

Ijime as an Organised Crime: Foucauldian Reading of Mieko Kawakami's *Heaven*

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Abstract: Bullying, known in Japan as *ijime*, is a serious and widespread problem in Japanese high schools. Unlike simple fights or one-on-one teasing, *ijime* often involves whole groups turning against one person, with teachers and adults frequently staying silent or looking away. Despite decades of policy interventions and student protests, *ijime* persists as a structurally embedded phenomenon. Mieko Kawakami's 2009 novel *Heaven* tells the story of a 14-year-old boy nicknamed "Eyes," who is brutally and constantly bullied because of his lazy eye, and his friendship with another bullied girl, Kojima. The book not only explains why the bullying happens; instead, it shows how normal it has become for everyone around them. Violence becomes difficult to resist or even identify. While the existing scholarship has examined *Heaven* through the lens of power relations among characters, trauma, or gender, no study has yet explored how the author uses the elements of crime fiction, like unreliable narrative, suspense, and detailed description of violence, etc., to show that bullying is kind of an organised crime that the school system allows to continue and does not take any action. The study will employ close reading of the text and will compare *Heaven* to older Japanese crime writers like Edogawa Ranpo to show how Kawakami updates the genre. The paper will also employ a Foucauldian framework to show that *ijime* is not just personal cruelty, but part of a system that controls and judges people. *Heaven* shows how victims begin to see themselves through others' eyes, leading to self-monitoring, shame, and sometimes a wish to disappear rather than fight back.

Keywords: Meiko Kawakami, Japanese literature, Foucault, crime fiction

Introduction

Bullying is typically defined as repeated aggressive behavior carried out by an individual or group, intended to cause injury or discomfort, and marked by intentionality, repetitiveness, and a power imbalance. In Japanese, the counterpart for bullying is the term *ijime*, which is loosely translated to mean treating someone badly, teasing, being cruel, or annoying. It is a serious and widespread problem in Japanese secondary schools. Unlike an isolated fight or a single act of teasing, *ijime* typically involves a group turning against one person over a sustained period, with teachers and other adults frequently staying silent or looking away. Despite decades of policy intervention and student activism, *ijime* persists as a structurally embedded phenomenon rather than an aberration. Mieko Kawakami's 2009 novel *Heaven* follows a fourteen-year-old narrator nicknamed "Eyes," who is relentlessly tormented by a group of classmates led by Ninomiya and Momose, and who forms a fragile alliance with another ostracized student, Kojima. While some scholarship has focused on the power relations among characters in the novel, there has been no research done on how the novel can be read through the conventions of crime fiction, or on what it means that Kawakami stages *ijime* with the internal hierarchy, code of silence, and extortive logic of an organised criminal enterprise. This paper argues that Kawakami borrows the formal machinery of crime writing restrictive narration, escalating suspense, and unflinching depictions of violence to expose *ijime* as something closer to organised crime than ordinary cruelty. The paper will also analyse the novel through a Foucauldian lens.

Methodology

This paper combines close textual analysis with a comparative and theoretical framework. The primary method is close reading of the text. This close reading is placed in comparative dialogue with the conventions of Japanese crime fiction, particularly the work of Edogawa Ranpo, to identify which formal techniques Kawakami retains from the genre and which she deliberately withholds. Finally, the paper applies Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary power.

Ijime as Structured, Not Spontaneous, Violence

Kawakami is careful to distinguish the violence in *Heaven* from spontaneous or purely emotional cruelty. From the beginning of the novel itself, the abuse directed at Eyes is patterned and routine: Ninomiya and the other boys make him carry their bags, kick him "like it was nothing," strike him on the head with their recorders, and send him running errands on command (Kawakami 7). It escalates when Ninomiya orders Eyes to push a stick of chalk up his nose and draw something "hilarious" on the blackboard, purely so the group can watch him humiliate himself for their entertainment (Kawakami 11). Kojima suffers from a similar kind of violence. Eyes witness the group kick her exactly as they had once kicked him, then dunk her head into the classroom fish tank under the mocking announcement that it is "bath time" (Kawakami 16). The near-identical treatment of both victims indicates a system with its own logic and momentum, not a series of disconnected incidents.

