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RESEARCH PAPER

A Living Space Under the Sign of the Rhythms of Nature: Kyoto in The Old Capital by Kawabata Yasunari

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Abstract: Yasunari Kawabata's The Old Capital offers a profound meditation on the relationship between nature, tradition, and the human spirit. Set in Kyoto, the novel transforms the city into a symbolic and aesthetic landscape through which themes of impermanence, seasonal rhythm, and cultural identity are explored. The present study tries to emphasize the way in which, out of the desire to lament the loss of tradition, in his novel whose original title is *Koto*, Yasunari Kawabata creates an idealized image of the old imperial capital, giving it the value of a keeper of the most authentic values of the Japanese ethos as well as that of a symbol of aesthetic concepts such as mono no aware, the fleeting beauty, wabi sabi, the rustic, imperfect and desolate beauty, or ma, the beauty of the empty space, which were generated by a deep awareness of the transient beauty of nature. The vegetal element that perhaps best characterizes the Japanese identity always tried hard by the forces of nature occupies a central place in Kawabata's novel, encompassing its traditional meanings as a symbol of renewal, but also that of the impermanence of beauty and fragility of life. By analysing key motifs such as seasonal festivals, natural imagery, and spatial motifs, this paper argues that tradition in The Old Capital is not portrayed as rigid or static. Rather, it emerges as a fluid and evolving presence, continuously reinterpreted through individual memory by the novel's characters acting like true keepers of tradition. It also puts forward an interpretation that aligns with Rodica Frentiu's analysis of Kawabata's poetic sensibility, where nature, seasonality, and the aesthetics of impermanence become part of a lived experience rather than abstract symbolism.

Keywords: *Kawabata; Kyoto; seasonal imagery; natural elements; Japanese aesthetics*

Published in 1962, Yasunari Kawabata's The Old Capital (*Koto*) presents a lyrical meditation on traditional Japanese aesthetics through the shifting seasons of Kyoto—a city where the impermanence of beauty, emotional ambiguity, and the quiet dialogue between nature and identity converge. This paper explores how Kawabata constructs a literary Kyoto that oscillates between fiction and reality, transforming the city into a symbolic space for articulating traditional Japanese aesthetics. Through close analysis, it examines how concepts such as *mono no aware* (the pathos of things), *ma* (the meaningful pause or spatial interval), and the symbolic relationship between humans and the natural world are woven into the narrative text of The Old Capital.

The study also seeks to demonstrate how the seasonal rhythm of the novel structures both the narrative and the emotional development of the characters, with each season marking shifts in perception, identity and interpersonal relationships. Moreover, it investigates how Kawabata reimagines traditional customs, especially festivals and rituals, not as static remnants of the past but as evolving practices shaped by individual memory and collective experience. From this perspective, Kawabata's Kyoto emerges not merely as a physical setting but as a literary and spiritual landscape where tradition and modernity coexist in delicate balance.

Time and space are ambiguous and complex concepts, but also crucial for the study of any culture and society. Each culture constructs its own temporality and territoriality. Time and space in Japan are considered to be in a permanent relationship, forming an indissoluble whole. In order to point out the fundamental difference in the perception of space in the West and in Japan, the philosopher and orientalist Augustin Berque brings into focus the concept of *ma*, which reflects not just a different aesthetic, but a fundamentally different 'way of being in the world' ("*avoir le «sens du ma », c'est vivre un autre espace-temps*") (Berque & Sauzet, 2004, p. 33). Analysing the way in which the Japanese conception integrates the human being in his habitat, in the smallest physical and symbolic detail, creating a link with an existential ideal, Berque considers that the notion of *ma*, would embody 'a concrete and singular relationship in space-time, as opposed to those universal abstractions that space and time' have become for the Occidental thought (Berque, 2016 [2015], pp. 16-17). At the same time, as an expression of space, *ma* can mean space itself, the dimension of a space, a unit of space, or the space between two things, while as an expression of time, ma means time itself, the interval between two events, rhythm, or timing (Komparu, 1983 [1980], p. 70). Marked by versatility, the notion of *ma* may also define an existence that connects a presence, a transitory phenomenon, a relationship between temporality and spatiality, a space-time, which implies the simultaneous awareness of the form and the space around it, so that the space is perceived as 'identical with the event or phenomena occurring in it and recognized only in its relation to time-flow' (Isozaki, 1979, p. 13). In other words, various performances have been considered 'to manifest themselves in concrete forms' within the space-time continuum (Suizu, 1984, p. 1). Moreover, within Japanese philosophical tradition reality is conceived, consequently, as an uninterrupted sequence of causally linked, ephemeral phenomena. The notion that most clearly reveals that everything ceases to exist the very moment it comes into being, making all things inherently fleeting is a foundational concept in Buddhism, *mujo*, often translated as 'impermanence', 'transience' or 'momentariness' (Takeuchi, 2015, pp. 10-12). Both traditional and modern Japanese contexts, are profoundly shaped by the aesthetic and philosophical awareness of transience.

