

PORTRAYING THE *WABI SABI* PHILOSOPHY OF BEAUTY IN KAWABATA'S *SNOW COUNTRY*

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Abstract

Snow country depicts beauty of nature, people, and love through the characters and the situation with the elements of sincerity, purity, calmness and condusiveness. Beauty itself is one of the major themes in this novel. However, Kawabata has his own perception of the beauty that is different with common perception of beauty. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the pductinosophy of beauty in Kawabata's *Snow Country*. These beauty were analyzed through philosophical point of beauty by Kant and Japanese aesthetic philosophy *wabi sabi*. In fact, the writer found that almost all of beauties in snow country included the sad element, such as a loneliness in a beauty of nature, sadness in a beautiful voice and a waste effort in a beauty of love. The beauty of unusual, imperfect (*Wabi Sabi*) was found in the way Kawabata depicted the beauty of the women in this novel; Komako and Yoko.

Keywords: Philosophy, Beauty, *Wabi Sabi*, Snow Country

A. Introduction

Yasunari Kawabata, one of Japan's greatest novelists, got Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968. *Snow Country*, one of his excellent novels, is about the love affair of a country geisha with a Tokyo gentleman. Yasunari Kawabata began writing this novel in 1934 and he published it in 1956. He took 22 years to present *Snow Country* to the world.

Snow country depicts beauty of nature, people, and love through the characters, the situation with the elements of sincerity, purity, calmness and condusiveness. Beauty itself is one of the major themes in this novel. Beauty, then, is many things or nothing. It is itself

a multiplicity, a rhizome (Barret, 2000). Beauty has many and different meanings when it intersects with other elements in the novel.

One kind of the beauty explored in *Snow Country* is the beauty of nature. The novel describes snow country in three different seasons for Shimamura's three visits; in chronological order: spring, winter, and autumn. A great deal of attention is paid to all the sense descriptions, from the rust color of grasses on the mountains to the cries of insects.

Another beauty that can be found in this novel is the beauty of people that are represented by Japanese geisha, Komako and Yoko. Their beauties are one of

Shimamura's attractions in visiting the snow country though it is an isolated place that can only be reached by using train. Their beauties are not only described physically but also through other characteristics such as cleanliness, voice, purity, and warm character.

The beauty of love is also shown in this novel through Shimamura love affairs with Komako and Yoko, and Yoko's love to Yukio. The love shown by Komako to Shimamura tells the readers more than an affair between man and a geisha. However, this novel is not simply talking about love affair between Shimamura and Komako. The elements of snow country including the nature, the characters, and the tradition interconnect each other throughout the story and build different interpretations. Though the plot of this novel is simple, the multiplicity of meaning behind every element of this novel makes this short novel becomes Kawabata's masterpiece.

The writer is interested in the beauty of this novel because the beauty depicted in this novel is not common beauty that other people who see them will think them as beautiful things. However, Plato (Kenny, 2007) said that "*beauty is in the eye of the beholder*" which means that the judgment of the beauty is on the person who looks at it. Therefore the perception of beauty is subjective. In this novel, Kawabata through Shimamura has his own perception of the

beauty that is different with common perception of beauty. Thus, Shimamura's ways in viewing uncommon beauty arouses the writer's curiosity on the meaning of those beauty in this novel. Therefore this study wants to classify the beauty in *Snow Country*. This study tries to find out kind of beauties are described in this novel and the meaning of those beauties. Moreover this study also analyzes some deep meanings of those beauty found in this novel.

B.The Philosophy of Beauty in Literature

1.Subjectivity of Aesthetic Judgment

The treatise that dominated aesthetics in the nineteenth century was Kant's *Critique of judgement*(1987). In his '*Analytic of the Beautiful*' and '*Analytic of the Sublime*' Kant sought to do for aesthetics what his earlier critiques had done for epistemology and ethics. Human beings possess, in addition to theoretical understanding and practical reason, a third faculty, the capacity for judgement (Urteilkraft), the judgement of taste, which is the basis of aesthetic experience.

In line with Kant, Johnson(2012) goes on to claim that aesthetic judgments are ultimately "subjective" because they are based on our feelings of pleasure or displeasure as subjects.

