Personification as a Reflection of Sadness: A Socio-Cultural Stylistic Study in Natsume Soseki's Kokoro Novel

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ABSTRACT

Kokoro novel by Natsume Soseki depicts the emotional struggle and loneliness of its characters amidst the pressure of Japan's socio-cultural transformation in the Meiji era, namely the shift from tradition to modernity. The characters' deep sadness is often expressed through the style of personification, making inanimate objects and natural atmospheres seem to have feelings, as a stylistic reflection rich in meaning. This study aims to identify the forms and imagery of personification that reflect the sadness of the main character and analyze the relationship between personification and the socio-cultural context of the Meiji era as a form of response to modernization. The study uses a cognitive stylistic approach (based on Lakoff & Johnson) and a sociocultural approach to see the relationship between language style and the context of changes in community values. The descriptive-qualitative method is carried out through the identification of personification quotes, classification of types, and interpretation of emotional meaning and its relationship to socio-cultural phenomena. The results of the study show that personification appears in nature (wind, sky, rain, fog) and the city atmosphere which emphasizes sadness and alienation. Personification also serves as a medium for emotional expression of characters as well as a subtle critique of socio-cultural turmoil, showing how language constructs and voices emotions in a particular historical context. Through the personification of objects and atmosphere, Natsume Soseki conveys sadness, isolation and anxiety in a society caught in the current of modernization.

1. Introduction

Literary works play an important role in culture and society because they are capable of conveying deep messages, emotions, and ideas through the creative and aesthetic use of language. According to Fairuz (2023), language can be considered both the main medium and a tool for authors to communicate their ideas to readers. Authors do not only focus on the content or message they wish to convey, but also on how it is delivered—using expressive, beautiful, engaging, and impressive language. Through literature, readers are invited to reflect on human experiences, values, and social realities across different times and cultures. As such, literary works not only entertain but also educate, inspire critical thinking, and foster empathy (Junaid et al., 2023; Cahyani et al., 2025; Asha et al., 2025).

Style of language is one of the essential elements in literary writing. According to Keraf (1981), style of language refers to the distinctive way an author or speaker expresses their thoughts and feelings through language, either orally or in writing. It includes various aspects of language use, such as word choice (diction), sentence structure, and the use of rhetorical and figurative devices to achieve specific effects. Stylistic language is necessary to enhance the aesthetic value of a literary work. One commonly used style is personification (Junaid & Andini, 2025; Kaharuddin et al., 2025; Sendana et al., 2025). Personification allows authors to animate abstract concepts or inanimate objects, making them more vivid and relatable to readers. By doing so, writers can create stronger emotional resonance and deepen the reader's engagement with the text.

Personification is a figurative language style that attributes human characteristics to inanimate objects or abstract concepts, as if they had the ability to think, act, or feel like humans. Gorys Keraf describes personification as a way of attributing human qualities to lifeless things, for example: "The wind howled in the dark of night, intensifying our fear." In this instance, personification makes it seem as though the wind has human intentions and emotions (Keraf, 1981). This

aligns with Pradopo's (1995) view that personification allows inanimate objects "to act, think, and so on, like humans." It can be said that personification is not merely a tool to beautify the narrative, but also serves to strengthen the depiction of situations and emotions that the author intends to convey through a work, such as a novel.

The novel is a literary genre that portrays the life of a character through a specific plot, and it also serves as a medium for authors to communicate their thoughts and ideas through a distinctive language style that reflects their aesthetics and personality. In this regard, Natsume Sōseki is known as a writer who skillfully uses poetic language to depict the moods and emotions of his characters, especially in his novel Kokoro, published in 1914. This novel illustrates the psychological and emotional complexity of human beings and the social shifts that occurred during the Meiji era (1868–1912). The Meiji era was a significant period in Japanese history marked by rapid modernization and the transition from traditional values to more modern and Western social structures. This transition had a profound impact on both individual lives and Japanese society as a whole. In literary terms, such socio-cultural changes are reflected in narratives that depict internal conflict, alienation, and the anxieties of modern man (Fujii, 1996). One literary work that strongly reflects the tension between tradition and modernity is Kokoro by Natsume Sōseki.

