

## The Ambiguous “Ball”--The Multiple Narrative Functions and Meanings of the “Ball” in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*

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### Abstract

This study examines *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, a novella by Japanese-American author Karen Tei Yamashita, using corpus linguistic methods to explore the multifaceted functions and meanings of the “ball” in the novel through qualitative interpretation and quantitative analysis. The findings indicate that the “ball”, as a central motif, pervades the entire text with increasingly profound functions and symbolic significance. It functions not only as an external marker of Kazumasa Ishimaru's social identity but also as an extension of his psychological self and a testament to the development of his moral self. This multidimensional narrative role establishes the “ball” as a crucial link connecting personal growth with societal reflection. By analyzing this core motif with corpus methods, the study provides new insights into understanding the novel's narrative structure and thematic depth, thereby enhancing the interpretation of Yamashita's work and offering empirical support for methodological diversity in literary analysis.

**Key words:** *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*; Corpus; Ball; Kazumasa Ishimaru

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### INTRODUCTION

As globalization deepens and accelerates, cross-cultural and transregional themes have become increasingly prominent in contemporary literary works. Karen Tei Yamashita's novel *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* employs a unique magical realist narrative strategy to profoundly reveal the ecological crises, cultural conflicts, and human existential dilemmas faced by developing countries in the context of globalization, offering rich material for contemporary literary studies. Existing research has primarily developed along two trajectories: one is an ecocritical perspective (Caroline Rody, 2000, Jain, 2016, Long & Sun 2017, Gamber, 2018, Rose, 2019, Ren, 2022, etc.), focusing on environmental ethics and ecological consciousness in the work; the other engages postcolonial criticism (De Loughry, 2017; Larson, 2021, etc.), emphasizing issues of cultural hegemony and identity politics. In narratological studies, Caroline Rody (2000) introduced the innovative concept of a “first-person omniscient anonymous narrator,” contending that this fluid narrative voice reflects the author's pursuit of a global discourse, marking a groundbreaking departure from traditional narrative modes. Ling (2012), from the perspective of temporal narratology, examined the nonlinear arrangement of time sequences in the work and their real-world significance, observing that the author places readers in a futuristic perspective through the “ball's” time-space traversal, thus promoting an organic integration of individual reflection and global awareness. However, existing scholarship has predominantly concentrated on the work's overarching narrative strategies or single-theme interpretations, lacking systematic and in-depth analysis of the “ball” as a core narrative element. In fact, the use of the “ball” as an unnatural narrator not only enriches the narrative layers of the work but also carries multiple symbolic connotations, whose deeper roles in

narrative function, thematic expression, and cultural implications urgently require thorough investigation.

Current research paradigms on *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* primarily rely on qualitative interpretations based on personal reading experiences, with insufficient application of corpus linguistic methods for systematic empirical analysis of the text. Hu and Yang (2019) point out those corpus-based literary research paradigms, through systematic data collection and statistical analysis of linguistic features in literary texts, provide methodological support for in-depth exploration of textual characteristics, authorial style, and the interaction between literature and society. This research paradigm not only expands the dimensions of literary studies but, more importantly, drives a paradigm shift in literary research methodology from purely qualitative analysis to a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Given the complexity of literary texts, corpus retrieval tools can systematically process and statistically analyze elements such as theme construction, character development, and plot progression, extracting core linguistic features from vast textual data while conducting multidimensional interpretations in contextual semantics, thereby offering a new methodological perspective for literary textual research (Zhang 2009). The introduction of corpus methods not only provides an empirical foundation for traditional literary interpretation but also significantly enhances the objectivity and reliability of research findings (Zhao 2011). Therefore, this study constructs a textual corpus of *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (hereinafter referred to as *Through the Arc*), utilizing AntConc 4.2.4 retrieval software to comprehensively employ corpus methods such as frequency statistics, plot distribution analysis, collocation analysis, cluster analysis, and concordance analysis. By combining quantitative analysis with close reading, this study offers novel perspectives and empirical support for research on *Through the Arc*, further deepening the understanding of the novel's narrative structure, thematic depth, and artistic features.

