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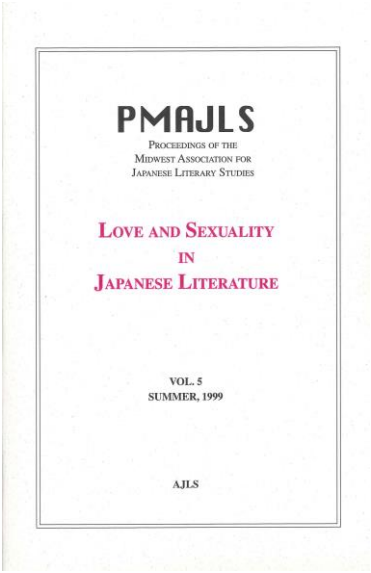


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# THE FUSING OF LABOR AND LOVE IN *SNOW COUNTRY*

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## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I discuss the socio-historical and ideological aspects of Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country* with an examination of the linguistic formation of the text. I argue that the text attains "Japanese beauty" when it sketches and then rejects social realities: class and gender relations, class struggles, the conflict between city and countryside, economic and social changes, and the everyday life and experiences of people in modern Japanese society. For this purpose, I focus on how the concepts of traditional love and labor is articulated in this novel.

My title responds to a sentence about female weavers' relationship to their work as producers of traditional *chijimi* linen: "(In their desire to be numbered among the few outstanding weavers), they put their whole labor and love into this product of the long snowbound months" (151). This notion, that traditional labor is fused with love, or *aichaku*, is a key concept to understanding how Kawabata constructs a traditional Japanese aesthetics. This fusion helps to transform farming and craftwork and their products into the contours of a beautiful landscape. I will look closely at the grammatical structure and function of two passages from the novel. In one passage the narrator describes the production of *chijimi* linen. In the other, Shimamura, the male protagonist, is observing the practice of making *hatte*, or sheaves of rice.

## POLITICS IN *SNOW COUNTRY*

Why is looking at the political and ideological aspects of *Snow Country* important? First, the contrast between the apparent apoliticality of the text and the historical time in which it was written is worth analyzing. Most of the novel was published between 1934 and 1937; a final section was added in 1947. It was begun when Japan started to move toward a state monopoly of the capitalist system. The novel was finished after the collapse of the wartime system.

By contrast, the novel itself is about Shimamura, a western dance critic who lives in Tokyo, who goes to a village in the mountains and has a love affair with a geisha named Komako. He lets himself float indecisively in his relationship with Komako and spends his time wandering in the bucolic village. The text seems to conceal it's historical back-

ground from the reader through its lyricism. Second, the novel's popularity and influence in Japan are also important, especially after Kawabata won the 1968 Nobel Prize. It is the ninth highest seller in postwar Japan. Children must memorize its first line for their high school entrance exams. The novel's inescapable centrality to Japanese literature was brought home to me when I went to look up the word *aichaku* in a prominent Japanese dictionary, *Nihon kokugo daijiten.* I wanted to understand the implication of using this word to refer to Shimamura's attachment to Komako as well as the *chijimi* product. The dictionary cited, as the source of the word's modern usage, the very sentence I was looking up. Kawabata's language has penetrated the Japanese language so deeply as to make it difficult to analyze. How do these two aspects of this classic novel—its historical position and literary influence—interact? How do the sociohistorical element and the linguistic function form the novel as an aesthetic of authority?

Karatani Kōjin calls *Snow Country* an ideological apparatus for the 1930s nationalist discourse of *nihon-kaiki* (Japanism). According to him, it brackets the concept of "other" and the reality with which Japanese Marxists had struggled and to which they had succumbed by 1935. The term other, as Karatani uses it, means one which exists outside. The other is different from, opposes and threatens one's self-consciousness, and is hard to identify with. Karatani defines Marxism as "an absolute other for the cultural climate of (1930s) Japan" and argues that "liberation" from (loss of) Marxism meant "liberation" from a whole host of others, including modernity, the West and history. In *Snow Country*, according to Karatani, there is no other. Karatani argues that Kawabata has created "another world" where Shimamura does not have to struggle with an "other" to assert his self-consciousness. This ideological literary apparatus, he says, invites readers "not to see reality at all but to admire only the images reflected on the mirror. Thus, only the image of a vanishing 'beautiful Japan' is fixed, which has no relation to any war ideologies" (Karatani: 1995, 245). This is the discourse of *nihon-kaiki* according to Karatani: to see the world through the "aesthetics" of Japan (Karatani: 1995, 259).

