aware*, the gentle sadness of impermanence. She asserts that the novel teaches readers not to rewrite the past, but to appreciate its transience and beauty.

3. BAKHTIN'S CHRONOTOPIC THEORY

The concept of the chronotope originates from the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and literary theorist, who introduced the term in his seminal essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" found in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981). Bakhtin defines the chronotope as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84). The term is derived from the Greek words *chronos* (time) and *topos* (space), indicating that narrative meaning arises from the fusion of where and when events occur. This concept moves beyond viewing time and space as mere settings and instead treats them as dynamic forces that shape character development, plot structure, and thematic evolution.

Bakhtin emphasizes that different genres create chronotopes, each reflecting specific ideological worldviews. He writes, "In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole" (84), underscoring that space and time are mutually constitutive rather than separate elements. Scholars have since applied this theory across various narrative forms, especially to analyze how characters experience time and how space influences emotional and psychological states. For instance, the road chronotope in the picaresque novel allows for episodic storytelling and chance encounters, whereas the castle chronotope in Gothic fiction reinforces isolation and suspense.

In contemporary literary studies, chronotype is increasingly used to explore liminal spaces and nonlinear temporalities, particularly in postmodern and magical realist texts. The cafe in Kawaguchi's *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* functions as a chronotope, where rigid temporal rules and static space paradoxically open a portal to emotional freedom and reflective depth. Through such applications, Bakhtin's theory offers a powerful lens for understanding how narrative form, cultural context, and human experience intersect. In magical realism and Japanese literary tradition, time and space are not treated as objective absolutes but as fluid, emotional, and often metaphysical constructs. This aligns seamlessly with the Japanese aesthetics of *wabi-sabi*, the acceptance of imperfection and impermanence, and *mono no aware*, a gentle awareness of the ephemeral nature of life. In magical realist texts, time often folds, suspends, or loops in ways that allow emotional truths to emerge over chronological realism. At the same time, in Japanese literature, space usually becomes a site of quiet transformation rather than action.

Mono no aware is especially relevant to Kawaguchi's *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, where characters revisit moments they cannot change, not to alter destiny but to understand it. As literary critic Tomoko Sato notes, "the novel teaches readers not to rewrite the past, but to appreciate its transience and beauty" (2019). This reflects the idea that emotional depth arises not from narrative climax, but from moments of stillness and reflection. Similarly, *wabi-sabi* informs the novel's sparse cafe setting, where "beauty lies in the ordinary and the overlooked", in a place worn with time, yet filled with meaning (55).

In the context of magical realism, Wendy B. Faris describes how "time and space may merge, collapse, or disappear altogether, allowing emotional or spiritual truths to take precedence" (7). Kawaguchi's use of time travel, restrained by specific spatial rules, exemplifies this collapse of linear boundaries to create a chronotope. In this fused space-time node, memory, emotion, and healing coalesce. Thus, the novel becomes a unique intersection of Japanese cultural aesthetics and magical realist narrative mechanics, demonstrating how time and space are deeply bound to affect and impermanence in both traditions.

4. CHRONOTOPE AND THE CAFE: FIXITY AND FLUIDITY

The unnamed Tokyo cafe in *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* is more than just a physical setting; it is a symbolic space of memory, ritual, and introspection. Governed by a strict set of rules, it creates a sense of spatial confinement that paradoxically offers a framework for emotional release. The rules are unyielding: one must sit in a specific seat, the person being visited must have previously entered the cafe, and, above all, the visitor must return “before the coffee gets cold” (25). These limitations reinforce the space's ritualistic quality, turning drinking coffee into a spiritual engagement with memory. The waitress Kazu warns every traveler, “No matter what happens, the present won’t change” (30). This static environment, dim lighting, quiet corners, an antique clock, suggests a suspended space untouched by the chaos of the external world, making the cafe a liminal threshold between emotional stasis and transformation.