But any reference of presentations, even of sensations, can be

objective[...]; excepted is a referenceto the feeling of pleasure and displeasure—this reference designates nothing whatsoever in theobject, but here the subject feels himself, namely how he is affected by the presentation.

A judgement of taste, Kant tells the readers, does not bring an experience undera concept, in the way that an ordinary judgement does; it relates theexperience directly to the disinterested pleasure. Unlike an expression of sensual pleasure, it claims universal validity. Judgements of taste are singular in form but universal in import; they are, as Kant puts it, expressions of‘a universal voice’. Yet, because a judgement of taste does not bring itsobject under a concept, no reason can be given for it and no argument canconstrain agreement to it.

Judgements of value are related to purpose. Judgements of beauty, however, cannot bequite like this, since they do not bring their objects under any concept. However, Kant maintains that beautiful objects exhibit ‘purposivenesswithout purpose’. Perhaps he means while beauty has no point, yet it invites us to linger over its contemplation.

The judgment of taste is therefore not a judgment of cognition, and is consequently not logical but aesthetical, by which we understand that whose determining ground can be *no other than*

subjective. Every reference of representations, even that of sensations, may be objective (and then it signifies the real [element] of an empirical representation), save only the reference to the feeling of pleasure and pain, by which nothing in the object is signified, but through which there is a feeling in the subject as it is affected by the representation. (Kant 1790, section 1)

a. Japanese Aesthetic

The primary aesthetic concept at the heart of traditional Japanese culture is the value of harmony in all things. The Japanese world view is nature-based and concerned with the beauty of simplicity and harmony with nature. These ideas are still expressed in every aspect of daily life, despite the many changes brought about by the westernization of Japanese culture. This Japanese aesthetic of the beauty of simplicity and harmony is called wabi-sabi (wah-bee sah-bee).

According to Koren (1994), wabi-sabi is the most conspicuous and characteristic feature of what we think of as traditional Japanese beauty, and it "occupies roughly the same position in the Japanese pantheon of aesthetic values as do the Greek ideals of beauty and perfection in the West." Wabi-sabi is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. It is the beauty of things modest and humble. It is the beauty of things unconventional.

Moreover, Japanese aesthetics are very prevalent throughout the novel. The most common and most poignant of aesthetics is the Japanese view of beauty. While our Western ideas of beauty may be surmounted by joy and happiness, in Japan nothing is beautiful unless it is sad. Many of the other aesthetics have a sadness element to them which always connotes something of beauty.

C. Research Method

The researcher applied a qualitative research in which she analyzed the data by applying explanation not numbers. The source of the data was taken from quotations of the novel *Snow Country* written by Kawabata. The data was collected as a collection from the research in library from the books that were related to the discussion of the idea of Japanese concept of beauty. The technique of data analysis was run through deductive and inductive methods where the researcher studies a combination between using the general into the specific proofs and vice versa, the researcher used the detail proofs first, and concluded.

D. Analysis and Discussion

The Beauty In *Snow Country*

Do the beauty in *Snow Country* have universal judgement? In fact, Parker (2007) in his book *The Principles of Aesthetics* states that although some feeling for beauty is perhaps universal among men, the same cannot be said of the understanding of beauty. It means that people can not have the same understanding or perspectives of the beauty that they see.

Thus, this issue is also found in Kawabata's *Snow Country*. The central question in the study of aesthetics in Kawabata's *Snow Country* is the question of subjectivity. It is from the author that the beauty can be seen in *Snow Country*. In fact Kawabata gives the reader a totally subjective form of beauty, often saying only that some woman or object is "beautiful" and leaving it up to the reader to provide the necessary qualities which compose its essence. (Silberman, 1977)

Moreover Ueda (1976) in his book *Modern Japanese Writer And The Nature of Literature* states Kawabata's favorite type of beauty was delicate, fragile, and perishable; when it perished, sadness ensued. In short, anything truly beautiful is sad and anything truly sad is beautiful (Wabi Sabi). The first allusion of this idea presents when Shimamura watches Komoko play the samisen. He describes her nose as being "a little lonely, a little sad" (Kawabata 73) and it is a good thing in Japanese culture. More importantly, some

thirty pages later, he describes her singing voice as, “so clear it was almost sad, the voice that seemed to be echoing back from somewhere” (Kawabata 109). It shows that Kawabata often mixes the beauty and sadness at the same time when he wants to describe a beauty.

