

Modernity in some of Kawabata's short stories

Tính hiện đại trong một số truyện ngắn của Kawabata

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(Ngày nhận bài: 23/10/2021, ngày phản biện xong: 25/10/2022, ngày chấp nhận đăng: 27/10/2022)

Abstract

Yasunari Kawabata (1899 - 1972), is a remarkable talent in the art of expression and the richness of genres and themes, and ideas in modern Japanese literature. He was born and raised in the country's comprehensive renewal of the country from economy, politics, and society to culture, Kawabata was dominated by Western liberal and democratic ideas. This has contributed to creating a new look for Japanese literature: young, rich, and bold. It can be seen that modernism largely influenced Kawabata's composition, particularly in the short story genre. However, he is not only a modern writer but also a traditional writer. The combination of East-West flows in his writing underground produces created literary masterpieces in which the modern element also carries very distinct personality traits. Therefore, learning about Modernity in some of Kawabata's short stories is a research way that we are very interested in contributing to deciphering some of the success of a writer.

Keyword: Modernity; Short stories; Kawabata.

Tóm tắt

Yasunari Kawabata (1899 – 1972) là tài năng vượt trội cả về nghệ thuật biểu hiện lẫn sự phong phú của thể tài, tư tưởng trong văn học Nhật Bản thời hiện đại. Sinh ra và trưởng thành trong thời kỳ tiếp nhận đổi mới một cách toàn diện của đất nước từ kinh tế, chính trị, xã hội cho đến văn hóa, Kawabata đã bị chi phối bởi những tư tưởng tự do dân chủ của Phương Tây để từ đó góp phần tạo nên một diện mạo mới cho văn học Nhật Bản: trẻ trung, phong phú, táo bạo. Có thể thấy rằng chủ nghĩa hiện đại chi phối nhiều đến sáng tác của Kawabata, đặc biệt ở thể loại truyện ngắn. Tuy nhiên ông cũng không phải là nhà văn trong quá trình hướng đến hiện đại đã khước từ và quay lưng hẳn với truyền thống. Sự kết hợp giữa hai dòng chảy Đông – Tây trong mạch ngầm sáng tác của ông đã tạo nên những kiệt tác văn chương mà ở đó yếu tố hiện đại cũng mang những đặc điểm rất riêng biệt và đầy cá tính. Chính vì thế, tìm hiểu về *Tính hiện đại trong một số truyện ngắn của Kawabata* là một hướng nghiên cứu được chúng tôi hết sức quan tâm nhằm góp phần giải mã phần nào sự thành công của một nhà văn.

Từ khóa: Tính hiện đại; truyện ngắn; Kawabata.

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1. Introduction

As one of the most magical "phenomena" of Japanese literature, Yasunari Kawabata is of great interest to researchers and critics. Over the years, there have been a lot of research works on him published, focusing on many issues such as poetic characteristics of the composition, and writer of Japanese Beauty⁽¹⁾.

An outstanding work on Kawabata research in terms of the compositional method is Kawabata Yasunari: The harmony between classical oriental songs and advanced techniques. Setsuko Tsutsumi, through this work, has focused on explaining and understanding Kawabata's works in terms of compositional methods based on the combination of culture, aesthetics, and philosophy, etc. The approach is from an outside point of view. This book is quite subtle and profound and has created a basis and a reference source for us to inherit, aiming at the research problem of surveying some typical short stories in Yasunari Kawabata's writing career to understand how the modern element manifests itself; thereby confirming the success and writing style of the writer. In this article, we do not go into depth to explain the heavy concepts of literary theory such as modernism; the process of literary modernization, which is applied just enough to serve as a basis for argumentation and analysis, and implementation of the problem.

2. The concept of modernity in literature

The concept of "modern" is an extremely vague one. The word modern, meant to distinguish, in the historical sense, the self-understanding of our time from its past, is a paradox. It is true that the French noun form *la*

modernité is the same as the German word *die Moderne*, a recent coinage. Both words first appeared at a time when our perception of the familiar historical world was so detached from the past that we could not access it without the mediation of historical knowledge. If one looks back at its literary tradition, it always seems to have lost, through historical repetition, the very claim it made. It is not specifically coined for our time, nor does it seem to be less able to portray, unmistakably, the unique features of an era [5, p.219].

This is true, not only for the Japanese but for non-Western peoples in general, among those commonly referred to as "modern" and "Western". Since, in the West as in Asia, modernity and pre-modernity are distinct from each other, it is reasonable that modernity should be conceptualized separately from the West, but since the "origin" of modernity is the West, both cannot be so easily separated. This is why in non-Western countries modern criticism and Western criticism tend to be confused. Many misconceptions arise from this. One typical example is modern Japanese literature because it's not Western, it's not quite modern. The flip side of this idea is that, if the material and subject matter of a work are non-Western, then the work must be anti-modern. These two statements are also common in Japanese literary criticism as well as in Western scholarship on Japanese literature.