Time in the novel is strictly bound and unchangeable. Despite allowing brief returns to the past, the novel emphasizes that no events can be altered. This paradox is stated unequivocally,

“Even if you do go back to the past, there’s nothing you can do that will change the present” (33).

Here, the past becomes not a site of correction but of reconciliation. The rule that one must finish their visit before the coffee gets cold introduces a physical and symbolic temporal boundary, reinforcing the fragility of second chances. The time limit not only instills tension but also reflects the Japanese cultural sense of *mono no aware*, the awareness of life’s fleeting nature. This built-in temporal urgency drives characters to focus not on what they could have done differently, but on what they still need to feel, say, or understand.

Despite its spatial and temporal restrictions, the cafe becomes a place of emotional liberation. Characters do not travel through time to change outcomes, but to heal, confront unresolved emotions, and understand themselves and others more deeply. In one powerful moment, Fumiko, who is grieving a lost relationship, realizes after her time-travel experience:

“Knowing the truth doesn’t mean you can do anything about it. But still, I’m glad I went back” (114).

This reflects how emotional freedom arises not from altering events, but from accepting and reinterpreting them. The act of revisiting regret allows characters to speak the unsaid, and as a result, move forward internally. The cafe, then, is less about traveling back and more about emotionally coming to terms with the past. A compelling paradox in Kawaguchi’s narrative is how a physically immobile space allows for emotional motion. The cafe never changes, its routines are fixed, its furniture unmoved, and its rules immutable. Yet within this stillness, profound personal evolution occurs. This contradiction is captured subtly in the narrator’s observation, “People don’t go back to change the past. They go back to accept it” (89). Here, stillness itself becomes transformative. It offers characters the mental clarity and emotional anchoring needed to confront what they’ve been avoiding. The fixed environment becomes a narrative chronotope, a space-time construct compressing external stasis and internal awakening. This fusion of stillness and growth underlines Kawaguchi’s central message: emotional journeys often occur in quiet spaces, within the boundaries of ritual, memory, and time.

5. MEMORY, REGRET, AND LIMINALITY

In *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, each character’s journey into the past is marked by a ritualistic return that carries deep emotional significance. These returns are not grand gestures but intimate relivings of one pivotal moment, often left unresolved in the emotional fabric of the characters’ lives. Time travel rules are unbendable, forcing characters to choose carefully the moment they wish to revisit, highlighting the sacredness of a single encounter. For instance, Hirai, a distant sister burdened by guilt, returns to say goodbye to her younger sibling. Her visit is brief and bound by time, but emotionally transformative.

“It was the first time in her life she had said ‘Thank you’ and meant it from the bottom of her heart” (152). This ritual, framed by coffee and memory, allows for not just recollection but emotional realignment. It is a solemn, almost ceremonial act, echoing the Japanese aesthetic of *reverence in repetition*.

The cafe operates as a liminal space, neither wholly part of the present nor entirely disconnected from the past. It is a place that suspends ordinary laws of reality, where time flows backward but only within the boundaries of ritual, and where memory becomes temporarily tangible. Sitting in the designated chair, drinking the poured coffee, and leaving before it gets cold defines a temporal threshold. As Kazu explains, “You can’t go back to any time you want. There are rules” (27). This in-between-ness, neither past nor present, neither dream nor waking, creates a mythical quality, aligning the cafe with liminal zones found in folklore and ritual theory, where transformation becomes possible. As such, the cafe is not just a narrative device but a symbolic threshold, a chronotope that condenses time and space into a metaphysical encounter between grief and understanding, loss and acceptance.

The cafe space enables emotional catharsis not by changing events, but by altering emotional perspectives. Each story in the novel functions as a case study of regret, silence, or unfinished emotion. Fumiko, abandoned without explanation by her lover, visits the past only to realize that closure lies not in getting answers, but in releasing the need for them:

“Even if I knew it wouldn’t change anything... I still wanted to see him one last time” (43).