In *The Principles of Psychology*, William James divides the self into three hierarchical levels: the material self, the social self, and the spiritual self, with each level building upon the previous one--the social self transcends the material self, and the spiritual self in turn surpasses the social self. Cao (2024) further proposes that the moral self represents the highest, most core, and most active dimension of the self-structure, manifesting as an individual's proactive engagement with the world through behavioral choices that reflect a value-oriented attitude and stance. Building upon this framework, this study explores the multiple functions and deeper implications of the "ball" as a core motif in the novel through three dimensions: its role in shaping protagonist Kazumasa Ishimaru's social self, facilitating the construction of his

spiritual self, and bearing witness to the establishment of his moral self.

## 1. "BALL" AND SOCIAL SELF: LABELING AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Frequency analysis reveals that proper names dominate the top 20 high-frequency nouns in the novel, including Kazumasa, Chico Paco, J.B. Tweep, Batista, Lourdes, Gilberto, Tania Aparecida, Mané Pena, Rubens, and Hiroshi. This distribution indicates that the narrative structure primarily revolves around core characters such as Kazumasa Ishimaru, Chico Paco, J.B. Tweep, and Batista Djapan. Particularly noteworthy is the protagonist Kazumasa, whose name appears 477 times in the text--a statistically significant frequency that provides quantitative justification for establishing our research focus. The term "ball," ranking as the 18th most frequent noun, demonstrates a strong correlation with the protagonist. This linguistic pattern reflects the author's distinctive artistic strategy in constructing character identity.

**Table 1**  
**Top 20 High-Frequency Nouns**

Rank	Category	Keyword (Noun)	Frequency
1	Proper name	kazumasa	477
2	Proper name	chico	358
3	Proper name	paco	319
4	Place/Material	matacão	371
5	Proper name	j+b	279+287
6	Proper name	tweep	52
7	Proper name	batista	257
8	Feather	feather+feathers	151+103=254
9	Pigeon	pigeon+pigeons	185+64=249
10	Proper name	lourdes	186
11	Proper name	gilberto	135
12	Company	ggg	119
13	Proper name	tania	133
14	Proper name	aparecida	113
15	Proper name	mané	224
16	Proper name	pena	114
17	Plastic	plastic	113
18	Ball	ball	106
19	Proper name	rubens	104
20	Proper name	hiroshi	79

In terms of research methodology, this paper draws on the theoretical framework of collocation analysis in linguistic branches proposed by Bill Louw (2007). Louw emphasizes the liberating role of collocation analysis in stylistics research, arguing that interpreting the implied

meanings of collocations can deeply analyze character traits. Based on this theoretical perspective, the present study examined the collocation patterns of high-frequency words.

The collocation analysis of the term “Kazumasa” revealed that, apart from noun collocations that reflect character relationships, “ball,” “I,” and “me” exhibited significant co-occurrence patterns with “Kazumasa.” This strong correlation not only highlights the close bond between “ball” and the protagonist Kazumasa but also indicates the author’s distinctive narrative technique in shaping the protagonist’s identity. This finding offers empirical support for a deeper exploration into the symbolic role of “ball” in character depiction, allowing us to transcend conventional subjective interpretations and uncover the text’s underlying structure from a linguistic standpoint. Consequently, this provides a more objective and systematic approach to literary analysis.