However, as long as a work is considered the "expression" of the "me" of an "author", the work is already within the machinery of modern literature, even though it may be anti-modern and anti-Western. In the Japanese book "Beyond Modernity", this kind of counter-question is completely absent. If we question the origin of these machines, we may fall into another trap, since they are all of Western origin. We seem once again to be back in the shallow, idle debate that can be summed up in

⁽¹⁾ The focus of this article's study is primarily on Vietnamese sources, with a small amount of minimal English documentation; Kawabata's works solely contain Vietnamese translations.

the word "influence". The concept of influence suggests the relationship between an original to a copy. Needless to say, countless books have been written by both Japanese and Western critics about the ways in which Japanese writers have incorrectly received, received, or resisted modern "originals" of the West [3, p.192]

According to some academics, in Vietnam, modernity is a category of a literary movement. "Modernity is not meant to express values but to express the value class, the development level of artistic thinking" [9, p. 92]. But speaking of the concept of modernity means emphasizing content ability, not considering the time at all. And with that understanding, it can be affirmed that no matter what literary period, modernity is still an unchanged concept in terms of meaning.

Modernity is often understood in a one-sided manner, "reduced and absorbed in rationalism (of the modern West), seen as the mere result of rationalization." [4, p. 57-58]. This concept is not satisfactory when considering the nature of the concept of modernity. And so according to professor Hoang Ngoc Hien, it is necessary to understand that modernity is the result of the combination of two processes of rationalization and subjectivism (including the national subject). In this respect, modernity in literature means that it is always towards innovation, but never being cut off from its traditional roots. The traditional underground circuit will be the internal force for modern writers to have more solid roots in the journey of creating new and unique works.

2.2. Kawabata short stories in the process of modernizing Japanese literature

The renovation thought of Emperor Meiji in the late 19th century and early 20th century blew into Japan a new wind. Morale's "Learn from the West, catch up with the West, surpass the West" has brought Japanese history to a new

page. Innovation in the field of economics and politics has led to strong impacts on literature and art. Novel writing techniques and methods originating from Europe have created a strong attraction for Japanese writers, of which Kawabata is a typical representative. He confided that literature can "become boring because it is unchanged as the sun today rises exactly in the east as it did yesterday." [2, p.42].

With a mindset towards "newness", the series of stories in the palm of Kawabata's hands from 1921 to 1972 was deeply influenced by Western literary schools. One researcher also said: "Kawabata's works from imitating, learning from the West and then finding national traditions, Japaneseizing external factors, harmoniously combining East - West is a phenomenon. There are rules in the process of literary modernization in East Asia. From his original compositions influenced by expressionism, pluralism, and ideas of S. Freud, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, etc., he returned to the tradition of love of beauty in national and Japanese literature. Westernized to become the savior of beauty, revived Japanese prose, and crystallized aesthetic thinking and national beauty. Therefore, although Kawabata is not the opening author of the modern era of Japanese literature, he is considered to have contributed to perfecting the face of modern Japanese literature". [8].

2.3. Expressions of Modernity in Kawabata's Short Story

Referring to the above explanation, we find that Kawabata's short stories have modern expressions from content to unique methods (artistic methods) as follows:

** The journey to find and save beauty*

Kawabata is known as "a lifelong wanderer in search of beauty". Those are the beauties that are distilled from tradition, nature, cultures, and from people, especially women. He saw in

them the beauty of purity and chastity of souls. It is also possible that Kawabata perceives in them the beauty of wonder, like "a lotus flower, transcending mundane dregs, etc. They are present in every life from low to high and transcend life. [1, p.1087].

Dancer Izu is considered his first masterpiece that contains a fresh and pure beauty "like a stream full of water after a rain, iridescent in the sun on a clear autumn day of Izu". The image of a traveler from being mesmerized to possessive to emotional, gradually getting rid of inhibitions before the fresh body, and pure soul of the dancer in the steam of Izu spring has left "a message of joy" in the heart of the reader. Subsequent stories such as Ksitigarbha, Oshin's bodhisattva kingdom, Existence, and God continue to be the search for beauty deeply rooted in a woman's soul. For example, the story Existence and God makes the reader touched by the meeting six years later between the traveler and the dancer whom he injured in the past.

Time seems helpless before the fragile appearance like leaves, like the accumulation of the vitality of thousands of flowers, especially in the beauty of the tolerant and holy soul of the dancer. That beauty is the existence of a god. Although knowing that in the ancient tradition, literature always aims to praise beauty, the image of a "sad tourist wandering in search of beauty" is still something attractive, and unique of Kawabata, causing a profound impression on those who love literature. His compositions thus show the crystallization of Japanese aesthetic thinking and soul. We will come across spaces filled with Japanese colors. It is the scene of white snow inlaid with silver on the mountain slopes in Kamakura, the image of cherry blossom clouds, etc. Despite being attracted by Western trends, modern theories, and the desire to experiment, Kawabata always

stands firmly on the national cultural tradition and never loses the core of the method. Therefore, that "sad traveler" has established himself in a solemn position in Japanese culture and literature [6].

