

Comparison of Yasunari Kawabata's Snow Country and Wei Xiuren's Flower and Moon Scars

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Abstract: This paper presents a comparative study of Yasunari Kawabata's *Snow Country* and Wei Xiuren's *Traces of the Flowering Moon*, and finds that the two novels have striking similarities in their overall character structure, while the differences between them are reflected in their different tragic roots, aesthetic tendencies and content focus. In terms of ideological connotation, the root of the tragedy of "Traces of the Flowering Moon" is more about "seeking but not getting"; the root of the tragedy of "Snow Country" is more about nihilistic spirit. In terms of aesthetic tendency, "Flower Moon Scars" contains more poetic aesthetics and the beauty of secular people, and presents the overall characteristic of "happy and joyful"; "Snow Country" inherits the traditional Japanese aesthetics of material sorrow, and presents the overall characteristic of "happy and quiet, happy and sorrowful". In terms of content focus, "Traces of the Flower and Moon" focuses on the description of human interaction; "Snow Country" focuses on the depiction of delicate psychological perception. To a certain extent, this reflects the correlation and difference between Chinese and Japanese cultures, and can give some inspiration to the mutual learning of novel creation between China and Japan.

Keywords: "Snow Country"; "Flower and Moon Scars"; Tragedy; Aesthetic Tendency; Chinese and Japanese culture

While Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country* was written in Japan during World War II and Wei Xiuren's *Traces of the Flowering Moon* was written in China during the late Qing Dynasty, it is clear that the socio-historical backgrounds of the two works are very different, but there is a high degree of similarity in their character structures, as both tell the stories of intellectuals and women from the lower strata of society. In addition, they both end in tragedy, and there seems to be some kind of consensus between the two across countries and times, which is worth exploring in depth. However, a deeper study reveals that the two works are different in content tendency and spiritual core under the similar character structure. Through comparative analysis, we can not only gain a deeper understanding of these two works, but also appreciate the similarities between Chinese and Japanese cultures in terms of intellectual spiritual world, tragic consciousness and traditional female culture, as well as the differences between the two in terms of their ways of thinking and aesthetic tendencies.

1. Commonalities between "Snow Country" and "Traces of the Flowering Moon" in terms of overall character structure

Although *Snow Country* and *Traces of the Moon* have different socio-historical and cultural backgrounds, they both focus on the two groups of intellectuals and women from the lower class, and both develop their stories around these two groups, forming a certain underlying consensus. In terms of intellectuals, both novels reflect to a certain extent the spiritual crisis of some intellectuals in society at that time; in terms of women, they both portray tragic women struggling at the bottom of society, showing their character traits and psychological states in their low status. We can see the similarity of the two authors' perspectives and the commonality between Chinese and Japanese society and culture behind their novels.

1.1 The spiritual crisis of intellectuals

Shimamura in "Snow Country" is a cultural person from Tokyo who studies Western dance. In the book, it is written that "he never watched the dances performed by Westerners and never watched the Western dances performed by Japanese, but what he admired was not the art of dance performed by the flexible bodies of dancers, but the imaginary dances based on Western texts and photographs. From this, we can see the emptiness and impracticality in Shimura's spiritual world. He lives a lazy life on the family fortune, doing

things based on interest and feeling. He is like the intellectual in “I am a cat”, but at the same time, he has the shadow of a “superfluous person”. Shimura seems to be filling the void in his own soul with this seemingly research. His nihilism in a way reflects his spiritual crisis. In the context of the creation of the work, we can find that the character of Shimamura is actually the subjective reflection of the writer Yasunari Kawabata. *Snow Country* was written in the period when Japan was in full militarism after the suppression of the proletarian literary movement. Japanese critic Hideki Shimazaki once said, “Yasunari Kawabata was passive resistance to militarism, as exemplified by *Snow Country*.” Indeed, although the work is silent on the issue of politics, the spiritual world of Shimamura, the central character, reveals an idea of escapism: instead of seeking a proper occupation, he repeatedly goes and stays in the land of snow without any purpose. This is undoubtedly a reflection of the confused, troubled, and vain spirit of writer Yasunari Kawabata in a period of intellectual confusion and social turmoil. The writer Yasunari Kawabata combined his own spiritual world with his own intellectual perspective to create the typical image of Shimamura.