Kokoro not only tells the story of interpersonal relationships and moral burdens, but also expresses sorrow through its language style, particularly the use of personification. Personification in this novel is frequently used to animate elements of nature and the cityscape, reflecting the emotional state of the characters. In other words, inanimate objects and the landscape around the characters become mediums that voice the grief and alienation experienced during a time of great change. This study aims to identify the forms of personification used in the novel and analyze how such personifications reflect the main character's sorrow and symbolize the unrest of Meiji-era society. Using the cognitive stylistic approach of Lakoff and Johnson, along with Nurgiantoro's sociocultural framework, this research explores the relationship between linguistic expression and the dynamics of changing social values.

1.1 Literature Review

Studies on the novel Kokoro by Natsume Sōseki have been conducted using various approaches, such as literary sociology, psychological character analysis, and others. This novel is one of the representations of the inner conflict experienced by Japanese society in facing modernization during the Meiji era. According to Fujii, in his essay Writing Out Asia: Modernity, Canon, and Natsume Sōseki's Kokoro, the novel Kokoro represents the narrative of Japanese modernity through characters who experience alienation, guilt, and a loss of moral direction. Fujii emphasizes that this novel is not merely a personal literary work but also a cultural product that positions modernity as something filled with identity crises. Through the characters of Sensei and the narrator, Sōseki illustrates the psychological impact of value changes that occurred as Japan transitioned from a feudal society toward Western modernity (Fujii, 1996).

Panukmolaksari conducted a study on Kanji and Kibun in Kokoro, which relate to "feelings" or "mood," highlighting the importance of emotional atmosphere in the novel as part of its narrative structure. This study is significant because it clarifies the nuances of emotional vocabulary, particularly in conveying the characters' internal conflicts through specific word choices (Panukmolaksari, 2022). Shabrina analyzed metaphors of nature's semantic field in Kokoro and demonstrated that nature functions as an emotional metaphorical medium within the narrative. Although her study did not focus specifically on personification, it supports the idea that natural elements have rich symbolic functions (Shabrina, 2020).

In the context of stylistics, personification as a figurative language style is one of the main strategies in Kokoro for reflecting the inner state of its characters. The Conceptual Metaphor Theory, developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), explains that language is not only a tool for communication but also a reflection of how humans understand experience and reality (Lakoff, 1980). Within this framework, personification can be understood as a cognitive manifestation, in which internal emotions are expressed through imagery of nature or inanimate objects. This is especially relevant in Kokoro, where elements such as wind, fog, and rain are often given emotional attributes to depict the characters' sadness or alienation.

From these various studies, it is evident that Kokoro is significant not only in terms of its narrative but also as a field for stylistic and ideological expression. Stylistic studies can also be used to reveal certain cultural meanings (Fairuz & L., 2024). However, specific studies on how personification functions as a reflection of character sorrow within the socio-cultural context of the Meiji era remain limited. Therefore, this research fills the gap by combining a cognitive stylistic approach with socio-cultural analysis to examine the role of personification in building emotion and delivering social critique in the novel.

Cognitive stylistics focuses on the analysis of figurative expressions—specifically personification—based on the theory of Lakoff & Johnson, which links language to the construction of emotional experience. The socio-cultural approach is built on the theory of literary sociology, exploring how external factors (such as cultural paradigms, Westernization, and alienation) shape language style, including the use of figurative language in the novel (Nurgiantoro, 2015).

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is a method used to explore and understand the meanings derived from individuals or groups. Qualitative methods can be carried out using various approaches, including ethnography, grounded theory, case study, phenomenology, and narrative (Creswell, 2010). The data is obtained by describing existing facts, followed by analysis. Ultimately, conclusions are drawn based on that data analysis.

The initial stage of the research process involves data collection, followed by two crucial stages: data analysis and presentation of the analysis results. The data collection technique used includes literature study and the observe-and-note technique, which involves gathering data related to lyric analysis using a stylistic approach. The research is then conducted through the following steps: 1) Reading and understanding each song lyric and its translation in detail, 2) Highlighting and noting every lyric that contains personification, 3) Classifying the forms of personification expressions found in the lyrics, 4) Analyzing the use of personification in the song lyrics and explaining the meanings contained within.

3. Result and Discussion

Based on the data analysis of the novel Kokoro by Natsume Sōseki, four instances of personification were identified, as shown in the following table.