Commenting on the concept of *fūdo*, advanced by the Japanese philosopher Tetsuro Watsugi, A. Berque considers that this concept emphasizes the relationship between the characteristics of human societies and the natural conditions of their environment, especially the climate. However, Watsuji himself stated that his work is not only about the influence of the natural environment on human life and that this notion defines the Japanese identity by highlighting the fact that there is a reciprocity of influence from man to the environment and from the environment to the human being which allows the continuous evolution of both, *fūdo* representing "the entire interconnected web of influences that together create the attitudes and values of an entire people" (Berque, 1982, p. 498).

At the same time, the traditional Japanese conception of nature, as embodied by the *kami*—the deities or spirits of Shinto belief—differs fundamentally from the dominant Western worldview. In Japanese thought, nature is an active, sacred presence, animated by the kami and intimately connected to everyday life and religious practice. As Thomas Kasulis states, in Shinto, nature does not represent a passive background but rather "the medium through which the sacred reveals itself" (Kasulis, 2004, p. 89). Trees, rivers, rocks, and mountains are often considered sites of divine presence, and thus demand reverence rather than domination. Nature has, in Japanese mythology, an ambivalent character, being at the same time a realm of beauty, but also the realm of change and of decay. Since the Heian era, there has been a special interest in the natural world. Literature and art have consistently celebrated its fleeting qualities, and seasonal change became a central organizing principle in both poetry and courtly rituals, giving rise to a special sensitivity towards nature that continues to influence Japanese aesthetics today (Shirane, 2012, pp. 20-22). In Japanese Aesthetics and Culture, Donald Keene describes how this profound attentiveness to nature's ephemerality gave rise to aesthetic concepts such as *mono no aware*, *wabi-sabi*, and *yūgen* (Keene, 2004). *Mono no aware*, or 'the pathos of things,' refers to the gentle sadness or awareness in front of the transience of life,

often symbolized by falling cherry blossoms. *Wabi-sabi* celebrates the beauty of imperfection, impermanence, and simplicity, while *yūgen* refers to the subtle and mysterious aspects of beauty that cannot be fully articulated, evoking depth and emotional resonance (Hume, 1995). As Keene observes that these aren't just intellectual ideas, but also emotional, even spiritual responses of a culture deeply attuned to the cycles of nature.

In his novel, *The Old Capital*, in which the action takes place in the city of Kyoto, where the characters live, move, following the natural rhythm of the changing seasons, Kawabata builds the image of the city between fiction and reality, his literary representation focusing on three specific characteristics: nature, seasons and festivals.

By discussing the literary text, the following analysis attempts to explore how the image of Kyoto is recomposed by describing nature and seasons, gardens, temples or festivals and identify how typical characters stand for a typical way of living in the world, under the sign of a permanent change of things and also embody the reciprocity of influence from man to the environment and from the environment to the human being.

Yasunari Kawabata's prose reflects this feeling of being one with nature, which encourages a return to the essence of existence; a feeling that simultaneously offers opportunities for isolation, but also for opening up to the world, to the beauties of nature. By picturing this human-nature interdependence, the Japanese author succeeds in praising the traditional Japanese way of life and at the same time raising it to the level of universality.

Nevertheless, the exterior spaces described in the novel are mostly natural ones. From the descriptions that abound in the text, the real geography of the city of Kyoto is configured. The mountains, forests and rivers that cross the city are constantly related to the unfolding events and involved in the characters' lives.

In The Old Capital, the temples and shrines dispersed all over the city of Kyoto appear frequently mentioned and they represent landmarks in the trajectories of the characters throughout the book. Equally, numerous references are to be found referring to the festivals that take place in Kyoto in all seasons. As the author himself writes: "It can be said, without any exaggeration, that in Kyoto in the many Buddhist temples and ancient Shinto shrines almost every day a small or large celebration takes place" (Kawabata, 2006, p. 69).