In 1932, proletariat novelist Miyamoto Yuriko pointed out the nationalist discourse of Kawabata literature in the early 1930s (Miyamoto). Miyamoto says Kawabata's novels are characterized by "mysticism" or *shinpishugi.* She points out two effects of Kawabata's mysticism within the nationalist discourse. First, she writes, his mysticism blinds people from reality. For Miyamoto, reality was the class struggle which demonstrated the contradiction and destruction inherent in the capitalist society

in which people lived and struggled everyday. Secondly, mysticism "refuses the positive aspect of the dialectical relationship between nature and humans" and leads people to indifferent subordination to absolute power. In sum, Miyamoto criticizes Kawabata's literary world as a rejection and depoliticization of social reality. I think that this very rejection is what politicizes *Snow Country*. As Karatani suggests, transforming social reality into an aesthetic other world is to contribute to nationalist discourse.

I have so far suggested that we can look at *Snow Country* as an ideological literary apparatus that aestheticizes the political and social realities of the time it was written. My presentation attempts to analyze the mechanism of this apparatus: how it really works. In the next section, I would like to look at two passages to analyze how farm work and craftwork of putatively traditional society are transformed into the aesthetic of a peaceful and harmonious village. I also discuss that it is the careful erasure and transformation of social and political realities that allows the novel to attain the aestheticization of politics.

## CHIJIMI

Traditional labor and love are perhaps most clearly conceptualized in the passage where Shimamura visits the old *chijimi*-producing town. In the snow country, the narrator explains, young women used to make *chijimi* linen, but now Shimamura can only purchase such linen. *Chijimi* linen as handwork has vanished and its manufacture takes place in "a well-known weaving center" with modern railway stations (153). The narrator describes the history of *chijimi* linen and the process of production in this scene.

Here, I would like to make two points. First, knowledge from old times and an old book imparts an authenticity that Shimamura can rely on to reconstruct the *chijimi* linen production process. Second, in the course of this reconstruction, the native young women's labor and love become part of the *chijimi* linen's aesthetic and commercial value. These points illustrate my central contention: that through an evocation of tradition, Kawabata rejects the socio-historical relations between women laborers and their cultural products, and by doing so can achieve beauty. But as Karatani and Miyamoto make clear, this rejection is what embeds the novel deeply into contemporary nationalist discourse.

Because Shimamura cannot see the production process and the workers, the structure of the narrative relies heavily on an "old book" (157). The word *mukashi* (old times) is used many times in this section, and marks the narrative of *chijimi* linen as a reconstruction based on old peo-

ple's knowledge in an old book. The phrase *to iu* (it is said) is also used in several sentences to indicate that the knowledge comes from a book. This book is *Hokuetsu Seppu* (*Snow Country Tales: Life in the Other Japan*) published in 1837 by a native wealthy farmer intellectual named Suzuki Bokushi. It is an ethnographic study of farmers' life in Echigo Province, now Niigata Prefecture.

The paragraph which explains *chijimi* linen production by young women consists of three types of endings. First, two sentences finish with *ta-toiu* (it is said) the next four sentences with *ta* (it was) and the last sentence is *ta-darou* (it would have been). The *ta-toiu* sentences evoke the early *chijimi* fair in the old days. It is clear that the *ta-toiu* ending marks the information as learned from the book. The *ta* sentences appear to explain the value of the female workers:

> Sellers' booths and buyers' booths were lined up side by side, and the market took on the air of a festival. With prizes awarded for the best pieces of weaving, it came also to be a sort of competition for husbands. The girls learned to weave as children, and they turned out their best work between the ages of perhaps fourteen and twenty-four. As they grew older they lost the touch that gave tone to the finest Chijimi (151).

These *ta* sentences tell us that the quality of production and labor are strongly related for the young women. The logic is that the younger the woman worker is the better she can produce, and the better she can produce the better her chance for marriage.

What is the function of *ta* here? Norma Field writes that the functions of *ta* are broad; *ta* indicates not only the past but also "past recurrences or even discovery or recognition" (Field, 181). Scholar of Japanese literature Noguchi Takehiko says it plays the role of defining a text as fiction. In this way, *ta*'s function is equivalent to that of the classic usage of *keri*, recognition of something which existed in a past unknown to the speaker (Noguchi, 39–40). The *ta* sentences show that the relation between female labor and *chijimi* is discovered by the narrator in the past, implying that this relation is factual. The fusing of labor and love is authenticated as tradition.