In “*Moonstruck*”, Wei Zizhu is a talented scholar from East Vietnam who went to the capital to seek a place of merit, an intellectual under the ancient Chinese imperial examination system. He was talented and wrote countless poems, but he was unsuccessful and poor, and his love with Liu Qiuzhen was not satisfactory, so he often felt sorry for himself and even lived his life negatively with a fatalistic view, and finally became seriously ill and died. Through Wei Zizhu’s mental state, we can also see the spiritual crisis of intellectuals under traditional Chinese Confucianism and the imperial examination system: traditional intellectuals often had only one path to the imperial examination, and they were extremely obsessed with it, and when their obsession was not satisfied, their spiritual world would easily collapse. Combined with the author Wei Xiuren’s life experience, the author writes about Wei Zizhu and how he is not writing about himself. Wei Xiuren also had a poor career, and was stuck in the children’s test for a long time, and failed in repeated attempts to become a scholar. The depression, helplessness, confusion and depression in his heart are fully revealed through Wei Zizhu. Likewise, Wei Xiuren, from the perspective of a literati himself, incorporates his own experiences into the story to create the image of Wei Zizhu, a tragic talent.

When we read *Snow Country* and *Traces of the Flowering Moon* in comparison, we can easily find that both Shimamura and Wei Zizhu have different degrees of confusion, bewilderment and depressed mental states, precisely because the authors of both novels have had painful and mentally troubled life experiences, and both narrate their stories from their own intellectual perspectives.

1.2 The tragic fate of women at the bottom

Although “*Snow Country*” and “*Traces of the Moon*” were born in different countries and periods, a closer comparison reveals that the social backgrounds of the two are similar, both being in a more turbulent and painful period of society. In addition to the spiritual crisis of some intellectuals, the people at the bottom of society also suffered from a miserable life. And in the bottom group, under the common social and cultural atmosphere of male superiority and female inferiority, the bottom female group gets consistent attention from both writers.

The striking thing in “*Snow Country*” are two female figures, one is Komako and the other is Yoko. Both women live at the bottom of the social ladder in the land of snow. Komako is willing to become a geisha in order to earn money for Gyoko’s medical treatment. Even though her life is difficult, she loves life and insists on writing diaries, reading novels, learning songs and practicing the *sanshin*. However, in Shimura’s view, all her efforts were in vain. Komako’s fervent love for Shimamura also never received an exact response from Shimamura. Like Koma, Ye has the same bleak life, but still maintains a kind and simple heart. She patiently and meticulously took care of Gyoko until his death, cared for her friend Komako, understood his misfortune, and had asked Shimamura many times to treat him well. However, such a near-perfect woman eventually died, her existence as ethereal and empty as her voice.

The fates of Liu Qiu scar and Du Caiqiu in “*Traces of Flowers and Moon*” are equally tragic. Liu Qiu trace originally came from a good family, talented, but because of the misfortunes, fell into the dust. Han Hesheng’s reworking of “*The Flower Book of Bingzhou*” has turned her to the first place, which shows the high level of her talent and makes her a famous prostitute. However, she was a person of high moral character, isolated and arrogant, and especially liked the “mournful sound”. From this point the reader can feel her resignation to fall into the dust but can not help the misery of life.

And Du Caiqiu as a woman of the dust is equally humble, in the face of the feelings with Han Hesheng like walking on thin ice, do not dare to make the slightest mistake. In this respect, Caiqiu and Komako are similar.