**Table 2**  
**Top 10 Words with the Highest Collocation Relevance to “Kazumasa”**

N	Collocate	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Likelihood	Effect
1	seu	24	23	1	79.420	3.660
2	lourdes	51	28	23	69.596	2.066
3	me	37	14	23	65.969	2.442
4	s	105	20	85	65.644	1.297
5	the	175	87	88	63.730	-0.770
6	i	69	13	56	53.950	1.480
7	nodded	17	5	12	33.291	2.594
8	ishimaru	11	3	8	28.976	3.145
9	ball	25	10	15	28.345	1.849
10	hiroshi	20	7	13	24.775	1.951

On the other hand, a collocational statistical analysis of the word “ball” revealed a high correlation with “Japanese” (relevance score: 75.470) and “Kazumasa” (relevance score: 28.345). This finding has significant implications: First, from a cultural identity perspective, the strong correlation between “ball” and “Japanese” indicates the “ball” serves as a cultural symbol. Second, the close association between “ball” and “Kazumasa” further supports the central role of the “ball” in shaping the protagonist’s identity. From the perspective of postmodern narrative theory, this intimate connection between an unnatural narrator and the human subject reflects the author’s innovative exploration beyond traditional narrative structures, creating a polysemous symbolic system. This discovery also aligns with Alber’s (2016) theoretical perspective on narrator identity construction within unnatural narratology.

From a narrative perspective, the “ball’s” recollection of memories commences with an apparently trivial event--the fragment striking protagonist Kazumasa’s forehead--

--transforming into a pivotal moment that changes his fate. The mysterious “ball’s” emergence upon awakening acts as a nexus between reality and fantasy, signaling the start of an unconventional narrative style. The “ball” consistently hovers a few inches from Kazumasa’s forehead, maintaining a spatial relationship that secures its role as an observational narrator. In terms of its narrative function, the “ball” displays a distinctive autonomy: it can rotate like a satellite and simultaneously move with the protagonist, a dual mobility that makes it a conduit linking the subjective and objective worlds. To others, the “ball’s” opacity and visibility affirm its tangible presence, while its enigmatic self-sustenance--needing no maintenance or energy supply--suggests its surreal essence.

As the most conspicuous feature of Kazumasa’s external appearance, the “ball” distinguishes him in a crowd while simultaneously erecting an invisible barrier. The novel repeatedly depicts the subtle discomfort of others interacting with him: “Although people tried to ignore the ‘ball’ hovering just inches from his face, most still found it difficult to look Kazumasa directly in the eye, as if the ‘ball’ had become an uninvited guest, or even an additional, unsettling gaze” (Yamashita, 1990: 6). This description reveals the dual function of the “ball” as an “othering” symbol: on one hand, it makes Kazumasa a focal point of social attention; on the other, it ostracizes him from mainstream social circles, rendering him an anomalous presence.

In railway maintenance, the “ball” exhibits a keen sensitivity to track wear, allowing Kazumasa to identify rail degradation and prevent potential disasters. Consequently, he is an essential safeguard in Japan’s railway system. The “ball” bestows upon Kazumasa a superhuman skill, conferring unique social status and respect, and endowing him with significant societal value. Nevertheless, this defined social role diminishes Kazumasa to a mere instrument, his worth reduced to the “ball’s” functionality. With technological advancements, the “ball’s” role is being replaced by electronic devices, leading to a decline in Kazumasa’s social status. This suggests society’s utilitarian assessment of individual worth.

Beyond analyzing single-word collocations, studying multi-word clusters can yield richer contextual information, revealing more complex semantic relationships and offering a more accurate understanding of textual meaning. In a systematic analysis of three-word clusters involving “ball,” a highly illuminating linguistic phenomenon emerges: the cluster “with the ball” ranks first with a high frequency of 13 occurrences. More notably, in 12 of these 13 instances, it forms a stable collocation with “Japanese,” resulting in the specific phrase “Japanese with the ball,” which exclusively refers to the protagonist Kazumasa Ishimaru. This highly stable collocational pattern is not only statistically significant but

also rich in narrative strategy and cultural connotations.