The next long sentence ends in *ta-darou* which indicates the imagined past:

> In their desire to be numbered among the few outstanding weavers, [they would improve their skills], they [would] put their

> whole labor and love into this [handwork] product of the long snowbound months—the months of seclusion and boredom, between October, under the old lunar calendar, when the spinning began, and mid-February of the following year, when the last bleaching was finished. (151–152). (*Note:* brackets [ ] indicate my translation.)

The narrator anticipates how those young girls would devote themselves to labor with love, of *nen o ire* and *aichaku mo komotta*. The essentialized nature of young female labor stated in the *ta* sentences is the rationale for the assumption that labor generates love in the process of production. The whole process of production is in the women's hands and their labor and love are reflected in the beautiful craftwork.

The word *aichaku* or "love" is used in a later paragraph to describe Shimamura's feeling of "being touched" by Komako (154). Here, *aichaku* conveys Shimamura's emotion for Komako. Instead of using a word to indicate romantic love, Kawabata uses a word that connotes a sense of attachment to an object. Komako is compared to products, and comes out behind. As Shimamura thinks, "But this love [of Komako] would leave behind it nothing so definite as a piece of *Chijimi*." To Shimamura, the love of an object of production clearly surpasses human love.

In the *chijimi*-producing town, Shimamura finds the dark houses to be depressing. Then, Shimamura reconstructs the female workers in his imagination based on the old book and his observations. "He saw that the weaver maidens, giving themselves up to their work here under the snow, had lived lives far from as bright and fresh as the *Chijimi* they made" and "in harsh economic terms the making of *Chijimi* was quite impractical, so great was the expenditure of effort that went into even one piece." (157). In other words, the young weaver women had to work and endure socio-economic hardship. They were cheap domestic laborers. But the narrator continues, "The nameless workers, so diligent while they lived, had presently died, only the *Chijimi* remained, the plaything of men like Shimamura, cool and fresh against the skin in the summer." The sad, economically unjust story of those young women is transformed through the narrator's eyes into a thing of wistful beauty.

It may be helpful to introduce how the original text, *Hokuetsu seppu*, concludes the chapter entitled "The Weaver Women," which Kawabata appropriates for his novel. According to historian Anne Walthall, in early 19th century Tokugawa Japan, Suzuki had to avoid topics like taxation policies and social protest (15). Nevertheless, he writes, "All the weaving women try very hard to be included in the select group to which

special orders are entrusted. Yet all this trouble and labor are ill-rewarded and for the benefit of strangers"(Suzuki, 67). To Suzuki, the female weaver's labor is exploited within commercial agriculture. It was the production of handicrafts like *chijimi* linen that enabled village communities to survive in the money economy. But they also brought about a new class of wealthy commercial farmers. When Suzuki writes of their labor as "ill-rewarded and for the benefit of strangers," he points out that the daughters of tenant farmers have to work hard not for themselves but for the leisured appreciation of urban consumers and wealthy farmers who exploit their labor and lives. But to Kawabata, their labor is sublimely rewarding because of the artistic form of the product. He transforms the oppression into beauty by reworking the relationship between labor and product, portrayed in Suzuki's passage as alienating, into a loving one.

### *HATTE*

I would like to turn to the village farmers Shimamura watches. In one scene, Shimamura observes a man and girl working together to make sheaves of rice. The narrator explains that when they dry these sheaves called *hatte* they create "a solid screen of rice" (*byōbu*). Describing the rhythmic cooperation of the man and girl, Kawabata writes: "unconscious, practiced motions were repeated over and over." The man and girl are described as engaging in a harmonious productive labor. Apparent, but apparently invisible to Shimamura's eye, this harmony is based on a gendered division of labor between them. Kawabata aestheticizes the power structure to create a scene of traditional beauty through his use of language.

Kawabata writes, "A farm girl threw up a sheaf of rice with a twist of her trousered hips, and a man high above her caught it expertly and in one deft sweep of his hand spread it to hang from the frame" (121). On the one hand, the act of throwing a sheaf of rice up into the air shows that female farmers work as well as a man in the field. On the other hand, the work performed by the male is described as requiring more skill than the female's "simple" supplemental manual labor. This division of labor is often true in workplaces of primary industries like agriculture, mining and fishery. The position of the man "above her" also frames the gender hierarchy.