Kawakami in the novel also addresses the classroom as a whole involved in this crime. In one of the novel's most devastating passages, the narrator observes that nothing ever really changes among his classmates: the same uniforms, the same posture, the same tone of voice on the same topics, until the individual voices in the room seem to melt into a single, undifferentiated "voice of the class" (Kawakami 62). It shows how there are no more individual people, just the class as a whole and one voice.

This passage highlights the power of "sameness". Nobody must give up any power, and the person who is seen differently is erased. The novel's account of bystanders makes the cost of that conformity explicit: classmates who witness the abuse and do nothing are, in the narrator's own reckoning, "no different" from the perpetrators, since their kindness toward the powerful and silence toward the victimized exist only to ensure the violence never turns on them (Kawakami 83). A paper on criminological framing is useful here: they treat bullying not as an ambiguous cultural mood, but as a tort with assignable responsibility, a vocabulary Kawakami's narrator seems to reach for instinctively when he refuses to let the bystanders' passivity read as innocence. (Sobko 228)

Crime Fiction Techniques, Silencing, and the Legacy of Edogawa Ranpo

Kawakami's *Heaven* more closely aligns with the genre of crime fiction than with a conventional coming-of-age narrative. The novel is narrated in the first person by Eyes, and his limited understanding of his own situation makes him an unreliable narrator. "Eyes", the narrator, is never given an actual name; he is denied the basic narrative marker of a fully recognized subject, and a narrator who cannot even name himself is poorly positioned to interpret his own story with authority. (Rakhmawati and Sudarmaji 58) The focus of the novel is not on "who did it," since the perpetrators of the crime are named from the outset, but it questions "how far will this go, and will anyone intervene." Eyes also registers a news report about a student who killed himself because of bullying and imagines classmates speculating that the boy brought it on himself, or that his abuse was merely "harmless" (Kawakami 47, 94). This news item functions like evidence smuggled into a crime narrative, a reminder of the maximum possible outcome that recontextualizes everything already witnessed happening to Eyes and Kojima and confirms that this violence belongs to a recognizable social pattern rather than to any one classroom.

The work of Edogawa Ranpo, whose stories combined a restrained, matter-of-fact narrative voice with scenes of grotesque violence, is a mode critics have described as ero-guro-nonsense. Ranpo's fiction shows his obsession with the body as something deformed, hidden, or transformed, like "The Human Chair" or "The Caterpillar," where physical abnormality becomes the entire engine of the narrative, simultaneously horrifying and strangely intimate. *Heaven* has something structurally similar in the narrator's lazy eye, and Kojima's unwashed, marked body aren't incidental details; they're the organizing obsession of the text. Ranpo's fiction often positions the reader as a kind of voyeur, made complicit in cruelty through the act of reading closely and continuing to turn the pages. There is no detective, no locked room, and no revelation of a hidden culprit, because the "crime" she is interested in is not a mystery to be solved but a structure that needs to be recognised. When Eyes attempts something like detective work, confronting one of the bullies directly late in the novel, the confrontation yields not confession but only the bully's blank justification: that they are children, and "nothing is a crime" at their age (Kawakami 100, 104). The suspense in *Heaven* does not resolve with the unmasking or punishment of a culprit; it resolves, if at all, only with the narrator's own decision to have his eye surgically corrected near the novel's end. Rather than altering the system that tormented him, he wants to alter himself. This is a crime novel with no confession and no closure.

Ijime as Organised Crime

Individuals who perpetrate bullying often develop externalizing problems, including anti-social behaviour, criminality, and drug use. This suggests a pathway from early aggressive behaviour to more serious offenses. (Borgen et al. 1148) The concept of

organised crime is useful here not as a loose metaphor but as a structural description with specific features, several of which *Heaven* reproduces with precision. Momose's role in the novel is less of an emotionally motivated bully than something closer to a syndicate boss, a person who gives orders and people carry them out for them so that they do not get their hands dirty. His blunt dismissal of any need for justification that they are "kids" and nothing they do counts as a crime "at this age" (Kawakami 104) functions structurally like the ideological cover a criminal organisation offers its members: a shared rationale that displaces individual responsibility onto an abstract, unaccountable logic. Momose is not written as a psychologically damaged individual lashing out, but as someone who has accepted a coherent story in which domination secures status and cruelty as an authored, chosen identity rather than a symptom. (Jacobson 256)