The phrase “Japanese with the ball” encapsulates the dialectical unity of cultural identity and alterity: “Japanese” underscores Kazumasa’s cultural affiliation, while “with the ball” signifies his exceptional status. This linguistic pairing succinctly captures Kazumasa’s dual identity markers and, within a postcolonial framework, exposes the complex interplay between cultural identity and alterity. From a semiotic viewpoint, this designation serves as both a direct description of the subject’s characteristics and a symbolic construct with significant socio-cultural connotations. The signifier “Japanese,” embodying cultural identity, merges with “with the ball,” a marker of extraordinary attributes, to create a symbolically charged unity. This distinctive mode of address not only aids in social recognition but, crucially, uncovers the complexity of subject identity within cross-cultural contexts. In the realm of postmodern narrative theory, the phrase “Japanese with the ball” reflects the multiplicity and fragmentation of subject identity. It positions Kazumasa as both a cultural subject from abroad and a disruptor of traditional cultural boundaries through the inclusion of supernatural elements. The use of this appellation not only reflects society’s scrutiny of unusual existences but also alludes to the intricate tensions experienced by cross-cultural subjects in constructing their identities.

To thoroughly examine the textual deployment of “Japanese with the ball,” this study conducted a systematic analysis of its contextual usage through concordance line examination. The retrieval results of concordance lines for “Japanese with the ball” reveal that this phrase is frequently employed in the text, primarily describing how others refer to or search for Kazumasa, becoming a key narrative term that propels plot development, especially in scenarios involving Kazumasa’s disappearance or being sought after. For instance:

Concordance 2: He had found Lourdes working at Radio Chico, but he did not want to confirm her worries. He knew that from time to time, Chico Paco asked the faithful over the radio if anyone had seen the Japanese with the ball.

Concordance 4: We will be happy to exchange these precious children for the Japanese with the ball.

Concordance 10: Lourdes contacted Hiroshi as soon as she heard anything, but “the Japanese with the ball” that someone had seen in some remote backwoods town was usually one of those persons who had become attached to one of those imitation satellite headbands or some other such visual mistake.

Concordance 12: WHERE IS THE JAPANESE WITH THE BALL?

Additionally, similar phrases like “Japanese with a ball” or “a man with a ball” appear in the text, collectively forming key terms that describe Kazumasa’s distinctive image. For instance, the novel poses the question: “How

do you make Japanese with a ball invisible?” (Yamashita, 1990, p.179). These expressions not only reinforce the “ball” as the most prominent marker of Kazumasa’s external identity, making him easily recognizable in crowds, but also reveal society’s tendency to define individuals by their most conspicuous external features rather than their intrinsic qualities or achievements. This inclination reflects a reductive and stereotypical perception of the “other,” rendering the “ball” an indispensable part of Kazumasa’s identity—so much so that without it, he seems to lose his basis for recognition. On one hand, “Japanese with the ball” brings Kazumasa fame and public attention; on the other, this label somewhat strips him of his individuality, transforming him into a symbolic entity. This process of symbolization diminishes Kazumasa’s complexity as an independent individual, reducing his image to an “other” with peculiar traits. Within the Brazilian cultural context, this English phrase also underscores linguistic and cultural barriers, further reinforcing Kazumasa’s identity as a foreigner and “outsider.” The use of this language not only highlights Kazumasa’s cultural otherness but also adds an aura of mystery and allure to his image, making him an object of public fascination.

From sociological and communication perspectives, the widespread circulation of the label “Japanese with the ball” reveals how tagging shapes an individual’s social identity. Kazumasa gradually becomes defined by this label, illustrating how personal identity is molded, constrained, and even alienated by externally imposed tags in social contexts. The dissemination of this label also demonstrates the powerful role of media and word-of-mouth in shaping public perception. Through mediums like radio, the phrase “Japanese with the ball” rapidly proliferates across society, potentially undergoing distortion and reinvention during transmission. This phenomenon sheds light on how information dissemination influences public cognition of individuals while also reflecting the complexity of identity construction in society.