Thus, considering the various meanings of beauty in this novel, this study wants to elaborate more about the beauty through some elements in *Snow Country* including the beauty of nature, the beauty of people and the beauty of love. These beauty were analyzed through philosophical point of beauty by Kant and Japanese aesthetic philosophy wabi sabi.

1.The Beauty of Nature

One kind of the beauty explored in *Snow Country* is the beauty of nature. The reader can see the beauty of nature from Shimamura’s three visits to an isolated place, snow country, in three different seasons: spring, winter, and autumn. There are some elements of nature that are considered beautiful by Shimamura during his stays in snow country. His description of the nature in that area shows that Shimamura is a man who is easily attached to the nature. He likes to observe the nature in detail description.

One of Wabi Sabi principles in viewing beauty is that the value of harmony in all things including the harmony with

nature. Throughout the novel, the examples of the harmony with nature from the author’s perspective can be obtained. For example, the author describes the beauty of the night that come together in a clear, tranquil harmony.

The layers of the BorderRange, indistinguishable one from another, cast their heaviness at the skirt of the starry sky in a blackness grave and somber enough to communicate their mass. The whole of the night scene came together in a clear, tranquil harmony. (p.44)

To some people, the description of the night could be very simple. However, the harmony of night scene could be something beautiful for Shimamura. In fact, it also shows that he is a person who is attracted to the nature. A person who can see beauty inside the nature. Moreover, Shimamura’s attraction to the nature makes him aware to the beauty in it.

But at the door of the inn he was seduced by the mountain, strong with the smell of new leaves. He started climbing roughly up it. (p.29) He thought he would never tire of looking at the autumn flowers that spread a blanket of silver up the side of the mountain. (p.90)

However inside the beauty of harmony in snow country, there is also a sad element that represents the Japanese aesthetic value. Shimamura sees sadness in the beauty of nature surrounding snow country. Komako’s loneliness is the sadness element of the beauty in nature.

Komako's too black hair was a little touching, a little sad, in the loneliness of the shadowed mountain pocket. The sun shone dimly on a spot in the mountains far down the river. (p. 80).

Moth

Shimamura describes the dying moth through his detailed observation. He spends much of his time watching insects in their death agonies. The moth has been written many times in the second part of this novel. His description on the beauty of the died moth shows the philosophical value of Japanese aesthetic 'Wabi Sabi' that beauty is something imperfect. In reality, a moth is not as beautiful as a butterfly. However, his process in dying reveals the beauty to Shimamura. Moreover, Phillip (2006) in his review entitled *The tyranny of beauty: Kawabata* says that it is a weirdly lovely, mournfully radiant passage, and the note of sweet sadness Shimamura finds in the hopeless struggles of the insects. But in the middle of the passage, he thinks fleetingly of the children he has left behind in Tokyo—and what are they, to him or to us, except an added source of melancholy sweetness?

As he picked up a dead insect to throw it out, he sometimes thought for an instant of the children he had left in Tokyo (p. 132)

Thus, it also shows that many aesthetic elements in Japan have a sadness element

which always connotes something of beauty. Dying is sadness element that happens in our life. However, the sadness element of moth life becomes beauty to Shimamura.

A moth on the screen was still for a very long time. It too was dead, and it fell to the earth like a dead leaf. Occasionally a moth fell from the wall. Taking it up in his hand, Shimamura would wonder how to account for such beauty. (p. 132).

Milky Way

The natural phenomena, milky way happens at the end of the story. The beauty of this phenomena so overwhelms Shimamura that he forgets his lover, Komako. When he walks wither through the dark village, and looks at the stars overhead, he feels himself wrapped in the Milky Way, "brighter than brightest full moon." (p.168) He feels that he is absorbed to the Milky Way that he forgets everything surrounding him including his mistress.

