

Purifying the Narcissist hero; A Feminist study of Kawabata Yasunari's Snow Country

Km Bandana¹, Dr Hemlatha K²

¹Research Scholar (Gurukula Kangri Deemed to be University, Haridwar)

²Professor (Gurukula Kangri Deemed to be University, Haridwar)

Abstract

This study examines the portrayal of women in Yasunari Kawabata's work *Snow Country*, specifically focusing on their depiction as individuals characterized by vulnerability, subordination, and objectification. Kawabata Yasunari was a renowned Japanese author who was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature for elucidating the Japanese mentality in his writings. The Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to him in 1968, making him the first Japanese author to receive the honour. In 1938, he released his most celebrated novel, *Yukiguni* (The Snow Country). Set in a remote hot spring town in the mountainous foothills of northern Japan, *Snow Country* is a dismal tale of a love affair between a Tokyo socialite and a regional geisha. In the novel, Women are labelled as weaklings. They are the ones who constantly weep and are frequently abandoned, whereas men are the dominant and stronger species. The narrative depicts women solely as sexual objects for males.

Keywords: Snow country, Feminism, Narcissism, Purity, Sexual objectification.

Kawabata Yasunari

Kawabata Yasunari was a Japanese novelist who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968. He was born on June 11, 1899, in Saka, Japan, and died on April 16, 1972, in Zushi. A historic Japanese literary heritage is echoed in the present idiom by his melancholy lyricism. The pervasive themes of isolation and contemplation of mortality seen in Kawabata's literary oeuvre may have been shaped by his formative years, during which he experienced a considerable amount of loneliness due to early orphanhood and the subsequent loss of close family members. In 1924, he successfully obtained his degree from Tokyo Imperial University.

Snow Country

Snow Country is widely regarded as one of the most notable and renowned literary works of Yasunari Kawabata, a fact that is further underscored by its inclusion as one of the three novels specifically referenced by the Nobel Committee when conferring upon him the prestigious Nobel Literature Prize in the year 1968. The novel takes place in a small hot spring town located in "snow country," a region along the western coast of Japan that experiences an exceptionally substantial snowfall. It narrates the tale of an ill-fated romantic relationship between Shimamura, an affluent dilettante from Tokyo who asserts himself as a ballet critic despite lacking firsthand experience of witnessing a ballet performance, and Komako, a geisha who exudes sensuality and passion, yearning for a love life that transcends the limitations imposed by her profession.

The relationship between Shimamura and Komako is inherently destined for failure because of the manifold challenges they encounter, primarily stemming from the cultural constraints that encumber them. Shimamura experiences a sense of attraction for Yoko, a geisha from a hot spring, from his interactions with Komako. He finds Yoko to be aesthetically pleasing as well. Yoko can be considered a rival to Komako, as she was formerly involved with Yukio, a deceased individual who was in love with Komako, and currently vies for the affections of Shimamura, who finds himself torn between the two due to a multitude of concerns and uncertainties.

Analysis:

According to Pramod K. Nayar,

Feminist Criticism is both a political stance and a theory that argues that the representation of women as weak, docile, innocent, seductive, or irrational-sentimental is rooted in and influences actual social conditions, where she does not have power, is treated as a sex object or a procreating machine, has fewer political and financial rights, and is abused. Feminism, therefore, is a world view that refuses to delink art from existing social conditions and practices (Nayar 83).

In his scholarly discourse, *Beginning Theory* Barry expounds about the genesis and significance of Feminist literary critique.

The Feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the 'women's movement' of the 1960s. This movement was, in important ways, literary from the start, in the sense that it realised the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature, and saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence (Barry 123).

In her seminal work, *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir argued that men possess the ability to mislead women. She believed that the utilization of mystification and stereotyping played a pivotal role in establishing patriarchy. The assertion was made by the speaker that women actively adopted this stereotype, therefore implicating themselves in their own subordination. She asserted that women consistently represented the antithesis of men, with males being regarded as the epitome and norm, while women were perceived as deviant or other. The statement was made regarding the societal expectations and norms around the gender roles assigned to individuals of male and female genders. Gender inequality is a prevalent societal issue that endures due to the notion that women possess inherent inferiority compared to others.

In *Snow Country*, women are unapologetically portrayed as overly sentimental, emotional, frail, and just sex objects. Roy Starrs, in his work *Soundings in Time*, has made the statement that "Kawabata's self-loathing heroes are usually 'purified' by coming into contact with a beautiful and innocent young girl" (Starrs 104), in the majority of Kawabata's writings, the heroine serves precisely this purpose. They must serve the leading man. This is their sole identification. Apart from this, Women are pitied against other women in most of Kawabata's writings, including Komako and Yoko in *Snow Country*, Mr Ota and Chicako in *The Thousand Cranes*, and numerous other female characters.

In *Snow Country*, women are portrayed as possessing characteristics that are commonly associated with vulnerability or fragility. They are the ones that constantly whine and feel helpless in social situations, while men are portrayed as the dominant and powerful species. The novel's female protagonists have all shown signs of crying, which is viewed as a sign of weakness. One instance that conveys this notion is "She started to smile through the thick geisha's powder. Instead, she melted into tears, and the two of them walked off silently toward his room" (Kawabata 15). The following narrative not only portrays the reason

behind Komako's tears but also depicts women's vulnerability, often perceived as a manifestation of their weakness.

