

## A SURVEY ON THE RESEARCH OF TRADITIONAL CULTURAL SYMBOLS APPEARED IN THE Y.KAWABATA NOVELS IN VIETNAM

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**Abstract.** Kawabata is one of Japan's leading writers. Kawabata's works are a place to preserve and preserve old traditional values becoming a miraculous bridge to bring Japan across the ocean to the whole world, and to bring the world to the land of beautiful cherry blossoms. Therefore, his works have been the object of many large and small research projects domestically and internationally. Within the scope of the article, we have conducted surveys of works and articles on traditional cultural symbols in Kawabata's novels under the following angles: Biography, Poetry, Psychoanalysis and Culture, thereby, affirming the talent and the unique art style of Kawabata. Beauty is at the heart of culture and art in Japan so Kawabata's writing point of view also focused on the ultimate beauty including its expression and the way in which it is expressed.

**Keywords:** Kawabata novels, cultural symbols and symbols.

### 1. Introduction

The 1968 Nobel Prize for Literature affirmed Kawabata's unique talent and artistic style. As early as 1969, many of his works have been translated and introduced in Vietnam. But it was not until the 70's that Kawabata's works did come to readers with abundant quantity and lots of qualitative translation versions, especially novels. Along with that are many research works that providing a comprehensive and systematic view of Kawabata from his life to his works on many different aspects. These articles generally aim to affirm the traditional character of the writer's compositions: the old cultural tradition, the aesthetic conception of Beauty, Sadness which originates from the literary tradition of Japan.

### 2. Content

#### 2.1. From the perspective of Biography Criticism

In 1969, right after Kawabata won the Nobel Prize for Literature, author Vu Thu Thanh had written an article: *Yasunary Kawabata, life and career* published in Văn magazine, Saigon. The article has provided information about the writer's biography and

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writing process, and also showed her profound feelings about Kawabata's style and aesthetic ideas [1; 2-3].

The largest work belongs to the book *Yasunary Kawabata - the life and work* (1997) of author Luu Duc Trung. This can be considered as the first treatise in Vietnam that has a relatively in-depth research on writer Kawabata. From the complete introduction of Kawabata's portrait, ideas, life, career and the influences of the "volatile" era to his writing and on the basis of an analysis of the trio of Nobel literature novels, author Luu Duc Trung affirmed: "The three outstanding novels above have clearly demonstrated Kawabata's artistic styl. Whether such deep lyric and mellow sadness has been inherited from the "feminine" literature of the Heian era? [2; 18].

In the book *Overview of the history of Japanese literature* published in 2011, author Nguyen Nam Tran provided readers with information about life, artistic perspectives, especially surveys of works considered as landmarks of Kawabata's literary life from early literary to final works. This can be said to be useful information for us in the process of accessing, analyzing and interpreting the writer's works [3].

In 2016, in the book *Travelling in the culture of cherry blossoms*, author Huu Ngoc spent a small part in the book to write about Kawabata - "The sad tourist" and "Snow Country" with the desire to explain how the writer chose to end his life at the age of 73. Is it because of the misfortunes of his own life or "Maybe one reason why he ended his life was because he felt he could not balance between two opposing lifestyles: the traditional and the modern ones"? "But that must not be the only reason that explains the suicide of an artist who claims to be *a sad tourist Travelling the world*" [4; 236].

The articles from the perspective of biography has shown the authors' insights into Kawabata's unique life, ideology and art style, and expressed his love, admiration as well as his gratefulness to Kawabata. It can be said that the above articles not only have brought new perspectives of the work but also provided valuable documents which will be a scientific basis for us to approach and explain the influences on life and time to the writer's point of view in the next chapters of the thesis.

## **2.2. From a poetic perspective**

In 1991, the author Nhat Chieu had the first research paper in Vietnam that mentioned the poetry of Kawabata's novel: *Yasunari Kawabata, the savior of beauty*. With a gentle and attractive way of writing through the study and analysis of typical Kawabata novels, the author affirmed: the poetic prosody of Kawabata's novel is close to the poem of Haiku - "Poetry of vacuum" [5; 1061]. That vacuum can not be explained but can only be felt. Although the new article is only provocative, it is really a valuable key that opens the way for us to approach and go deeply into his novels.

