

Beauty & Sadness in Yasunari Kawabata

By Mukesh Williams



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The surprise of apprehending beauty and the sadness of its passing away are the twin themes Yasunari Kawabata returns to time and again. Any attempt to possess the beauty encapsulated in an individual leads to disastrous consequences. His novels are haunted by phantoms of elegiac beauty, feminine loveliness, pure nymphets and true love. His characters are forever wandering between two worlds — the one dying and the other powerless to be born. His novels capture fleeting moments of pure loveliness often sullied by selfish intrigue and unfulfilled desire. There is always something missing or incomplete in human relationships that call for withdrawal and retreat. An aesthetic regret pervades his world of dreamy somnolence where desires are reined in so tightly that individuality is about to die. A broken individualism pervasive in Japanese “I” or *watakushi* novels flowers into a fetish of self-negation where the *mono no aware* or “sadness of things passing” away becomes a fictional standard for Kawabata. To bring conformity into relief Kawabata also creates seductive outsiders who hide their extreme individualism to dominate others. Kawabata’s writings are deeply affected by his childhood experience of parental loss and adult experience of fractured relationships. Though Kawabata rejected suicide as a means of escape, taking refuge in the soothing beauty of the snow, moon, meadow, road and sea, he finally succumbed to it in despair. It is no coincidence that in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech of 1968 “Japan, The Beautiful and Myself” he quotes from two Japanese priests, Dogen and Myoe, about their consecration to the moon.

Giving Significance to Life

Though Kawabata is not read so much in modern day Japan, his images resonate with renewed intensity. Some might reject Kawabata for sketching the travails of egocentric middle-aged men with a penchant for very young girls, but Kawabata was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature half a century ago for his “narrative mastery” and ability to represent the “Japanese mind” (Photo 1). He distills the essences of nature and the evanescence of celestial bodies into the beauty of a young girl through evocative metaphors and images. He brings to Japanese literature a nuanced perspective that gathers human yearnings, literary history, changing seasons, celestial objects and erotic fantasies into a compelling narrative giving significance to life.

Life in his times was different and Kawabata felt the social, cultural and political transition more intensely than others. Born in 1899 in the commercial district of Osaka and dying in Kamakura in 1972, Kawabata was witness to three eras — Meiji, Taisho and Showa. His works started coming out in the 1920s and continued for the next 40 years until the late 1960s. During this time the cultural and political landscape of Japan had changed dramatically. The agonizing modernity of the Meiji era (1867-1912) was gradually replaced by the new ideas of the Taisho era (1912-26), also called the “Jazz Age” when the *ero-guro-nansensu*, or eroticism and the grotesque, entered the Japanese literary world. The Showa era (1926-1989) saw the rise and fall of militarism and creation of a new Japan. Like many

other Japanese writers such as Junichiro Tanizaki and Natsume Soseki, Kawabata sought literary models of cultural modernity and stylistic sophistication in European writings. But he also wanted to subvert Western modernity and champion the culture of old Japan. It is no coincidence that Tanizaki published his attack on Western modernity in 1933 called *In’ei Raisan* (In Praise of Shadows) and Kawabata’s first great work *Yukiguni* (Snow Country) began to be serialized from 1934 to 1937.

Photo 1: SCANPIX / JUI



Yasunari Kawabata (right) receives the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968 from King Gustaf Adolf of Sweden. The king’s granddaughter Princess Christina is in the background.

Photo 2: The Asahi Shimbun



Matsuei, a model for the character Komako in *Yukiguni*, pictured when she was working as a geisha around 1935 in Yuzawa, Niigata Prefecture

The Snow Country

Yukiguni is symbolic of Kawabata's ambivalence towards Western modernity. The novel traverses the divide between tradition and modernity. The story is about a rich married man, Shimamura, who visits a hot spring in Yuzawa and falls in love with a local geisha, Komako. But he is a Casanova and gets attracted to another young girl called Yoko whom he meets on a train. Komako is perhaps based on a real geisha named Matsuei (Photo 2).