The first description of such a ceremony that appears in the novel is that of *Aoi Matsuri*, held in the middle of May, the Festival of Mallows, an ancient prayer ritual for rich harvests that was taken over by the Imperial Court when the capital was moved to Heiankyo and has been held ever since at Kamo, Kamigano and Shimogano shrines. Kawabata describes its history and the changes this ceremony has undergone over time. The description of the celebration appears in the chapter "Kitayama Cedars" (Kawabata, 2009, p. 69) but its chronotropic valences are amplified in other chapters by the references to the characters' relationships, the justification of their non-participation due to the weather and the recollection of the years when they were there to admire the procession.

However, the most extensive description of a festival in the novel is that of *Gion Matsuri* to which Kawabata dedicates an entire chapter with the same title. Appeared in the 9th century after a plague epidemic, the festival began as a purification ritual meant to calm down the destructive forces of vengeful gods that cause fires, earthquakes or floods (Nenzi, 2015, p. 46). The festivities last throughout July and include purification rituals by fire or water, such as *hikoshiraiai*, the washing of allegorical chariots in the Kamo River near the Great Sijo Bridge, prayers at Buddhist shrines or Shinto shrines and processions of illuminated chariots in the sound of traditional music, *hayashi* (Shirane, 2012, p. 64).

Kawabata confers it special values in the relationship with the main characters of the book. For them the Gion celebration is at the same time, a space and a time of identity recovery, of rediscovery, but also one of confusion, of illusion. This is where the meeting

of the twin sisters, Chieko and Naeko, takes place, where they recognize each other and at the same time where Hideo mistakes their identity.

Like any city depicted in the pages of a fiction, Kawabata's Kyoto is transformed, transfigured from the moment it is narratively reconstructed. Its literary image is not a literal transcription of reality, but an allegorical or symbolic representation of it through which the writer who aspires to understand the world tries to order and explain it according to his vision.

The entire text of the novel presents an abundance of vegetal elements. Kawabata describes the beauty and colour of the trees changing from one season to another, from the pine trees of the Imperial Palace, to the rows of weeping willows in Kiyamachi or on the banks of the Takase and Hori rivers.

Not only in the descriptions but also in the conversations between the characters, references to vegetation occupy a central place. During the visit to the nun temple of Saga where his father has retired himself, while preparing him the meal, Chieko answers his question about the cherry trees encountered on the road: "- Their scattered petals float on the lakes. There are only a few cherry blossoms left on the mountain, but when you pass and see them from a distance, they seem even more charming" (Kawabata, 2006, p. 31).

Moreover, even the life of the novel's characters is paced by seasonal rhythms and plant symbolism: "It's already the bamboo autumn, said Takichiro. The clay wall begins to deteriorate and crumble. It's the same with me" (Kawabata, 2006, p. 31).

The omnipresent vegetal elements in the descriptions of The Old Capital also gives the names of four of the book's chapters: "The Flowers of Spring", "Kitayama Cedars", "The Green Pines", "Winter Flowers". The entire text valorises the vegetal elements in the Japanese tradition, as an object of aesthetic admiration and meditation on life.

Kawabata's The Old Capital is structured around the cycle of the four seasons, beginning in spring and ending with the onset of winter. Each season not only marks the passage of time but also frames the emotional and spiritual journeys of the characters. Their experiences are deeply intertwined with seasonal changes, reflecting traditional Japanese aesthetics that emphasize the transient beauty of nature and the impermanence of life.

All the characters in the novel, the members of the Sata family, their friends and acquaintances respect the tradition and go, depending on the season, to admire the cherry blossoms, the budded pines, the cedars, the camphor trees - sacred trees considered to have healing and spiritual powers (Berque & Sauzet, 2004)- the weeping willows or the maples with their autumn reddened leaves.

For instance, a detailed scene describes Chieko visiting the cherry blossoms with her friend Shin'ichi, taking part in the traditional *hanami* ritual. This moment becomes a quiet meditation on impermanence. As the petals fall, Chieko is struck by the poignancy of their brief life. She observes that, "the cherry petals flew through the air, drifting aimlessly, like her own thoughts"; later in the same scene, the narration reflects her quiet sensitivity: "Beneath the blooming trees, she felt that time did not flow, but dissolved" (Kawabata, 2009, p. 42). The *hanami* scene thus becomes a mirror of Chieko's emotional world, reinforcing both the fragility of life and her own feelings of uncertainty and longing.