Next, in 1999 author Luu Duc Trung has had a writing: *a poetic prosody of the novel by Yasunari Kawabata, a great Japanese writer*. The author has emphasized a number of outstanding features such as *vacuum poetic prosody, Haiku poetic prosody, structure, storyline* by examining the trilogy of *Snow Country, A Thousand Cranes* and the Nobel Prize-winning in literature *The Old Capital* in 1968 [6; 45]. This article really had a great influence in the field of Kawabata's art research, greatly helpful to his later studies.

In 2000, when researching on the characteristics of prose genre, especially

exploring the world of beauty in Kawabata's works, the researcher Nhat Chieu also confirmed Kawabata's poetic prosody through articles: *Kawabata and the aesthetics of the mirror*. The author emphasizes the aspect of *vacuum* through the mirror aesthetic "Kawabata's aesthetic, from first sight to last, is to illuminate the world in a miraculous mirror and the reflected things will be more beautiful than themselves" [5; 89].

Also exploiting the artistic aspect, in 2004 in the journal *Literary Research*, Khuong Viet Ha published: *A contrasting tactics in the story "Sleeping Beauty" by Kawabata Yasunary*. In addition to pointing out and analyzing the contrasts of space - time, form - interior, old - young..., the author has argued that "the contrast is used by Kawabata as an essential tactic, dotted in every page of *Sleeping Beauty*..." [7; 105-106].

The work *Murasaki to Kawabata* (2005) of the author Thuy Khue could be a rather profound article about Kawabata's work from novel to story *In the palm of your hand*. Thuy Khue had shown the correct assessment of the masterful art of Kawabata: "Kawabata's works is poetic, dense, condensed as Duong Poetry with gaps outside language. Using Western anatomical techniques, he entered the human heart like a phenomenologist with endoscopic light that shined from within, like Zen light; he attained consciousness with subtle lights, not through arguments, which few Eastern novelists achieved"[8;987-988]. Through the above assessments and judgments, we believe that researcher Thuy Khue has indirectly affirmed the vacuum prosody in Kawabata's work.

With the aim of finding a way to express beauty in Kawabata's work, in 2006, in *The literary research journal* author Khuong Viet Ha had an article of *Kawabata Yasunari's aesthetics*. Under studying and analyzing the works of Kawabata, the author has discovered the modes of expressing beauty in Kawabata's works [9; 69].

In 2007, in the treatise on *Japanese culture and Kawabata Yasunari*, the author Dao Thi Thu Hang stated: exploiting the methods of mirror tactic in depth as an effective tool in discovering the inner world of people or "feminine sentimentality" is the main substance that Kawabata has inherited from traditional literature" [10; 17].

In 2009, on the celebration of the 110th anniversary of the writer Kawabata's birth, the seminar about *Kawabata in the school* was held at Hanoi Pedagogical University. Many articles and approaches of Kawabata works from different angles were presented and discussed at the workshop. Typical of which is the article by author Nguyen Thi Mai Lien: *Art space polarization of art in Kawabata's composition*. The author affirms that the main theme in Kawabata's works is "Japanese soul, tradition of loving beauty, preserving beauty, promoting the eternal value of beauty in human life and in art". At the same time, discovering one of the ways to express this theme is "Kawabata has built the art space in his composition which is a combination of the polarities, expressing the depth of the writer's thoughts on a journey of abandon and search [11].

In addition, author Nguyen Tuan Khanh in the section on Kawabata in the book *Outstanding Pens in Japanese Literature* also expressed a consensus opinion about the literary characteristics of Kawabata artist as sadness. Therefore, "Kawabata's works remind us of Japanese painting, he is a worshiper of the fragile beauty and the sad image of the existence in natural life and human condition" [12; 268].