All at once they hear a fire alarm and the shouts of distant villagers. A blaze has broken out in a crowded warehouse, crowded because a movie was being shown there; Shimamura and Komako run to the scene, where, moving among the throng, they see Yoko fall from the burning second floor. Komako runs to the girl, tries to drag her away. Shimamura pushes toward her through the crowd, but is shoved aside, and "as he

caught his footing, his head fell back, and the Milky Way flowed down inside him with a roar.”(p.75) In fact this incident indicates actually Shimamura does not have a strong feeling to his lover.

The effect of Milky Way’s beauty not only brings the happiness to Shimamura but it also brings the sadness to Komako as his lover. She was forgotten by Shimamura at the time the beauty of Milky Way overwhelmed him. It reveals the true character of Shimamura as a selfish and loveless person. He is quite selfish in ignoring his surrounding when he is attracted to Milky Way. He did not rush to help Yoko as she fell from the burning warehouse or helps Komako in saving Yoko.

The incident of Milky Way implies that Kawabata always mixes up the happiness and the sadness in Snow Country. Thus it shows the value of Japanese Aesthetic that inside the beauty there is a sad element.

1.The Beauty of Women

Another beauty that can be found in this novel is the beauty of women that are represented by Japanese geisha, Komako and Yoko. Their beauty are one of Shimamura’s attractions in visiting Snow Country though it is an isolated place.

However Kawabata depicts the beauty of women in uncommon perception of beauty.

Komako’s Beauty

One example of Kawabata unusual perception of beauty is the way he depicts Komako’s lips. This unusual description of Komako's lips is visceral to the point of being slightly disturbing, but it highlights the voluptuousness that Shimamura sees in her. In fact, the option in using *leeches* in describing a beautiful lips is considered uncommon.

"The bud of her lips opened and closed smoothly, like a beautiful little circle of *leeches*" (p. 32)

Thus Komako’s unusual depiction of her lips reveals the philosophical point of view of Japanese aesthetic *wabi sabi* which shows that beauty is unusual. Moreover, it is from Shimamura’s subjectivity in seeing beauty. Not all people would agree that lips like little circle of leeches are beautiful lips. The beauty of komako’s lips could be not representing the standard beauty of women lips.

Yoko’s Beauty

Thus there are some of Yoko’s parts that attracted Shimamura attention to her. The first part of Yoko which arouses Shimamura feeling is her beautiful voice. Her voice is so beautiful that it makes the hearer almost feels sad.

It was such a beautiful voice that it struck one as sad. In all its high resonance it seemed to come echoing back across the snowy night. (p.5)

In this case, Shimamura depicts Yoko's voice by adding the element of sadness. Kant in *The Philosophy of Modern World* (Kenny, 2007) argued that the object of such satisfaction is called beautiful. However, Yoko's beautiful voice does not bring satisfaction. Thus, it contradicts Kant's philosophy of beauty that it should make people happy or satisfied, not sad. In fact it brings the element of sadness. The depiction of sadness element in the beauty of Yoko's voice is in accordance with Japanese aesthetic values that sees beauty and sadness in one element.

Furthermore, the other considered beautiful part of Yoko is her eyes. The reflection of her face passes over a distant light shining somewhere out in the mountains, and "as it sent its small ray through the pupil of the girl's eye, as the eye and the light were superimposed one on the other, the eye became a weirdly beautiful bit of phosphorescence on thesea of evening mountains." (Kawabata, p.10) Even, the depiction of Yoko's eyes brings some questions to the writer. Are they really beautiful? Since Yoko's eyes are described weirdly beautiful.

Moreover, Kant (1790) argued that the judgment of taste is therefore not a

judgment of cognition, and is consequently not logical but aesthetical by which we understand that whose determining ground can be *no other than subjective*. It means that Shimamura's judgement of Yoko's beautiful eyes could be subjective. There is no logical explanation instead of his own perception of Yoko's beauty.