This narrative mode, marked by its use of tags, also prompts contemplation on the effects of linguistic and cultural barriers on personal identity. As a Japanese immigrant, Kazumasa’s identity is already situated at the confluence of various cultures, and the introduction of the “ball” amplifies the diversity of his identity. This diversity places him at the core of the narrative, while also revealing the intricacies and paradoxes inherent in individual identity within cross-cultural settings. By employing the term “Japanese with the ball” in multiple contexts, the novel not only illustrates how personal identity is socially constructed but also delivers a deep critique of the ways in which language, culture, and social cognition mold and restrict individual identity.

From a narratological perspective, the phrase “Japanese with the ball” experiences a significant semantic evolution



within the text. Initially, it functions as a simple descriptor for Kazumasa, but it progressively evolves into the central identifier of his being, ultimately undergoing a profound semiotic transformation with the vanishing of the “ball.” This evolution not only mirrors the dynamism inherent in the construction of subject identity but also uncovers the complex interplay between signs and the formation of identity.

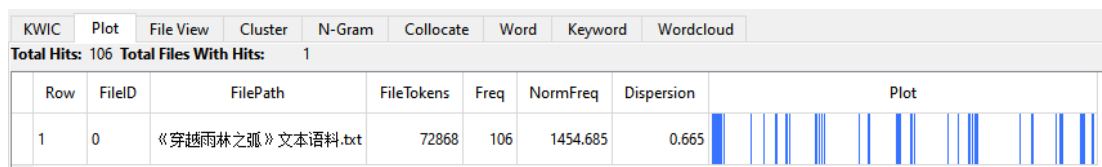
Particularly noteworthy is the pivotal description at the novel’s conclusion: “The loss of the ball to Kazumasa was strange, as if he had undergone radical plastic surgery. People no longer recognized him; even Hiroshi was taken aback by the enormous change.” (Yamashita, 1990: 211). From a postmodern identity theory perspective, this passage profoundly underscores the significance of the “ball” as an identity marker. The disappearance of the “ball” is not merely a physical alteration but a fundamental identity reconstruction. The rhetorical comparison to “plastic surgery” suggests a deep reliance on visual symbols for identity recognition while also reflecting the superficiality and limitations of societal identification. The “ball’s” presence transforms Kazumasa

into an instantly recognizable symbolic vessel, a visual identity marker that not only enhances the uniqueness of his image but also provides crucial visual cues for the narrative structure.

The “ball” is not only an externalized symbol of Kazumasa’s identity but also a manifestation of the tension between society and the individual. Through its presence and absence, the novel explores how individuals navigate the process of social labeling to discover their authentic selves, as well as how individuals are recognized, defined, and understood within social contexts.

## 2. “BALL” AND SPIRITUAL SELF: LONELINESS, DEPENDENCE, AND REFLECTION

AntConc’s plot distribution reveals that “ball” appears consistently throughout all sections of the novel (see Figure 1), demonstrating its role not just as a core element of narrative framework but also as a catalyst for plot development.



**Figure 1**  
Plot Distribution of “ball”

Within the novel’s narrative structure, the author employs the innovative strategy of casting the “ball” as a first-person narrator. This unconventional narrative perspective not only chronicles the historical transformations of Matacão but also profoundly depicts the vicissitudes of the main characters’ fates, providing a unique entry point for textual interpretation.

Building on this narrative feature, this study specifically examines the usage patterns of pronouns in the text and their deep semantic references, conducting a systematic corpus-based analysis of high-frequency pronouns. The high-frequency word retrieval results show the following primary pronouns and their occurrence frequencies: “he” (822), “his” (767), “her” (323), “you” (321), “she” (266), “their” (266), “they” (220), “him” (196), “we” (146), “me” (104), “himself” (98), and “my” (94). From a linguistic statistical perspective, “he” dominates the pronoun system with the highest frequency of 822 occurrences. To further explore the narrative function and semantic associations of “he,” this paper examines and analyzes the collocations of “he” (as shown in Table 3).