In 2012, in *the Art and Culture Magazine*, author Nguyen Duc Ninh has an article

honoring Kawabata's talent as an artist who is very meticulous in nurturing beauty "for more than anyone, Y. Kawabata understands the beauty which is so fragile dissolving like soap bubbles, falling down like peach petals while showing off the most brilliant flavor". It can be said that "Throughout his life, Kawabata sought and worked hard to nurture beauty with the expectation of perfect beauty, the ideal of existence in love, life as desired by each of us and all humanity" [13; 43].

The question of beauty and the mode of expression of beauty has been a recurring theme in many studies of Kawabata's writing. In 2017, in the magazine *Art and Culture*, an article by author Le Thi Bich Thuy also discussed *the Art of Expressing Beauty in "Sleeping Beauty" by Y. Kawabata*. Through analyzing the novel *Sleeping Beauty*, the author affirmed that "beauty is felt as a main character throughout the life, the literature of Y. Kawabata" [14].

Thus, works have shown that beauty is the most core issue in Kawabata's aesthetic conception. The unique beauty of the pure, sincere, fragile, deeply evocative and philosophical depths is reflected in most of his literary works. At the same time, it is pointed out that the writer's aesthetic conception is deeply influenced by Zen aesthetics and other traditional cultural achievements.

### **2.3. From a Psychoanalysis point of view**

First of all, we must mention the research paper of author Doan Le Giang *Kawabata - Traditional beauty through modern lenses, published in Van magazine, No. 101 in 2000*. It can be seen in Kawabata's work that "Western literature to him is very familiar and he is influenced quite a lot, especially novels by James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and the psychoanalysis of S.Freud ... To be more specific, Japanese beauty in the Kawabata's work is recognized through Western lenses, and from this lens, he had discovered the modernity in national beauty and tradition, and expressed it with a new color" [15; 87].

In 2004, the author Dao Thi Thu Hang in the article *Yasnary Kawabata between East-West currents* had a deep and thorough insight into Kawabata's writing art and the effects of psychoanalysis on compositions by Kawabata. It is the combination of Eastern spirit and modern Western thoughts: "he *overcame* or in another aspect, he was the man who built the bridge between the East and West banks"; "From this conception, in conjunction with unconscious Freudian psychoanalysis, the writers have re-enacted human inner life in their own way [16; 1094].

When discussing some influences of modern Western art in the compositions of writer Kawabata, author Ha Van Luong in the article *Time and art space in the novel Sleeping Beauty by Y. Kawabata* determined that Yasunari Kawabata is a typical writer of "traditional trends", always looking back to the national roots, expressing the beauty of the country and people of Japan. This is reflected in many great works of the writer such as *Snow Country, The Old Capital, The Dancing girl of Izu ...* But, Y.Kawabata is also a writer of the "New Feelings" school, strongly influenced by modern Western art. [17; 72]. We believe that, in this research, author Ha Van Luong also indirectly confirmed the influence of Psychoanalysis in the creation process of writer Kawabata.

Author Hoang Thi My Nhi in *Kawabata Yasunary's Symbol in "A Thousand*

*Cranes*” from a psychoanalyst point of view affirmed another view in Kawabata’s expressive art. “In *A Thousand Cranes*, this image system is the mascot objects in the user’s perception, hiding the spirituality of the depth of thought. From a psychoanalysis point of view, we focused on applying two basic theoretical bases: collective unconsciousness according to Jung’s point of view and the personalization problem to clarify the reflected values of symbols in works. “[18; 74].

This is a new and quite interesting approach to research into Kawabata’s novels.

#### **2.4. From a cultural perspective**

One of the characteristics of Japanese literature, becoming “the lovely creed” according to the word used by the author Nhat Chieu is the worship of beauty. Beauty is at the heart of culture and art in Japan. It is also the highest goal that the artist is aiming for. Therefore, there are many studies that claim that Kawabata’s view of composition focuses on the ultimate beauty, including its manifestations and the way of expressing that beauty in works.