** Expressing secret feelings through metaphors*

The metaphorical method is one of the features of Kawabata's short story poetics. The arm is a clear example of the expression of this writing style. The story is about my character's one night of cuddling with a lover's arm. Even though it was just an arm, it had the same charm as a sentient woman. Perhaps the reader will never identify or discover the mysterious meaning of the arm but still be led and fascinated by the strange and illusory emotions of the world of the nihilistic ego. Dao Thi Thu Hang in a statement said that The Arm was used by "surrealism", a return of Kawabata to the experiments of surrealism, its imaginative power has made the work of art becomes particularly appealing [2, p.44].

Another haunting story in Deadly Faces also begins with a special moment. When the husband returned from a trip, his wife died, the moment he looked at his wife's face, he saw "the two thin, green cheeks, the teeth have changed color, sticking out the lips. The flesh in her eyelids has dried, stuck to her pupils". He was not frightened but gently put his hand on that ugly face and massaged it until the muscles were relaxed, that face was beautiful and fresh. The mother-in-law did not witness what he did and burst into tears because she thought the miraculous moment she met her husband made her daughter's face so peaceful. Obviously, although he only captures brief moments in the character's life, with his delicate pen, Kawabata has sown in the hearts of readers deep emotions about life like "draining a thousand years in a minute playing with".

Thus, the stories in the palm of Kawabata's hand have opened up a boundless void, giving the reader's imagination the opportunity to travel around the world to receive their own personal feelings, emotions, and concerns. depending on your own experience.

** Breaking the boundary between space-time*

Seizing life's moments to describe the ultimate state of emotions is the way Kawabata often uses when writing short stories in the palm of his hand. With this method, the space-time distance seems to be shortened to the point of being re-entered indistinguishable. Let's analyze Kawabata's generalization in *Landscape* to see his mental state: "I grew up in a village between mountains and fields. I found the young woman by the river. I was just thinking about taking a picture with her as a couple. Every day I go up and down the riverbank, looking for standing places, flowing water, and rocks to use as a backdrop for taking pictures. After doing so, I learned the beauty of the landscape." He seems to have put people in exile. And is it possible for him that the world is just a temporary place and "life is a pilgrimage of non-stop status". When people appeared, they carried the destiny of an eternal traveler who was always nostalgic for his homeland. The journey here is, of course, a journey of consciousness. People go through imaginary stages to find themselves, people with all the essence of real people [1, p. 1083].

Or in an autobiographical work, "Côt", just a moment of seeing the bones of his grandfather that the sensitive 16-year-old Kawabata saw a whole life of chaos. Then it was only in the blink of an eye that I looked at the face of my lover, that my character in the Land of Light remembered the faces of loved ones, and people around, especially the grandfather who was blind who always had the habit of look towards the South - the side of the light. The

memory of the face of the grandfather who was blind but always turned to the light and the current lover "helped me feel closer to her and wanted to take with me the memories of her and my grandfather to the light on the sea shore beyond."

** Minimalist form to represent a slice of reality*

The series of stories in the palm of your hand are the ones that make Kawabata the most satisfied. This is a genre close to traditional Japanese haiku. Each story has only a few pictures, even some stories are less than a page long but contain many profound philosophies of life, especially expressing a slice of reality. The wordless gaps in each of those short stories are filled with many thoughts of the reader. Therefore, it can be seen that "with the story in the palm of your hand, the Japanese short story genre has been fundamentally restructured, far from the previous type of short story. From single points of view, capturing the divine moment of reality, awakening all senses, and creating according to the principle of "haiku of prose", Kawabata has brought openness to a genre with a short volume, turning the story in the palm of a hand into a genre with a modern European nature but somewhat different from the previous Western short story models in a very Japanese way [8]. Reading stories like the *Canh Tay*, *Thuy Nguyet*, and *The sound of dice rolling late at night*, *About birds and animals*, and so on, readers will be extremely impressed by Kawabata's "photography" technique when writing stories. He seems to be very quiet, but behind the gaps in words are very haunting slices of life.

3. Conclusion

Kawabata's short stories, although experiencing a new form, are not alien to traditional literature because they still carry the values that make up the Japanese identity. The problem is how to keep the national cultural

identity while still absorbing the quintessence of the times. Kawabata has answered that question with his compositions. The harmony between tradition and modernity is expressed by the love of Beauty itself, which is Zen-colored thoughts, intuitive worlds... Therefore, Y. Kawabata's short stories are not only national but also modern. He is a modern writer but is modern in the oriental style. In the process of composing, Kawabata actively used Western creative techniques and methods as a tool to express his artistic purpose without being dependent on and mechanically imitating. And maybe that's why Kawabata's short stories are modern in a very unique way - a "Japanese way of thinking".

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