Despite what had passed between them, he had not written to her, or come to see her, or sent her the dance instructions he had promised. She was no doubt left to think that he had laughed at her and forgotten her. (p. 15)

Additionally, the story depicts women solely as objects of male sexual desire. Shimamura makes it obvious that he is not looking for a long-term relationship with the geisha when he hires a geisha from Komako on his first visit, and he says, "An affair of the moment, no more. Nothing beautiful about it. You know that it couldn't last" (Kawabata 22). However, Komako does develop feelings for Shimamura, and as a result, when they finally meet on his second visit, she breaks down in front of him.

Kawabata's protagonists exhibit a tendency of cowardness, demonstrating a limited capacity for effectively managing the emotional dynamics with the women they encounter. This pattern persists, often persisting even after they have acquired insight into both the women's feelings and their own. Similar to how things are in *Snow Country*, the woman is still shown as vulnerable and considered weak. They are made to beg even for love. Komako also has to beg and even justify her feelings before Shimamura; in a revealing remark, she says, "I won't have any regrets. I'll never have any regrets. But I'm not that sort of woman. It can't last. Didn't you say so yourself? [...] It's not my fault. It's yours. You lost. You're the weak one. Not I" (Kawabata 37). Komako takes a courageous and tragic step when she gives herself to a love affair, which she knows has no chance of enduring beyond a fleeting moment, and she does not want Shimamura to misunderstand and diminish it by mistaking her genuine longing for the passion of a prostitute. ("women of this type").

Shimamura is a classic example of a narcissist, much like most of the male protagonists in Kawabata's works. When discussing the characteristic traits of narcissists, Nancy McWilliams draws upon the insights of Ernst Jones, a prominent psychoanalyst and follower of Sigmund Freud,

Ernest Jones (1913) may have been the first analytic writer to describe the more overtly grandiose narcissistic person. He depicted a man characterized by exhibitionism, aloofness, emotional inaccessibility, fantasies of omnipotence, overvaluation of his creativity, and a tendency to be judgmental (Jones as qtd. in McWilliams 178).

From the very beginning of the novel, it becomes clear that Shimamura is introverted and emotionally distant, frequently keeping his thoughts and emotions to himself. He spends much time immersed in introspection, as he is reflective and contemplative. He is characterized as a modern man who lives a "life of idleness" devoid of genuine passion or interest in anything. Although the author does not offer an elaborate portrayal of his family in Tokyo, it can be deduced that Shimamura's connection with his wife and children is not notably strong. When discussing the type of spirit Shimamura searches for in the *Snow Country*, it is a spirit diametrically opposed to city life.

Shimamura, already married, begins a connection with Komako, who helplessly falls in love with him. Despite knowing that Komako loves him but that he cannot reciprocate her feelings, Shimamura continues to visit her until he finally sleeps with her. Everything goes fine until Komako starts expressing her love for him which freaks out Shimamura. When Shimamura calls Komako "good girl" prior to having sexual relations with her and "good woman" after that, Komako feels as though she has been used. Despite this, Komako pledged to forgive him and stayed with him that night. Once more, this demonstrates how a woman is portrayed as the victim of her uncontrollable emotion. It is not that Shimamura's marriage prevents him from loving Komako; rather, he doesn't want to commit to any emotional relationship. Freud,

in his paper *On Narcissism* (1914), points out an important and crucial characteristic of Narcissistic people, “Narcissist people have disturbed libidinal development. It makes them unable to commit. They are seeking people who don’t demand” (Freud 13). Roy Starrs rightly says, "The *snow country* stands as the perfect metaphor for Shimamura's psychological condition, which is the 'lifelong psychic cold' typical of the narcissist” (Starrs 18).

The male protagonists of most of Kawabata’s works exhibit a distinct preoccupation with the concept of purity. Many of Kawabata's heroes reside in cities, and as they already feel somewhat contaminated by his presence in the world, they seek a 'clean' female to rejuvenate their spirit. Consequently, it is also reasonable that, as Komako begins to seek at least some reciprocation of her passion and dedication, Shimamura begins to shift away from her and gravitate towards Yoko, a more distant and mysterious girl who appears to him to be both purer and more maternal than Komako.

Conclusion

It follows that women in the *Snow Country* are not portrayed as independent and powerful figures. The novel's female protagonist Komako faces sexism despite her many positive traits: she is strong and capable, caring for her family and a sick relative; she is pure and innocent; she is full of love; she is dedicated to her work; and she is an accomplished musician. Instead of celebrating her qualities, Kawabata portrays her as a woman desperate for love and reduced to sobbing and overly sentimental seduction. This woman just serves to benefit the male protagonist in this story. It is indisputable that certain women, despite the contemporary era in which we reside, remain bound by the shackles of ignorance, and continue to be susceptible to abuse and inequality. The story effectively illustrates the status of women characters who are geishas, revealing that they mostly engage in prostitution rather than enjoying the social prestige associated with geishas in other regions of Japan.

Works Cited

1. Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. Fourth. Viva Books Private Limited, 2018.
2. Freud, Sigmund. n.d. <www.SigmundFreud.net>.
3. Kawabata, Yasunari. *Snow Country*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2011.
4. McWilliams, Nancy. *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2011.
5. Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary literary theory and cultural theory*. Uttar Pradesh: Pearson India Education Services Pvt.Ltd., 2019.
6. Starrs, Roy. *Soundings in Time*. Kindle. New York: Routledge, 2019.