Shimamura thinks he is an expert on Western ballet, while Komako feels she has mastered the *shamisen* without a mentor through using sheet music and listening to the radio. The self-delusion of each autodidactic character and their yearning to be loved seem to blend with the motifs of the seasons, especially with the purity of human emotions and the surprise of snow accumulating. Most readers are familiar with the novel's opening line: "The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country." The long tunnel is between Gunma and Niigata, a marvel of Western technology, and creates a heart-thumping surprise as the train emerges from it into the snow country. Kawabata plays upon the shock his protagonists feel when suddenly meeting pure, snow-like young girls in their sojourns. The powerful imagery of ancient Japan symbolized in the teapot acquires significance in the hands of Kawabata. Shimamura falls in love with Komako like steam rattling through the spout of a teapot and sees her feet dancing inside the teapot as an apparition. The sensuality of the image and his desire to possess her is conveyed intensely.

A Lonely Existence

Often a sense of loneliness and abandonment pervade Kawabata's novels, making us aware of our uncertain finitude. Perhaps the sense of abandonment springs from his experience of early childhood and adult life. Kawabata was orphaned at an early age and was forced to live with his blind grandfather in the remote countryside. This painful experience was further compounded by his broken love affair with Hatsuyo Ito (1906-1954) (Photo 3). He wrote letters to her that he never posted. In one of his unsent letters Kawabata wrote: "I cannot sleep at night out of fear that you may be sick. I am so worried that I am starting to cry." She never told him why she broke off the engagement: "You will probably ask me to tell you about this

emergency, but I would rather die than tell you," she wrote. "This is goodbye."

His son-in-law Kaori Kawabata recently stated in *Bungei Shunju* that perhaps she had been "violated by a monk" in Saihoji temple where she was living and felt that having lost her virginity she had lost her virginal status to marry into the reputable Kawabata family. Remembering the pain of this broken engagement, Kawabata confessed that "I was a 20-year-old man, and I promised marriage to a 14-year-old... Everything was broken senselessly, and I was left deeply wounded. After the Kanto Earthquake [in 1923], I wandered the burned fields of Tokyo, because I wanted to make sure she was safe... But that girl no longer exists in this world." Perhaps it is not good to read biography into literature, but it is hard to ignore how Kawabata's life finds its way into his works.

The Psychology of Self & Behavior

A preoccupation with the psychology of loneliness and maladjustment was a feature of the age in which Kawabata lived. The rise of humanistic and behaviorist psychologies of the 1950s questioned the belief of fitting individuals into a system and called for the need to understand deviance in human behavior. Writers began to probe the unconscious and reveal its organizing force before the emergence of experience, deduction and collective experiences. Kawabata responded with sympathy to social maladjustment and sexual deviance as it absolved his characters of social responsibility. The psychology of the 1950s was further compounded by the post-1950s search for beauty free from social responsibility evident in the theme of "true" love. Kawabata uses lyrical vocabulary to elide the transgressions of the protagonist by painting the victim as an enticer.

Photo 3: The Museum of Modern Japanese Literature



Kawabata (aged 22) and Hatsuyo (aged 15) pictured in October 1921. During the photo shoot, Hatsuyo hid her hands, chapped from her everyday manual work, in the sleeves of her kimono.

Kawabata's story *Mizuumi* (The Lake), published in the mid-1950s, introduces a 34-year old man, Gimpei Momoi, who has lost his job as a school teacher. He wanders the streets of Karuizawa fantasizing about the knees and breasts of young girls while hiding in ditches and grass. His obsession starts early in life, when he has an affair with his beautiful student Hisako Tamaki. Together with his consciousness of his deformed feet, which "did the chasing", is his regret of an unconsummated love life. He does not know why he chases them: "Yayoi and Hisako were not casual passers-by. He not only knows their names and addresses, but had a relationship with them and could meet them at any time. Yet he had still chased them and, worse, he had been forced to part from them." The reader is forced to share his obsession with young girls and feel his destruction at the hands of technology and mass culture. Through Gimpei, Kawabata explores the impact of modernity, middle-class values and concepts of love in Japanese society.

Obsessions & Fetishes

Kawabata's protagonists are obsessed with nymphets, enamored of fetishes and haunted by their past. Both the Lacanian concept of gaze and Althusser's theory of ideology play a significant role in creating and sustaining their obsessions and fetish. They get pleasure not from realizing their desire but pursuing the object of it in surrogates. Kawabata tells us that the nymphelette may be "pure and radiant" but "such perfection doesn't last after the age of sixteen or seventeen" [*Mizuumi*]. Kawabata's novella *Izu no Odoriko* (The Dancer of Izu, 1926) traces an obsession with adolescence. The image of the old Amagi tunnel that introduces the story allows the dilettante student to enter the beautiful world of early love with an adolescent dancing girl, Kaoru, which incidentally means fragrance. It is not clear whether she teaches him about the sincerity of emotions or merely gives him an opportunity to fantasize about her nubile body. There are suggestions of Kawabata's aborted love affair with Hatsuyo, but it is always difficult to find a direct correspondence between life and literature. Gimpei is another man obsessed with his childhood "first love" Yayoi, of whom he has hallucinations as a flitting figure on the lake together with the ghost of his drowned father.