**Table 3**  
Top 10 Words with Highest Collocation Relevance to “He”

N	Collocate	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Likelihood	Effect
1	wanted	32	9	23	71.026	2.791
2	his	166	87	79	58.994	0.940
3	was	191	67	124	45.998	0.758
4	himself	40	11	29	65.644	1.297
5	did	44	13	31	42.174	1.665
6	the	381	172	209	40.636	-0.432
7	thought	36	11	25	40.283	1.826
8	knew	24	7	17	38.462	2.274
9	felt	28	12	16	37.878	2.049
10	had	150	23	127	37.807	0.779

In the novel, the frequent use of the pronoun “he” alongside psychological verbs such as “wanted” and “thought” highlights the narrator ball’s intense focus on the protagonist Kazumasa’s mental processes. This linguistic pattern originates from the novel’s unique narrative perspective, which uses “ball” as a first-person

narrator. As a mysterious entity hovering near Kazumasa's forehead, "ball" is inextricably linked to him, able to observe and describe Kazumasa's behaviors, emotions, and thoughts from the closest vantage point. This omniscient perspective not only allows "ball" to delve into Kazumasa's inner world but also elevates it above conventional narrators to a supernatural, all-knowing entity. As illustrated in the novel: "...When Kazumasa and I came to live in Brazil, he didn't realize how this simple pastime of gazing at the apartment scenes below would affect his future. These things I knew through simple insight." (Yamashita, 1990, p.15) This excerpt vividly showcases ball's unique narrative technique, which combines omniscience with first-person narration, adding depth and interpretive layers to the story.

In the three-word cluster analysis of "Kazumasa", the phrases "Kazumasa and I" and "Kazumasa and me" emerge as significant collocational patterns with high frequencies of 36 and 12 occurrences respectively. Here, "I" and "me" refer to the narrator "ball", indicating an intense narrative connection between the "ball" and protagonist Kazumasa. Their frequent co-occurrence in the text, along with shared events or emotional states occupying crucial narrative positions, reveals from a narratological perspective their profound relationship: not only do they share key experiences and emotional journeys, but they also jointly construct the novel's narrative framework through dual perspectives. This narrative strategy blurs boundaries between narrator and subject, transforming the "ball" from mere witness into an extension and projection of Kazumasa's inner world.

Verbs frequently co-occurring with "Kazumasa and I" include "were", "walked", "forward" and "nodded". These collocations demonstrate the synchronicity and symbiotic relationship between narrator "ball" and Kazumasa in narrative space--they share not just physical movements ("walking", "moving forward") but even micro-gestures ("nodding"). Their relationship transcends conventional narrator-subject dynamics, forming a profound symbiosis where the "ball" serves simultaneously as witness, chronicler and participant in Kazumasa's experiences.

In the early stages of the story, the "ball" serves as Kazumasa's only companion in his isolated life, offering emotional solace. It alleviates his anxiety during mechanical routines, yet paradoxically, it also creates psychological barriers that isolate him socially--especially in heterosexual interactions, where it intensifies his loneliness, making him conspicuously eccentric. This duality establishes the ball's dual identity as both an emotional anchor and a social barrier.

As Kazumasa matures, the ball's role shifts from private emotional object to public symbol of ability. Its acute sensitivity to rail conditions becomes Kazumasa's professional asset, granting him irreplaceable status in the railway system while externalizing his social

value. This functional transition from private to public spheres transforms the "ball" into Kazumasa's identity marker while serving as a bridge for social interaction, symbolizing his evolution from isolated individual to socialized role.

Upon arriving at Matacão, the "ball" exhibits mysterious reactions to local plastics, entangling Kazumasa in capitalist struggles. Here, the "ball" becomes both a coveted object and the core of Kazumasa's identity conflict--he is simultaneously its master and a victim of the social exclusion it generates. As the "ball" decays and disappears, Kazumasa is forced to re-examine his sense of self and the meaning of life, reducing his dependency while awakening his inner strength. Its disappearance marks his spiritual turning point from external reliance to internal awakening.