Similarly, Kohtake, a devoted wife to a man with Alzheimer's, chooses to revisit a moment when he still recognized her. This does not restore her husband’s memory, but it heals her inner fragmentation: “I’ll be fine... I’m glad I got to see you again, even for a little while” (123). These emotionally loaded returns do not rewrite the characters’ pasts, they rewrite their emotional scripts. Through the controlled space of the cafe and the strict limits of time, characters undergo profound inner transformation, finding peace, forgiveness, and the strength to move forward.

6. CULTURAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSIONS

One of the most profound undercurrents in *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* is the traditional Japanese aesthetic philosophy of *mono no aware* (物の哀れ), a sensitivity to the ephemerality of life, and a quiet sadness paired with a deeper appreciation of beauty in impermanence. This sentiment permeates every narrative arc in the novel, where characters confront the irreversible flow of time and the unchangeability of outcomes. Instead of resisting impermanence, the characters come to embrace it as part of their healing journey. The novel does not offer closure in the Western sense of resolution; instead, it presents *emotional continuity*, a hallmark of *mono no aware*. As literary theorist Motoori Norinaga described it, *mono no aware* reflects “the pathos of things, the power to move, to feel, and to accept life as it is” (1790). Kawaguchi's characters, like Kohtake and Fumiko, embody this principle by finding value not in changed outcomes but in felt connection. As Kazu says in a moment of profound simplicity:

“Even if nothing changes, you can learn something. You can feel something” (88).

This illustrates how the novel encourages a philosophy of presence, rooted in emotional awareness and acceptance, deeply resonant with *wabi-sabi* and *mono no aware*.

Beyond its aesthetic dimensions, the novel invites a therapeutic interpretation, the cafe functioning not merely as a physical space, but as a metaphorical space of therapy and narrative self-exploration. Like a therapy room, the cafe holds emotional boundaries (the rules), empathetic listeners (Kazu and the regulars), and a secure space to revisit the past without judgment or danger. In literary terms, this aligns with the concept of bibliotherapy, where fiction serves as a healing medium for both characters

and readers. Each character's return to a painful memory serves as a kind of narrative exposure therapy, reliving a memory, confronting suppressed emotion, and gradually letting go. For example, in the case of Kei, who faces the fear of disappearing from her unborn child's life due to a terminal illness, her act of writing a letter to her future daughter becomes an act of narrative self-soothing, "Even if I'm not there, I want you to know that you were loved" (163).

This therapeutic reading positions the cafe as a symbolic womb of memory, where stories are held, witnessed, and released. Kawaguchi's minimalist style enhances this atmosphere, offering quiet spaces between words for the reader to reflect, relate, and heal. Together, these cultural and philosophical dimensions make *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* a literary space of healing, where Eastern philosophies of impermanence and literary strategies of emotional insight converge to offer readers a contemplative, restorative experience.

7. IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY

Fiction has long served as a mirror to human emotion, but in *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, it transcends this reflective role and functions as a therapeutic tool. Kawaguchi's narrative reveals literature's potential to model emotional reflection and closure, especially through stories that revisit loss, guilt, or regret within controlled, narrative boundaries. In a world burdened by speed and distraction, this novel offers the revolutionary idea that healing can occur in stillness. Characters do not escape their pain, they sit with it, revisit it, and reinterpret it. This provides readers with emotional scripts for facing similar psychological dilemmas in real life. The book models how unresolved emotions can be revisited safely, not to erase the past, but to integrate it. In doing so, it becomes literature as quiet therapy, accessible, empathetic, and culturally resonant.