With the desire to explore the beauty of Japan, in the article *Kawabata - Traditional beauty through modern lenses*, author Doan Le Giang has discovered outstanding traditional cultural features which are the unique beauty of Japan. Beautiful and talented geisha girls in *Snow Country*, the art of tea ceremony in *A Thousand Cranes*, the art of decoration, kimono weaving ... in *The Old Capital* are all old traditional cultural features and the essence of the Japanese nation. But all that beauty is in danger of fading and being tarnished by human selfish intentions and the rampant Western culture. All of these caused the beauty to gradually drift into “the past” because “fragile beauty is easy to lose”; therefore, “the pilgrimage in search of beauty and the warning of its peril is the greatest contribution of Kawabata. [15; 87].

In 2001, in the article *Kawabata - The melancholy traveler looking for beauty*, author Le Thi Huong affirmed: “Love for beauty, feeling about beauty is an outstanding feature of Japanese culture. Facing the invasion of a new lifestyle and Western culture, Kawabata has been diligently on the way to find the beauty of national identity. “To modernity from tradition”, Kawabata’s works beared the imprint of traditional Japanese aesthetics [19; 70]. In addition, the author also affirmed: “Showing the concept of the beauty of the universe, Kawabata often uses images with symbolic meaning. The mirror image and its equivalent similarities are repeated many times in works with intention and have a philosophical meaning about beauty”; “Nature in Kawabata works is a symbol of Eastern human consciousness” [19; 72].

In 2004, the author Dao Thi Thu Hang commented in the article *Kawabata between the East-West currents* that “Reviewing the whole system of his works, we can confirm that modernism and foreign literature had a great influence on Kawabata style. The typical image that the author has analyzed quite deeply in the article is the mirror: “at the peak of the iconic image depiction, Kawabata has made the mirror become soulful, destined like a human beings” [16; 1091].

In 2005, with the article *Yasunari Kawabata - “Eternal traveler” looking for beauty*, author Nguyen Thi Mai Lien has studied deeply into Japanese beauty under many different aspects such as natural beauty, customs and the beauty of human soul in

Kawabata novel. In each aspect, the writer highlighted the “traveler” Kawabata’s writing style in searching for and preserving Beauty and the beauty reflected in the writer’s writing is “humility, elegance, pure, youthful, harmonious, sad and illusionary” [20; 74-86].

In 2005, author Tran To Loan had an article, *A discussion on Symbol in Kawabata Yasunary’s novel A Thousand Cranes*. The author approached the symbol “being a special character, present in many different forms, collectively referred to as forms of expressing meaning of literary works”. The author affirmed: “In Kawabata’s compositions, the mirror, the lantern, the pair of Raku cups, the Shino goblet, the scarf with the thousand-winged cranes, fire, snow, even a black birthmark on the chest characters... are also artistic symbols associated with his creative intentions” [21]. Thus, the author approached the icon in the direction of being an artistic aspect, a way to express the beauty of the work.

Then, in 2006, the article *Traditional Japanese Beauty in the composition of Y. Kawabata* authored by Tran Thi To Loan which was published in *the Journal of Japanese and Northeast Asian Studies* emphasized the beauty on the basis of exploiting the concept of Japanese beauty and the inward thinking style of Zen to affirm: “Y. Kawabata quietly built the trust of the nation with works that shimmering Japanese beauty: people, nature, lifestyle, soul, personality ... Born from Japanese beauty, Y. Kawabata vowed all his life to be a traveler to save the fading and tarnished Beauty. The article had an overview of the continuation of traditional Japanese literary values to Kawabata’s unique creations in his compositions. These are valuable documents for us in the process of surveying and understanding the traditional cultural roots in the novel by writer Kawabata [22; 67-71].

In 2007, in her treatise on *Japanese culture and Yasunari Kawabata*, Dao Thi Thu Hang also reviewed some symbolic images in some works of Kawabata Yasunari. The author has commented that all the beauty of traditional culture of Japan are kept and preserved in *The Old Capital* - a valuable handbook which anyone can find and enjoy it in mysterious way of infatuation. This research has partly revealed to the readers some unique aspects of the construction and depiction of the colorful symbolic world of a delicate and sensitive Eastern soul [10; 49].