Among the perpetrators, no member breaks ranks to report or halt the abuse, even when individual boys appear uneasy with its intensity. Among adults too, silence functions similarly. The novel does not indicate that any teacher notices, records, or investigates a pattern spanning years and multiple victims. The discourse analysis of real secondary-school teachers offers a plausible account of how such silence is sustained without any single adult consciously choosing to look away: her interviews found that teachers routinely normalize their own inaction, constructing bullying as an inevitable feature of adolescent life or as a problem located within pupils' personalities rather than the school's structure. (Hepburn 37) Kojima, though a fellow victim, initially resists escalating the situation to adults, developing instead a private philosophy in which enduring abuse without resistance becomes a form of moral integrity, a refusal that, however sympathetically rendered, functions within the novel's logic as another form of silence that permits the system to continue. Viewed through a legal-tort framework, bullying encompasses acts that, stripped of the euphemism "bullying," would be recognised elsewhere as assault or sexual offences. (Sobko 242) Kojima's response was to undress herself rather than allowing Eyes to be forced into performing the act on her, reclaiming a sliver of agency inside a scene otherwise defined by coercion. It shows how the victim is made to enact violence against another victim.

A Foucauldian Reading of the Text

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* offers a vocabulary for understanding why the school, an institution organised around order and moral formation, becomes the site where this criminal structure flourishes rather than the site where it is suppressed. Foucault argues that modern institutions like the prison, the school, and the barracks do not primarily control individuals through direct, visible force but through continuous surveillance that trains individuals to monitor and discipline themselves, a mechanism he models on Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon (Foucault 195-200). The model is effective as it remains invisible to its subjects. People get used to being watched so completely that no watcher is needed at all, and they end up enforcing rules on themselves. (Foucault 202-203).

This theory can be used to analyse *Heaven*. When Eyes is finally allowed to leave a scene of humiliation, one of his tormentors calls after him not to let anyone see him crying "on his way out," a demand that he manages the visible evidence of his own suffering for an audience beyond his attackers (Kawakami 76). Reading through Foucault, the instruction barely needs to be given more than once: Eyes has already learned to regulate his posture, his way through the school, and his facial expressions in case he is being watched by someone, which is self-surveillance in the fullest Foucauldian sense. Bullies no longer must be present there to scare him because the

fear of their eyes is enough for him to behave. Another instance is when Momose refuses to give the narrator any reason for the abuse, which shows that there is no grudge or motive. Bullying in the novel functions more like an enforcement of hierarchy of who is normal. Kojima's private philosophy of chosen endurance can be understood, in this light, as the most complete form of internalisation: a victim so thoroughly excluded from the group's moral community that she reconstructs her own exclusion as a freely chosen ethical stance. Eye's decision to get surgery late in the novel also highlights an important point. Rather than resisting it, he wants to alter his own body to fit in. This is the disciplinary system operating exactly as Foucault describes: power does not need to compel compliance directly once the subject has learned to compel it from himself. The norm itself is left completely intact; only the individual changes to fit it. Naseem's critique of Foucauldian bullying scholarship is useful here as she observes that most such analyses remain theoretical and offer schools little practical purchase on the problem, and *Heaven* fits this pattern. It shows how schools fail to notice this violence. (Naseem 90) The teacher's failure to intervene is not just a simple moral lapse, and Hepburn's interviews with real teachers suggest it is not even a conscious one. It is instead a reflection on the school system that cares more about keeping things orderly on the surface than about students' well-being.

Conclusion

Heaven does not offer a conventional crime narrative's satisfactions: there is no detective, no confession, no restoration of order at the novel's close. This absence is the source of its argument. By borrowing the formal techniques of crime fiction while withholding the genre's customary resolution, Kawakami insists that *ijime* cannot be understood as an isolated criminal act to be solved and punished. It must instead be understood as an organised, self-protecting structure, complete with its own hierarchy, code of silence, and extractive relationship to its victims, sustained by an institution whose disciplinary logic trains everyone within it, victims and bystanders alike, to police themselves rather than intervene. Reading through Foucault and the wider body of scholarship this paper has drawn together, the novel's bleakest insight is that the school's ordinary operations of discipline and surveillance are not opposed to this organised cruelty but are its precondition. *Heaven* ultimately stands as a form of youth testimony: a narrative that refuses to resolve the violence it depicts precisely because, in the world the novel describes, that violence has not been resolved either.

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