The same way, an entire chapter of the book, "Kitayama Cedars" highlights the symbolism of cedars as marks of sacredness and protection. Chieko's visit to Kitayama is both a search for her own identity, and at the same time, for protection. The little village near the cedar forest is the place where she begins to discover her own roots, as a possible daughter of a cedar cutter. Walking through ancient forests planted "by unknown hands" (Kawabata, 2009, p. 61), Chieko senses a quiet connection to a past she cannot name. The silence of the trees reflects her own uncertainty about her origins. Unlike the

rooted cedars, she feels unanchored — a symbol of her fragile identity. Her personal sense of rootlessness, of being adopted and unsure of her origins, is brought into sharper focus in this natural setting. This moment, steeped in *mono no aware* and *yūgen*, captures both the beauty and sadness of her estrangement.

In this novel, Kawabata builds an urban setting based on the purest Japanese traditionalist style. The literary image of the millennial capital acquires a symbolic value as the writer's subjectivity defines typical urban landmarks as a network of places of memory, images that convey to the reader that a simultaneous feeling of impermanence and eternity. The last image of the novel, condensed like a *haiku*, that of the snow-covered city at dawn on a frosty morning brings in mind the desire for time to stop at least for a moment and keep the beauty of this land untouched: "The town was as it should be, still silent in sleep" (Kawabata, 2006, p. 182). The final image in The Old Capital, that of Kyoto quietly covered in snow, condenses the emotional resonance of the entire novel into a moment of pure visual and sensory stillness. Much like a *haiku*, this image evokes not action, but presence, not resolution, but a suspension of time. In Japanese aesthetics, snow has long been associated with both purity and impermanence—a symbol that carries the weight of seasonal cycles and spiritual introspection (Shirane, 2012, pp. 27-33)

As Rodica Frenţiu discusses, Yasunari Kawabata's prose exhibits a profound affinity with the haiku form, particularly through his use of ambiguity and the evocation of fleeting moments, pointing out that Kawabata intentionally employs grammatical structures that introduce ambiguity, thus compelling the readers to engage deeply with the text to derive meaning.

Besides this technique, Kawabata's narrative also mirrors the haiku's characteristic of capturing transient beauty and emotions (Frentiu, 2013, pp. 454-65).

For the protagonist of the novel, Chieko, whose journey through the novel has been one of emotional searching and seasonal wandering, the snow does not mark a clear conclusion, but rather a moment of subtle reconciliation with the flow of nature. Her story, full of questions about origin, identity and belonging finds no definitive answer. And yet, in this last scene, there is a sense of quiet acceptance. The snow acts like a veil over the unresolved, suggesting that beauty lies precisely in ambiguity. This aesthetic gesture aligns deeply with *mono no aware*, the pathos of things, and *yūgen*, the subtle and mysterious beauty of what is felt but not fully seen (Juniper, 2004). Kyoto itself, as a historical and symbolic space, becomes in this moment both timeless and transient. The city under snow recalls the classical landscapes of *ukiyo-e* prints and the minimalism of *waka* poetry, where winter imagery evokes contemplative solitude and ephemerality. This concluding image, then, is not just poetic ornament. It is a final aesthetic and philosophical statement. In a world where identity remains uncertain and traditions are quietly eroding, Kawabata offers no resolution—but he does offer presence, stillness and the quiet beauty of a snowfall.

At the end of the book, the winter flowers become a symbol of the calm and subtle dignity that emerges from withstanding the cold. This is not just a seasonal metaphor but a reflection of the inner strength Chieko gains through her experiences. She gazes at camellias blooming in the snow and reflects on how something so fragile can endure the harshness of winter: "Even in winter, the flowers bloom quietly, with no one watching. Perhaps that's why they seem so noble" (Kawabata, 2009, p. 152).

This vision is underlined in the final pages, where the image of falling snow appears as a counterpoint to the novel's opening scene of cherry blossoms. If the petals' fall once expressed the sadness of evanescence and the impossibility of preserving happiness over time, the snow now evokes something quieter, less dramatic: the silent conclusion of one cycle and the subtle anticipation of another. In this shift from the transient to the cyclical, from sorrow to serenity, Kawabata offers not resolution but an aesthetic and emotional stillness. The snow-covered Kyoto is no longer just a backdrop—it becomes a space where the emotional, seasonal, and spiritual dimensions of the novel converge.

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