Table 1. Personification Analysis In The Novel Kokoro

No	Figurative Expression	Cognitive Stylistics (Personification)	Sociocultural Approach (Westernization & Alienation)
1	*The heartbreaking wind*	The wind, an inanimate object, is given human emotional attributes	The wind, emotionally charged, symbolizes social values or turmoil
2	*The cold air bites the back*	The cold air is personified as if it can "bite," evoking a sense of anxiety or emotional tension	The physical sensation reflects the character's inner alienation caused by modernization and the shift in traditional values
3	*The dazzling blue sky pierces the eyes and throws color onto the face*	The sky is treated as an active subject that "pierces" and "throws," indicating the character's mental state	Symbolizes the pressure of new cultural forces disrupting the balance between tradition and modernity
4	*Strange clouds crossed his face*	The shadow is likened to a creature with will, reflecting emotional shifts	The character's face covered in shadow becomes a metaphor for the ambivalence of values and a critical view of the cultural crisis

After completing the process of data collection and analysis, this section presents the research findings in detail. These findings serve as the foundation for the subsequent discussion and interpretation.

Data 1

悲痛な風が田舎の隅まで吹いて来て、眠たそうな樹や草を震ほわせている。

Hitsuu na kaze ga inaka no sumi made fuite kite, nemuta souna ki ya kusa wo shinhowasete iru.

""The heartbreaking wind came sweeping through the corners of the village, shaking the trees and the grass that looked drowsy."

(Kokoro, Chapter 2 – Section 11)

In Data 1, there is personification, which involves attributing human characteristics to elements of nature. The phrase 悲痛な風 (*hitsuu na kaze*), meaning *"heartbreaking wind,"* depicts the wind with the emotional quality of 悲痛 (*hitsuu*), or "heartbreaking," which is a human emotion associated with sadness. Furthermore, the wind is said to "shake

the trees" and the grass appears "drowsy," traits typically associated with living beings. This illustrates how nature is personified to express human emotions or states of mind.

From a **sociocultural approach**, literary works reflect the social and cultural conditions of the time in which they are created. The personified sentence above mirrors the emotional atmosphere or social condition of the village community at that time—such as sadness or exhaustion—likely caused by hardship or social change.

Data 2

寒さが背中へ嚙り付いたような心持がしました。

Samusa ga senaka he karitsuita youna kokoromochi ga shimashita.

"I felt as if the cold air were biting my back."

(Kokoro, Chapter 3 - Section 42)

In **Data 2**, the expression 寒さが背中へ嚙り付いたような (*samusa ga senaka he karitsuita youna*), which means *"as if the cold air were biting my back,"* contains personification. The verb 嚙り付いた (**karitsuita**) or "biting" describes an action typically performed by humans or other living beings. However, **samusa** or *cold air* is an inanimate object that is portrayed as if it were capable of biting. This expression conveys a deep sense of anxiety or emotional tension.

From a **sociocultural perspective**, this expression reflects the social and cultural conditions of the time. Literature often serves as a mirror of social reality, reflecting ideologies, social classes, and the conditions of society during the time it was written. This expression can be interpreted as a depiction of the **individual's alienation** within Japanese society during the **Meiji era**, when social change and modernization caused emotional and psychological strain.

The process of modernization brought new realities to Japan, including a shift in societal mindset from traditional to modern values, leading to ideological struggles between the older and younger generations. The conflict between tradition and modernity in *Kokoro* is evident in differing views on marriage, social status, future aspirations, and the values of loyalty and honor. This demonstrates how literary works reflect the **cultural and social conflicts** that occurred in society during that period (Setyako, 2023).

Data 3

青空の色がぎらぎらと眼を射るように痛烈な色を私の顔に投げ付けた。

Aozora no iro ga giragira to me wo iru youni tsuuretsu na iro wo watashi no kao ni nagetsuketa.

"The bright blue color of the sky dazzled my eyes and threw its color onto my face."
(*Kokoro*, Chapter 1 - Section 3)

In Data 3, the expression 青空の色が痛烈な色を私の顔に投げ付けた (*Aozora no iro ga tsūretsu na iro wo watashi no kao ni nagetsuketa*), meaning *"the bright blue color of the sky dazzled my eyes and threw an intense color onto my face,"* contains personification. The blue sky is described as if it has the ability to "hit" or "throw" something at someone's face—actions typically associated with humans or living beings.