The application of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope in Kawaguchi's work expands our understanding of how time and space operate in contemporary narrative as sites of healing. Traditionally used to examine movement and interaction (such as the road in picaresque novels or the castle in Gothic fiction), the chronotope here is reversed: it is inward, still, and bound. The cafe, a static, rule-governed setting, becomes a sanctuary for emotional transformation, suggesting a new chronotopic possibility in postmodern literature, the healing chronotope. This reconceptualization contributes to both literary theory and trauma studies, showing that temporal compression and spatial ritual can facilitate catharsis, not despite their limits, but because of them. Kawaguchi's cafe is proof that fictional time-spaces, when carefully crafted, can mimic therapeutic encounters and encourage inner growth.

Though written before COVID-19, Kawaguchi's novel gained renewed relevance in the post-pandemic world, where isolation, grief, and emotional reflection became shared global experiences. In an era when external movement was restricted, people were forced into internal journeys to sit with memory, uncertainty, and often, silence. The cafe's spatial stillness and the characters' reflective inner monologues echo the lived experience of millions during lockdowns. The rule-bound nature of the time-travel reinforces the idea that not everything can or should be changed, but what can be changed is our emotional posture toward the past. As such, the novel offers a gentle, post-pandemic philosophy: even in immobility, emotional movement is possible. Its popularity during the pandemic also demonstrates society's craving for stories that comfort without illusion, offering hope not through grand transformation, but through the quiet acceptance of life's impermanence.

8. CONCLUSION

Through a nuanced reading of *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, this study has revealed how a single, seemingly mundane setting, a small Tokyo café, functions as a richly layered narrative device. The novel demonstrates that literature can explore profound emotional transformations even within spatial and temporal constraints. Kawaguchi's use of a confined, ritualistic space brings forth narratives of loss, love, regret, and forgiveness, reflecting the universal human yearning to confront the past, not to change it, but to understand it. The study also shows how memory and time travel become therapeutic

rather than fantastical, grounding the narrative in emotional realism rather than speculative escapism.

By applying Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope, this research has established the cafe as a temporal-spatial site where memory, ritual, and emotion intersect. Unlike traditional chronotopes that facilitate movement or external change (e.g., the road or the ship), Kawaguchi's cafe is static yet dynamic, offering emotional transformation through the very act of spatial fixity and temporal boundary. This suggests a redefinition of the chronotope for contemporary fiction: it can serve not just as a framework for action, but as a womb of introspection, a sanctuary where emotional healing unfolds through the narrative pause, "Time doesn't flow backward, but the heart sometimes needs to go back before it can go forward" (114).

The most compelling contribution of Kawaguchi's narrative is its subtle affirmation of emotional motion within spatial stillness. In a world obsessed with progress, expansion, and escape, *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* invites readers to sit still, drink slowly, and listen deeply to others and themselves. The cafe's immobility does not hinder transformation; it becomes the condition for introspective clarity. The emotional architecture of the novel shows that it is not always by changing our world, but by changing our relationship to memory and time, that we heal, as "You must return before the coffee gets cold... because even miracles have their limits" (67). This limitation is not a barrier but a metaphor: healing must happen within the boundaries of life as it is, not as we wish it to be.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study opens several avenues for further scholarly inquiry. Comparative studies can be undertaken with other cafe-centered narratives, such as Murakami's *After Dark* or Jostein Gaarder's *The Orange Girl*, where enclosed, nocturnal or liminal spaces serve as sites of philosophical engagement. Future research might also explore the chronotope in digital or virtual spaces (e.g., metaverse therapy narratives), or study gendered experiences of memory and time within confined literary spaces. An interdisciplinary approach incorporating narrative psychology, trauma theory, and Japanese aesthetics would further enrich the understanding of Kawaguchi's unique narrative contribution.

In a time when the world demands fast answers and forward motion, *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* reminds us of the quiet power of emotional stillness, of the spaces that hold our stories with care, and the people who help us see them anew. The novel is not just about time travel, it's about emotional return. In this small cafe, Kawaguchi has created not just a story, but a space for the soul.

"Even if nothing changes, even if it's just for a moment, people still want to go back"

— Toshikazu Kawaguchi, *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*

And sometimes, one moment is enough.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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