In particular, in the article of *Kawabata Yasunary’s aesthetics*, Khuong Viet Ha affirmed that a unique and effective way of expressing the Beauty in Kawabata’s works is to build the symbolic system: “In his work, Kawabata has emphasized the search for special artistic symbols that bring infinite emotional and semantic depth to the object depicted [9; 72].

Next, we can mention the research work of Pham Thi Khanh Liem with: *Symbol in the trio of works “Snow Country”, “A Thousand Cranes”, “The Old Capital” by Yasunari Kawabata*. In this work, the author has also focused on exploiting and pointing out many issues mentioning the value that constituted the world of symbols in the trio of Nobel Prize winning novels by Kawabata Yasunari. The author also mentioned a few other aspects such as Kimono - belts, Kyoto festival, willow tree: “Unpacking the writings of kimono, we discover cultural values of the cherry blossom island with the old capital of Kyoto a leading figure [23; 81]. This research work is a

source of documents, a very great basis opening up many matters for the process of approaching and comprehending the works of Kawabata Yasunari, especially from the level of symbols in his *the Old Capital*'s novel.

In 2010, at the National Conference on Kawabata, author Tran To Loan wrote: *Symbol in Kawabata Yasunari's novel*. The essay has outlined several aspects about symbols, especially the use of symbols as an art tactic to successfully sketch out the aesthetic cultural features of the Japanese. For most of his writing career, Kawabata Yasunari has used symbols and he saw it as an art craft to convey the aesthetic cultural values of the Japanese to the readers. [24]. It can be said that this research paper by author Tran To Loan is a starting step for the new approach coming from Kawabata Yasunari's work. With the above findings together with practical and logical basis, this study helps readers partly exploit and decipher mysterious unknowns in Kawabata Yasunari's work.

Also in 2010, in the article *Kawabata in the process of modernizing Japanese literature*, once again, author Tran To Loan affirmed the issue of national culture in Kawabata's compositions: "His writing is not only retaining Japanese identity but also the harmony between tradition and modernity. That is the love of beauty, that is Zen-colored thoughts, the intuitively perceived worlds ... [25].

In addition to the influence of Zen aesthetics, the concept of Kawabata aesthetics is influenced by traditional and modern culture. Through the article *The World of Kawabata Yasunari (or beauty: figure and shadow)*, Nhat Chieu said: Kawabata created the world of art with beauty. The beauty is a unique combination between a legendary lamp from ancient times handed down by a new light. In other words, the combination of traditional and modern cultural elements has created success in expressing Japanese beauty through the works of Kawabata [26; 86].

In 2016, Huu Ngoc the culturalist in his book *Travelling in the land of cherry blossoms* devoted a number of pages to write about Kawabata: "The Sad tourist" Kawabata and "Snow Country". In addition to analyzing the traditional Japanese beauty reflected in Kawabata's novels, the author mentioned the problem of symbols, "symbolic language", "a signal chain"; "Snow Country is a symphony with Asian themes, variations, structures and styles, very Japanese. The whole novel is a series of signals, images in succession like sequences of cinema ... [4; 238]

On the other hand, author Hoang Thi My Nhi in *The sense of Zen of Kawabata Yasunary viewed from the concept of world and people in "A Thousand Cranes"*; Feeling of nature in "A Thousand Cranes" of Kawabata Yasunary from the traditional point of view has shown Kawabata's unique and unique interpretation of people and the world. From the influence of the sense of Zen in the writer's compositions, the author makes the statement "A Thousand Cranes is the most representative and most successful representative work of the writer when the artist introduces the Japanese style to world's readers "[27; 73-78]. In general, in these articles, the author focuses on affirming the tradition and breath of the Japanese people with spiritual beauty through Zen's essence and the universe. This is a unique creation that made a success for the novel *A Thousand Cranes* as well as the writing career of writer Kawabata [28; 76].