Old Eguchi in *Nemureru Bijo* (The House of Sleeping Beauties, 1961) visits a brothel to sleep with drugged young girls and contemplates suicide with one of them, while Ogata Shingo in *Yama no Oto* (The Sound of the Mountain, 1949-54) is interested in other younger female relatives. In *Koto* (The Old Capital, 1962) Hideo finds Chieko more beautiful if he can feed his illusion about her in her twin sister Naeko. In *Utsukushisa to Kanashimi to* (Beauty and Sadness, 1964) Toshio Oki still yearns for his 15-year-old first love Otoko even after decades, while she contemplates suicide with her lesbian lover to freeze the felicity of the moment.

Illusion & the Myth of the Beautiful

The reality and the illusion of the moment must be retained to give a dream-like quality to life. The illusion is perhaps essential to keep the myth of the beautiful alive. Comprehending reality through memories, phantoms and apparitions changes the flow of time for people. Each person lives within the same temporal reality but catches different time streams, comprehending reality at different levels. Oki remembers his first love Otoko through his writings and the sound of the New Year's bell in Kyoto and through him Kawabata ruminates about the phenomenon of memory: "What were memories? What was the past that he remembered so clearly?" Though Otoko feels that "bygone memories are merely phantoms and apparitions" they are still living entities that cannot be ignored. Kawabata felt that time flowed in "many streams" but even when it flowed the "same way" for all, every human being flowed "through time" in a "different way". Kawabata achieves the flow of time in his novels through a mixing of realistic and poetic narrative.

Kawabata's realistic descriptions are charged with evocative images of nature, seasons or celestial objects, creating an illusion of reality. A quintessential Kawabata novel transports us to images of early Japanese poetry. The erotic and the fantastic are just below the surface of his overt realism where Kawabata presents the ungraspable beauty of nature and women. In both *Nemureru Bijo* and *Utsukushisa to Kanashimi to* Kawabata evokes eroticism, nostalgia and *mono no aware* through reflected images of grass or moonlight on water, like a haiku. But he is also a master of surprises, bringing together stories of childhood separation and lesbian revenge in works such as *Koto* and *Utsukushisa to Kanashimi to*. In *Koto* a poor girl, Chieko, is deserted by her parents and brought up by the merchant family of Takichiro. She grows up as a well-mannered girl but yearns to meet her lost twin sister Naeko. She is delighted after she accidentally meets her in a cedar forest but then her problems begin. Hideo is infatuated with Chieko, the perfect Kyoto beauty with elegance and charm. But in the end he decides to marry her twin sister Naeko who is an illusion of her. When Naeko hears the soft patter of snow on the rooftop, Chieko offers to open the window to see but Naeko stops her as opening the window would "ruin the illusion". Illusion is perhaps essential to keep the myth of the beautiful alive.

Bungei Jidai & Evocative Images

Kawabata suggests and alludes to incidents and events without overtly stating their essential quality. In the mid-1920s he was involved with literary aesthetics, working assiduously to move away from the traditional, anti-proletariat writing of the old Japanese school and created a literary era called *bungei jidai*, or the artistic age (Photo 4). More concerned with art for art's sake, Kawabata focused his attention on the aesthetic aspects of creating new sensations, perceptions and impressions released through literary

Photo 4: The Museum of Modern Japanese Literature



The cover page of the first issue of Bungei Jidai

devices, especially rhythm, diction and lyricism that the *shinkan-kakuha* writers were making popular. Kawabata's novels such as *Izu no Odoriko*, *Nemureru Bijo* and *Mizuumi* reflect his romance with the Japanese language.