Notably, the "ball"'s plastic nature not only propels the plot but metaphorizes modern society's dependency on and reflection about plastics and natural resources. Matacão plastics symbolize technological progress while exposing unsustainable resource exploitation.

Sanchez (2009) suggests that to comprehend the "ball"-Kazumasa relationship, one must consider whether the "ball" is perceived as a representation of Earth or merely as plastic. Their dynamic reflects humanity's ambivalent reliance on nature. In an interview, Karen Yamashita mentioned that while writing "Through the Arc of the Rain Forest," she initially developed characters and plot before envisioning the "ball" as an Earth-like connector (Brada-Williams, 2010). As Long and Sun (2017) point out, Yamashita sheds light on human-nature relationships and interpersonal dynamics, offering contemplations on environmental crises and contemporary ecological values that encourage readers to care for "Others" (including marginalized humans and non-human nature), recognizing nature as a shared home for all life forms. The "ball" embodies loneliness and dependency; its connection with Kazumasa and its entanglement with Matacão plastics interweave the novel's ecological themes. Through this distinctive perspective, Yamashita reveals modern society's extreme reliance on resources and the environmental repercussions. The eventual vanishing of both the "ball" and Matacão plastics suggests the unsustainability of overconsumption, leaving profound reflections.

The traumas and transformations shared by Kazumasa and the "ball" ultimately complete his spiritual self-construction. Transitioning from initial dependency to forming deep bonds with the maid Lourdes, Kazumasa breaks free from isolation and marginalization, moving towards authentic, meaningful living. As the "ball" deteriorates, he learns to exist autonomously--this separation symbolizes both growth and reconciliation with the past. The novel's conclusion shows the "ball"'s departure marking the end of a life stage while opening new possibilities for spiritual awakening.

From loneliness and emotional dependency to professional empowerment, from identity conflict to ecological metaphor, the “ball” manifests agency and symbolism across multiple levels. Through its plastic nature and eventual disappearance, the novel reveals complex journeys of individual growth and spiritual awakening while offering profound critiques of modern resource dependency and ecological crises.

### 3. “BALL” AND MORAL SELF: GROWTH AND TRANSFORMATION

In the novel, the function and symbolic significance of the “ball” gradually unfold with the progression of the plot, becoming a central narrative thread throughout the text. As an unnatural narrator, the “ball” not only drives the development of the plot but also reveals, across multiple dimensions, the protagonist Kazumasa’s journey of growth and the establishment of his moral self. Through the “ball,” the novel intertwines personal destiny, social responsibility, and environmental crises, constructing a complex and profound narrative system.

Beyond the explicit plotline, the novel employs implicit narrative to depict Kazumasa’s internal growth and transformation. As Shen (2022: 52) observes, “Implicit progression is highly concealed and indirect, often composed of seemingly trivial or digressive details.” The descriptions of Kazumasa’s psychological activities, though appearing unrelated to the main plot, form a crucial part of this implicit progression. The core imagery of the “ball” permeates Kazumasa’s entire developmental arc--transitioning from an object of private emotional attachment to a symbol of socialized ability, and ultimately to a metaphor for ecological crisis. The “ball” not only shapes Kazumasa’s social role and spiritual world but also serves as a testing ground for his moral choices.

Kazumasa’s journey is marked by both external exploration and internal awakening. Initially, he fled Japan to escape the monotony of life, but over time, his experiences in Brazil taught him empathy and understanding, leading to a significant transformation in his psychological state. Through the “ball,” Kazumasa transitions from a detached observer to an active participant. His interactions with Lourdes and Chico Paco teach him to care for others. When he unexpectedly acquires great wealth, he decides to dedicate it to philanthropy, aiding those in dire straits. This act showcases his selflessness and social responsibility, even though he knows his generosity could be taken advantage of. More importantly, Kazumasa realizes that material aid alone cannot address systemic social problems. As Chapter 10 articulates: “He recognized that his role as a distributor of funds was limited by both imagination and reality...the joy of fulfilling any wish proved as fleeting as the wish itself.” (Yamashita, 1990: 148) This blend of

introspection and action signifies his evolution from a mere distributor of wealth to an activist with a systemic perspective, embodying the shift in his values from self-interest to social responsibility.