Through comparison, it is easy to see that the women share the common characteristics of living a miserable life and being at the bottom. In a similar situation, both novels show two different images of women, one relatively lonely and noble, such as Ye Zi and Liu Qiuchen, and the other relatively optimistic and aggressive, such as Koma Zi and Du Caiqiu, but they both share the psychological state of insecurity and dependence, i.e. they are both in a vulnerable position in their emotional relationships, which is created by

similar social and cultural backgrounds.

2. The differences between “Snow Country” and “Traces of the Flowering Moon” in terms of content tendency and spiritual core

Although “Snow Country” and “Traces of the Flowering Moon” share similarities

in their superficial character patterns and tragic nature, a comparison reveals that the spiritual cores behind the two are in fact very different, which is reflected in their different tragic roots and aesthetic tendencies. In addition, there are also differences in the content focus between them in the lines, forming their own characteristics. We can perceive the differences in character and aesthetics between the two peoples.

2.1 Root of the tragedy

The tragedy of Wei Zizhu in “Traces of the Flowering Moon” is more a result of “seeking but not getting”, the destruction of his own ideals under the influence of Confucianism and the imperial examination culture. In the book, Wei Zizhu is a talented and brilliant man with a brilliant mind, but he lives a life of misery. This image is an expression of the author’s anger and shows the declining status of intellectuals in the late Qing Dynasty. At the same time, Liu Qiu scar in the book is also the image of a tragic prostitute who fails to pursue a good life. Her misfortune equally reveals the author’s pessimistic and disappointed mood. However, the main body of the work is a contrast between “a poor man and a man of great talent”, using Wei and Liu to vent their indignation at their lack of talent, and using Han and Du to express their hopes of building a successful career. As a whole, the tone of “Flower and Moon Scars” is upward overall, and its sadness does not negate the spirit of positive effort to enter the world.

Unlike Snow Country, the tragedy of Snow Country is rooted in a spirit of nihilism. Shimamura in the book has a heavy sense of emptiness as well as a sense of disappointment and confusion about life. He feels that Komako’s persistence and perseverance are meaningless, but cannot say what the meaning of life is. In the ending, it is written that “the Milky Way in my heart has fallen”, and the death of Yoko has completely destroyed the beautiful things in Shimamura’s heart. The author’s “Snow Country” is a dream-like place of refuge for Shimamura, and a refuge for the soul of Yasunari Kawabata. The writer creates an unreal beauty in his book, a beauty beyond reality, as if escaping from the spiritual damage brought to him by the real world. It seems to convey to the reader that “what one clings to may not be meaningful in itself”.

The tragic root cause of the two novels may be derived from the differences in national cultural character. Chinese culture as a whole belongs to the music culture, although Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism three ideas are profoundly influenced China, but in the overall Chinese spiritual world is given priority to with Confucian positive enterprising thought, in the underlying consciousness will constantly striving, so the tragedy of the “flowers” is “poor” “not”, and the other “a” eventually to outward upward in the Confucian positive feelings. And American scholars Ruth Ben Benedict said Japanese culture is shame culture, pay attention to propriety, in the accident in social factors and standards, although it also comes from Confucianism, but fully development is different from the above part, and compared with Chinese culture, shame awareness in Japanese culture, combined with Taoist thoughts, this consciousness is easy to make people to individual life is meaningless and empty, produce a sense of admiration and eternal feeling to death. Therefore, the spiritual core reflected in “Flower and Moon mark” and “Snow Country” is fundamentally different, and the tragedy in “Snow Country” finally leads to the deep life thinking in human beings.

From this, we can see that although both show the misfortune of social life, their tragic roots are very different, which has a great relationship with the spiritual core and social background of the author behind them. The tragedy of “Traces of the Flowering Moon” is more a replica of the author’s own life experience. Although the author does not go beyond the vision of his own life, The tragedy of “Snow Country” reflects more the spiritual world of writer Yasunari Kawabata himself. Between left-wing thinking and Japanese militarism, the spiritual world of some intellectuals was confused and empty, and they turned to nature and the pure world of the mind. There is a great degree of decadence and emptiness in their spirit, and under the influence of such a world and life view, the tragedy in their spiritual world is revealed.