Literary technique plays an important role in Kawabata's writings. In *Yama no Oto*, Kawabata reflects upon the passage of time and shifting moods through changes in perception. The 60-year-old protagonist Shingo, though married to the younger

Yasuko, feels lonely when he remembers the passage of time. He dislikes his wife and children but is closer to his daughter-in-law Kikuko. The *oto* or sound has an array of meanings in the novel, standing for roar, boom, crash, splash to fame, voice and melody. Kawabata deliberately links Kikuko to his mistress Kinuko. Both become pregnant while his wife aborts a child. The sound of trains, the voices of woman and children, and the sound of snow falling echo throughout the novel, creating new patterns and associations. Shingo hears the rumbling of the earth like a "demon" passing through it, which becomes associated with an impending death. Shingo has heard the frightening sound before when his wife's sister died.

The images and allusions are never lost on the reader. When Kikuko returns from visiting her parents she brings an electric shaver as an *omiyage* (present) for Shingo. He sees it as a seductive instrument that shaves the back of a woman's neck. He gives her a vacuum cleaner as a return gift. Both the sound of the electric shaver and the vacuum cleaner acquire erotic meanings in his mind. Ideas of compassion, old age and spiritual strength are revealed through images of trees. Shingo reflects upon the strength needed to be happy in old age through a comparison of the qualities of the ginkgo and the cherry tree:

'The ginkgo has a sort of strength that the cherry doesn't,' he said. 'I've been thinking the ones that live long are different from the others. It must take a great deal of strength for an old tree like that to put out leaves in the fall.'

'But there's something sad about them.'

But old age itself has "something sad" about it.

Images dominate Kawabata's works and often reveal his vision and meaning. In the short story "The Sparrow's Matchmaking" a man chooses his wife through a mystical communion with a sparrow, while in "The Wife's Search" a woman attempts to understand the "flower of delusion" that blossoms in the "fertile soil of human boredom". The controlling aspect of marriage is presented through the image of a prison house. Housewives wait for their husbands at

the ticket gate to take them home. The ticket gate becomes the gate of an "enormous prison society" where men become "convicts" serving "a life sentence". Kawabata reveals the insanity and boredom of daily life.

In her book *The Moon in the Water*, Gwenn Petersen points out that Kawabata uses the *sui-getsu* (water-moon) image to fuse the beauty of the individual with nature. He gathers the eternal beauty of the seasons, the snow, and the celestial objects into the passionate sensuality of young girls and conveys them to the reader as erotic or momentous. In the tea ceremony conducted in *Senbazuru* (Thousand Cranes, 1952) Kawabata shows a star reflected in the stone basin of the garden. In *Nemureru Bijo* the aged Eguchi remembers his passionate first "true love" and her slightly bleeding nipple through the red lipstick of one of the girls he sleeps with. The bleeding nipple becomes associated with her scent and reminds him of breast milk when the girl in the past had a baby; he had wondered then if it was his. Though Eguchi sleeps with drugged young women they release his memory through audiovisual and olfactory images and helps him recover the lost past. In *Utsukushisa to Kanashimi to*, in the chapter entitled "Strands of Black Hair", Keiko decides which lover will touch her left breast and which her right. The enchantment of the scene, her vengeful intention and the "scent" of a woman when she lies in the "embrace of her lover" are not lost to the reader. Kawabata presents her as a seductive outsider who takes revenge on Oki by destroying his family. When Keiko meets Taichiro at the Kyoto airport in the evening she looks "dazzling" in a kimono. Kawabata writes:

'Turning, Keiko displayed the back of her silk organdy obi. On its puffed-out bow there were green mountain ranges, and the delicate rose-colored shading of a sunset sky... He was captivated by the combination of the faint flush of rose with the creamy skin at the nape of her slender neck under her upswept black hair.' Such evocative prose reflects Kawabata's romance with language.

Whether it is the stalker's vision, an old man's erotic fantasies, a lover's quarrel or a lesbian's revenge, Kawabata releases them from the dark closet of an "infernal world". He reveals to us the structure of the unconscious, the dark "masochistic self-disgust" often "crushed" by the "awful mystery of nature [and] the agony of time". Using evocative language to represent the structure of abnormal consciousness, Kawabata treats the obsessions of a dysfunctional protagonist with compassion. Though he believed in art for art's sake and represented the spirit of traditional Japan, he was quite modern in style, choice of themes and the treatment of characters. He portrays the irrationality of human emotions, the convoluted passages of memory, the objective correlative of thought processes and the poignancy of a gesture or an image. His elegiac invocations of beauty summon forth those aesthetic qualities of Japan that are both unique and abiding.

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