This gendered relation between the man and girl merges and disappears into the landscape when its presence serves to create "beautiful" cultural products. Consider the line in Japanese. "*Sanbaku no koshi o hyoito hinette musume ga ine no taba o nageageruto takaku nobotta otoko ga kiyō ni uketotte shigokuyōni furiwaketewa sao ni kakete itta*"

(345). This sentence can be divided into two parts: one which describes the girl working and the other which describes the man working. The former is characterized by "*hyoito*" (swift) which can modify not only "*hinette*" but also "*nageageru.*" The latter is characterized by "*kiyōni*" (expertly) which can modify all the three verbs, "*uketotte,*" "*furiwakete,*" "*kaketeitta.*" It is hard for the reader to escape the influence of these modifiers. Each part of the farmers' actions is dominated by these modifiers, which convey Shimamura's perspective.

The next line is "*mononarete mushin no ugoki ga chōshiyoku kurikaesareteita.*" This is an observation only an outsider would make. Farmers themselves would not see their works as "*mononarete*" (practiced) or "*mushin*" (unconscious). Kawabata uses "mushin no" to capture the motion as the essence of the farmers rather than "*mushin na,*" which would modify the external atmosphere.

The product of cooperation between the man and girl is accentuated in the next line. Kawabata writes that Komako "took one of the dangling sheaves in her hand and shook it gently up and down, as though she were feeling the weight of a jewel." This sentence substantializes the weight of the farmers through Komako by using the active expression, "*yusayusa yuriagenagara*". She says "See how it's headed. And how nice it is to the touch." Through this touch of appreciation, Komako is unified through love with the farming world and with the products of its labor. Kawabata writes that she "half-closed her eyes from the pleasure," and "(A) disorderly flock of sparrows flew low over her head." In this moment, Kawabata's aesthetisization of labor's products creates a scene of beauty that all but erases the social realities which lie embedded in it.

The concept of labor as producing pleasure and beauty displaces the "reality" that Marxist-influenced farmers movement struggled to change. When Kawabata began this novel in 1934, many villages in northern Japan faced chronic poverty and hunger from the cold weather. But Kawabata frames this scene with an artistic appreciation of the agrarian life and aesthetic, willfully ignoring the devastation that most farmers at the time were suffering. Daughters of impoverished farmers were sold to prostitution, children were malnourished and entire families committed suicide. But Kawabata removes the struggle to the past which has been overcome. Komako says the rice is "Entirely different from last year's rice," obliquely referring to past bad harvests, but calling attention only to the current harvest. Just after this scene, Shimamura sees a posted notice: "Pay for field hands. Ninety sen a day, meals included. Women forty per cent less" (121). This could remind us of the presence of wage-laborers in the rural village and the dominant system of landowner and tenant farmers

that supported prewar Japanese capitalism. This structure provided low-paid and hardworking labor to enhance Japan's competition in the international economy.

The flier tells us that labor quality is measured in money, and that thepay is different according to gender. The Japanese text uses the term *chingin kyōtei* (wage agreement), implying the presence of a Marxist labor movement in the village. Compared to the hundred yen Komako earns each month (108), farming is devalued in the money economy. The flier could be a vehicle for bringing the class struggle to the foreground of the landscape. But in fact it produces a different effect. The juxtaposition of this notice with the working scene "reminds" the reader that in village communities, rice-planting was traditionally done by family members, with communal cooperation. The flier and the wage-based economy that it signifies present a modern threat to traditional labor and social relationships. The former is rejected (the sign is old and off to the side) while the latter is transformed into the sheer power of a compelling image of fertility.

In this passage we can see the discourse of Karatani's *nihon-kaiki.* The reinterpretation of modernization was integral to the formation of the Japanese wartime system and to the dissolution of the Marxist labor movement. The creation of a peaceful myth of a homogeneous rural village is a constitutive element of 1940s state-driven modernization because it allowed society to believe that modernization safeguarded "traditional" Japan. The power structure in traditional society is fixed. No one is threatened; no one needs to resist. I am pointing out that the aesthetic moment is a "refuge" for Shimamura and readers from 1930s social reality. The peaceful agrarian landscape emerges with the critical rejection of farmer's everyday lives, of class and gender struggles in modern Japan. Kawabata achieves this escape by distancing the reader from his references to social reality (the flier, the gender hierarchy, last year's crop) through deliberate use of language. And at the moment of escape, he produces a nationalized aesthetic, "Japanese beauty."

## CONCLUSION

I have suggested that Kawabata creates a device of aesthetisization of politics through his language usage and rejection of the socio-historical and ideological examination. While I have focused only on two passages to illustrate my point, I think this perspective might be extended to the entire narrative structure of the novel. Modifiers that characterize Yōko and Komako—*seiketsu na, shizen na, yasuraka na,* for example—and of the snow country as a whole can be seen in contrast to a less clean, less

natural, less peaceful reality that Kawabata lets surface briefly, only to be rejected in the moment of the emergence of beauty.

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