Studies of traditional Japanese cultural symbols will actively support us in defining the role of symbols in Kawabata's work clearly.

Most recently, in 2018, the author Dao Thi Thu Hang - who especially loves and devotes a lot to Japanese literature, gave birth to a treatise "*Japanese Writers of the twentieth century*". In the section about Kawabata, the author once again affirms: the inheritance of traditional culture is the highlight that makes the works of Kawabata successful. [29; 106-136]

Through some typical research articles above, it can be affirmed that the aesthetic concept of Kawabata focuses on the core beauty of Japan. The main factors such as Zen, traditional culture and modernity have a certain influence on the aesthetic conception of the writer. The research works as well as the above articles have partly helped us to get a lot of interesting and unique things from Kawabata Yasunari's novels. At the same time, it also opens up a new approach for readers in terms of cultural symbols. However, each researcher stands from many different angles and aspects when presenting the problem so we try to explore, research as well as systematically exploit each aspect of many issues at different angles with the desire to bring a broader and more comprehensive, deeper view of the meaning of the world of symbols and the specialties in building world of symbols in the novel by writer Kawabata Yasunari.

In addition to the above research directions, when studying the works of Kawabata in Vietnam, we also pay more attention to a number of theses and treatises that choose Kawabata's novels as the aim of research. We would like to list here a number of master theses such as: *The art of co-present in the trio of works: "Snow Country", "A Thousand Cranes", "The Old Capital" by Kawabata* (2010) by Nguyen Thi Thao Nguyen; *Compassion (aware) in Kawabata's novel* (2011) by Pham Thao Huong Ly ... It can be said that these are the results of serious, qualitative scientific research with many new observations and findings. Although these studies did not choose the issue of *traditional cultural symbols in Kawabata's novels* as the object of research, but more or less inspires us to understand more about the writer himself and the characteristic expressions in the work under many different approaches.

There is only a small number of research works in Vietnam regarding the doctoral thesis, up to now we have only surveyed two successfully defended subjects. The first one is: *The art of storytelling in the works of Yasunary Kawabata* by Dao Thi Thu Dang. This is the first doctoral thesis on Japanese literature in Vietnam to choose Kawabata's work as the subject of research and defending in 2006, guided by Ha Minh Duc. The second one is: *The sense of awareness in Japanese literature through the novel "Genji story" by Murasaki Shikibu and "A Thousand Cranes" by Kawabata Yasunary* by author Hoang Thi My Nhi defended in 2018, tutored by Nguyen Duc Ninh. These are also valuable documents in suggesting how to approach Kawabata's works.

It can be seen that the issue of traditional cultural symbols in Kawabata Yasunari's novels has also been researched and exploited by researchers and literary critics to confirm Kawabata's talent. Going into the decoding of symbols will help us expand our awareness and discover the true values of the work and deepening our understanding of Japanese national culture.

### 3. Conclusions

Overall, the most popular surveyed piece of research in the research papers is still the three Nobel Prize winning literature: *Snow Country*, *A Thousand Cranes*, *The Old Capital*. Research papers highly appreciate Kawabata novels from content to art, which focus mainly on poetic prosody, language, style.... Some research articles have mentioned the issue of Japanese traditions, but have not exploited the issue of traditional cultural symbols. However, each researcher stands from many different angles and aspects when presenting the problem, so we try to explore, research as well as systematically exploit each aspect of many issues at different angles with the desire to bring a comprehensive and deeper overview of the meaning of the world of symbols and specialties in building the world of symbol in the novel by writer Kawabata Yasunari.

Based on all the above research, in our opinion, the works and articles on the issue of cultural symbols in Kawabata's compositions have not been published in large quantity that do not deserve with the writer's stature "the eternal traveler looking for beauty". However, these studies, judgments, analyzes and feelings will be the suggestions for us to partly explain and decode the problem when studying Kawabata's novels. At the same time, it also opens up a new approach for readers in terms of cultural symbols that imply the reception and research of Kawabata keep continuing in the present and in the future as well.

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