1. The Beauty of Love

The beauty of love is also shown in this novel through Shimamura love affair with Komako and Yoko, and Yoko's love to Yukio. There are different types of loves that emerge throughout the story in *Snow Country*. Many view the love in *Snow Country* is futile love. However, Japanese Aesthetic would consider futile love is beautiful though it includes sadness in it. The love story of Komako and Shimamura is sad but it is also beautiful. They know that they can not continue their love because of their status as a married man and a geisha. Their love will end just like the life of a moth. However, there is beauty in their love because there is a sadness in it.

Komako's Love

Yet, knowing the dispositions of Komako and Shimamura, it is clear that their love is doomed from the beginning, a "waste of effort" which, like the laboriously made Chijimi cloth is nevertheless beautiful in its poignant

sadness. However, Phillip (2006) argued that Shimamura loves the melancholy air of “wasted effort” he feels around Komako. Thus it shows that the beauty of love and the sad element of waste effort are mixed in the story.

Thus Komako’s love to Shimamura transforms herself from the virgin love to the woman love. Moreover Ueda (1976) said that Komako has been marvelously successful in retaining her virgin beauty before she meets Shimamura. The success is due to her innate love of cleanliness and her will power to keep herself clean. Komako’s love of cleanliness attracts Shimamura’s uncommon perception of beauty. This transformation began after she surrendered herself to Shimamura in having not only friendship but also sexual action. From that night on, she is no longer a virgin to Shimamura, and the nature of her beauty begins to change as well. The longer Shimamura stays in the hot-spring town, the more wifely Komako becomes.

Even while she was still an amateur entertainer during Shimamura's first visit, Komako is bound in the restrictive role of professional woman who must please and amuse her guest but can never sustain anything with him. Her desire to enter into something more long-lasting and more significant leads her into a relationship with Shimamura, but since he does not care to empathize with her feelings or help her

materially, she can do nothing but hold onto him while he is in the hot spring and await his return when he is back in Tokyo.

If we view Komako’s love from the Japanese aesthetic, her love to Shimamura is beautiful even though it does not end in a happy ending. The beauty of love is not always represented in a happy ending love. A sad ending love could also be beautiful from Japanese aesthetic perspective. Just like Komako's love, it is beautiful even it is wasted.

Yoko’s Love

The beauty of virgin love is shown from Yoko’s love to Yukio or Shimamura. Yoko is an embodiment of virginity which Komako has lost or, which she has sacrificed for Yukio’s sake and for Shimamura’s sake. Yoko, as such, is a painful reminder for Komako of what she has lost.

A virgin’s love is always unrewarded. No matter how much love she may give out, she does not and cannot expect it to be returned. Just like Yoko’s loves to Yukio or to Shimamura. She does not expect anything by giving her love. In all cases a virgin’s love goes unrequited; to borrow Shimamura’s phrase, it is a “complete waste of effort.” But the beauty of love increases in proportion to the degree love is wasted.

The *wabi sabi* philosophy would view this kind of love is beautiful. Beauty does not need happy ending. Though Yoko's love is waste effort, it is still considered beautiful. Yoko's love to Yukio by taking care him when he was sick shows us the pure love that does not need him to give anything. Yoko just gives her love without demanding something from Yukio. It is pure love eventhough it is sad. And that is the beauty of Yoko's love, pure as a virgin.

E. Conclusion

From the analysis, it can be concluded that the beauty in *Snow Country* are depicted by the author subjectively. The judgment of the beauty is subjective since the beauty depicted here are not common beauty. Thus the researcher finds that the uncommon beauty in *Snow Country* can be seen through the beauty of nature, the beauty of women and the beauty of love.

Based on Japanese aesthetic values of beauty, there is always sadness element inside a beauty. In fact, the researcher found that almost all of beauty in snow country include the sad element, such as a loneliness in a beauty of nature, sadness in a beautiful voice and a waste effort in a beauty of love. The beauty of unusual, imperfect (*Wabi Sabi*) is found in the way Shimamura depicts the beauty of the women in this novel, Komako and Yoko.

The illustration of Komako's lips as a little circle of leeches shows unusual beauty of a woman. Yoko's weirdly beautiful eyes also shows that the beauty in *Snow Country* is uncommon beauty.

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