This use of personification conveys **strong and intense emotions**, linking visual sensations with psychological states, and shows that the emotional impact is so powerful it can be felt physically.

From a **sociocultural perspective**, this expression reflects the **socioeconomic and cultural conditions** of Japan during the Meiji era. Literature acts as a mirror of society, portraying the conflict between traditional values and modern (Westernized) influences, which gives rise to emotional and psychological tension. The use of personification to express emotion through language reflects **the values and cultural structures that were undergoing upheaval** (Tiwar, 2018).

Data 4

けれども時として変な曇りがその顔を横切る事があった。

Keredomo toki toshite hen na kumori ga sono kao wo yokogiru koto ga atta.

"However, there were times when strange clouds passed across his face."

(Kokoro, Chapter 1 - Section 6)

Data 4 features personification in the sentence 変な曇りがその顔を横切る (*hen na kumori ga sono kao wo yokogiru*), which means *"strange clouds passed across his face."* This sentence is categorized as personification because the dark clouds are depicted as entities moving across a face, as if they possessed human will. **Kumori**, or clouds during overcast weather, are typically dark and are often associated with gloomy human expressions. Thick and dark clouds can create a melancholic atmosphere and simultaneously reflect **psychological concepts** such as doubt and sadness. According to **Lakoff & Johnson**, this kind of personification makes abstract emotions concrete.

From the perspective of **literary sociology** (Swingewood, 1972), *Kokoro* expresses the **cultural tension between Japanese tradition and Western modernity**. The "strange clouds" can be interpreted as a **symbol of the character's internal dilemma** brought about by Westernization and the alienation of Japanese identity. The character **Sensei**, for instance, bears the burden of a modern identity that does not fully "fit," as well as the inner conflict between old and new values.

The analysis of figurative expressions in Kokoro by Natsume Sōseki reveals how personification functions not only as a stylistic device but also as a medium to externalize inner emotions and psychological states. Expressions such as "the heartbreaking wind," "the cold air biting the back," "the dazzling blue sky," and "strange clouds crossed his face" attribute human qualities to natural elements, thereby transforming external phenomena into mirrors of human feelings. This technique allows abstract emotions like sadness, anxiety, tension, or ambivalence to be rendered in tangible forms, which enhances the readers' ability to grasp the characters' inner struggles. From the perspective of cognitive stylistics, personification in these data points demonstrates how language bridges the gap between concrete experiences and abstract mental states.

From a sociocultural viewpoint, these instances of personification also reflect the cultural and historical context of Japan during the Meiji era, when Westernization and modernization created ideological conflict and emotional strain. The natural elements symbolically embody the sense of alienation, dislocation, and psychological burden felt by individuals as traditional values clashed with new cultural forces. Thus, the figurative language in Kokoro is not merely ornamental but functions as a cultural code, revealing the deep tensions between modernity and tradition. This underscores how literary works operate as both artistic and sociological documents, offering insights into the values, anxieties, and identity crises of the society in which they are produced.

4. Conclusion

Based on the data analysis above, four instances of personification were found in Kokoro by Natsume Sōseki, in which elements of nature are depicted as if they can move and are likened to human beings. These elements include wind, sky, fog, and cold air. Sōseki uses personification to beautify his writing and to build the reader's imagination, enabling them to visualize the atmosphere and emotions of the characters in the novel. Each figurative expression—such as "cold air biting the back," the sky "piercing" the eyes, clouds crossing the face, and shadows on Sensei's face—presents internal emotions as concrete physical experiences. In cognitive stylistics, this creates personification that animates natural phenomena as active agents, visually and sensorially emphasizing the characters' inner feelings.

From a sociocultural perspective, these expressions reveal the conflict between traditional Japanese values and Western modernity during the Meiji era. Physical sensations become metaphorical symbols of psychological alienation and fragmented identity, resulting from rapid Westernization and modernization, which triggered intergenerational tension and a shift in moral norms. Thus, the figurative language style in Kokoro not only enriches the reader's emotional experience, but also unveils the cultural conflict and inner turmoil of the characters as a representation of the social reality during Japan's transitional period toward modernity.

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