As a supernatural entity, the “ball” triggers Kazumasa’s moral awakening. It bestows upon him heightened perception and unique opportunities, while instilling in him the understanding that abilities carry responsibilities. The ball’s influence motivates his repeated decisions to undertake rescues. Upon discovering its potential link to Matacão’s ecological crisis, he feels a deep moral obligation, even risking danger to “return” or “investigate.” This spirit of sacrifice and sense of duty reflect a higher moral commitment. At the climax, Kazumasa willingly surrenders himself and the “ball” to kidnappers to save Lourdes’ children, demonstrating the utmost regard for others’ lives and marking his transition from being “ball”--dependent to a morally autonomous individual.

Ultimately, Kazumasa’s growth represents not only a personal awakening but also a transition from observation to action. His journey, from passively accepting fate to actively engaging with society and nature, reveals the complexity and multidimensional development of humanity. Each experience, ranging from adventures marred by greed and deceit to witnessing ecological devastation, acts as a prism that refracts the light and shadow within humanity. Emerging from isolation, he becomes socially responsible and environmentally conscious. His profound affection and sense of duty towards Lourdes imbue the novel with a warm humanity. This emotional and ethical leap underscores how the “ball” serves as the critical nexus for Kazumasa’s growth and moral self-actualization.

### 4. CONCLUSION

Through the integration of quantitative analysis and qualitative interpretation, this study reveals that the “ball” embodies multidimensional roles as a narrator, a character, and a focalizer, performing three primary narrative functions: the telling function, the acting function, and the observing function.

As a narrator, the “ball” constructs a storyworld filled with wonder and mystery through its unique perspective. As an actor, it directly propels plot development--or instance, its sensitivity to Matacão plastics entangles the protagonist in capitalist resource conflicts. As an observer, it witnesses Kazumasa’s psychological transformation and growth, becoming both mirror and externalization of his inner world. Through these interwoven functions, the “ball” not only shapes Kazumasa as a complex, multifaceted round character across three dimensions--social self, spiritual self, and moral self--but also deepens the novel’s narrative structure and thematic expression.

At the social self-level, the label “Japanese with the ball” bestows upon Kazumasa a unique social recognition, while also revealing the complexities and contradictions inherent in constructing identity within cross-cultural contexts. This labeling process amplifies the protagonist’s social visibility, yet it simultaneously restricts the full expression of his individuality. On the spiritual self-level, the “ball” acts as an emotional anchor during Kazumasa’s moments of solitude and as a catalyst for his maturation. Transitioning from a private talisman to a public symbol of ability, it traces his psychological journey from isolation to autonomy. As the “ball” decays and eventually vanishes, Kazumasa overcomes his reliance on external forces, achieving an awakening to his intrinsic worth. This process not only illustrates the intricacy of individual development but also serves as an allegory for modern society’s reckoning with resource dependency. At the moral self-level, through the “ball’s” existence, deterioration, and eventual demise, Kazumasa completes his transformation from a passive acceptor of social roles to a spiritually independent seeker and ultimately to a bearer of ethical responsibility. His developmental trajectory mirrors the reconstruction of personal values and the deepening of social accountability. This interplay between personal growth and societal critique allows the novel to explore social issues while offering profound insights into humanity and obligation. The novel ultimately builds a multilayered narrative structure where the ball’s versatility—as a narrative agent, character construct, and ecological metaphor—enables rich thematic exploration. Through this symbolic core, Yamashita illuminates the dialectics between the individual and the environment, the local and the global, ultimately presenting contemporary readers with an imaginative yet urgent ethical inquiry into sustainable coexistence.

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