2.2 Aesthetic tendencies

In terms of aesthetic tendency, “Snow Country” inherits the Japanese aesthetics of material mourning, rendering an overall sense of emptiness and desolation. Behind this aesthetic concept points to a delicate, mysterious and quiet mood atmosphere, which constitutes the quiet and even lonely atmosphere characteristic of “Snow Country”, showing the overall characteristics of joyful stillness and sorrow. For example, many of the scenery descriptions will highlight the “quiet” feature, between the lines and will reveal a faint sadness, “so poignant, as if calling on a distant passenger ship can not hear the people. After the train drove by, like taking off the blindfold red stems are decorated with flowers, looks very quiet.”

In contrast, the aesthetic tendency of “Traces of the Flower and Moon” is more of the traditional Chinese poetic beauty and the harmony between secular people, with an overall joyous and happy character. For example, the book often contains a large number of poems that are rich in mood, such as “The autumn of the immortal palm is pale, and the willow of Ba Bridge is shaking down. The pale autumn of the immortal palm, the willow at Ba Bridge. In addition, the book is rich in human descriptions. For example, in the second chapter, “It turned out to be an old friend who was going to visit his relatives outside the city, and he met up with a foolish pearl. The two sides hastily jumped out of the car and cheerfully said that they were dead”, showing the scene of Chinese people’s joy and excitement when they see their deceased friends. However, because of the beauty of the human feelings, the tragic beauty of the things that happened later and the impermanence of the world are more prominent and have the power to move readers.

In general, the aesthetics of Snow Country inherits the traditional Japanese aesthetics of material sorrow, mainly expressing a sense of sorrow for natural objects, male and female romance and all forms of life, tending to a quiet and delicate perception, a slow and quiet flow of emotions, and an overall silence and light sorrow. While “Flower and Moon Traces” inherits the traditional Chinese poetic aesthetics and humanistic aesthetics, there are a lot of poetic descriptions and descriptions of worldly human feelings, tending to the expression of interpersonal harmony, humanistic care and the pursuit of humanistic completeness, with an overall preference for hilarity and joy.

2.3 Content focus

In terms of content, “Snow Country” has more descriptions of psychological perception and feelings than “Traces of the Flowering Moon”. On the one hand, the novel often expresses feelings and thoughts about natural objects, such as “the cedar forest is always darker than the sky, perhaps they are eager to escape because they do not want to be swallowed by the obscurity of the cedar forest”, etc. On the other hand, the psychological descriptions of the characters, especially Shimura, are often found in the novel. For example, “He spent his days doing nothing, and spent half a day climbing the mountain for nothing, which can be described as a typical futile far apart, he always thought of the colt; but when he came close, he felt that the attachment to human skin, and the temptation from the mountains, all became like a dream”, etc. Through these psychological depictions, the reader can intuitively feel the spiritual texture of the work.

On the other hand, “Traces of the Flower and Moon” puts more ink on the descriptions of worldly life scenes, human interactions and poems, more on the descriptions of language, actions and scenes, and relatively less on psychological descriptions. For example, the first chapter is a scene of storytelling, with a large part of the dialogue between the “boy” and the storyteller. The third chapter has a scene of Suyu and Wei Zizhu having a banquet to catch up with each other, also from a life scene, describing and narrating the exchange between the two and their past friendship. There are many other similar depictions, even calling them subjects. Because of this, “Flower and Moon Scars” is more lifelike, and the expression of human feelings is richer and more intense.

All in all, “Snow Country” focuses on the description of nature and psychology, on the one hand, the delicate depiction and perception of natural objects, and on the other hand, the full analysis and presentation of the psychology of the characters. In contrast, “Traces of the Flower and Moon” focuses on the presentation of scenes of mundane life and the characters’ verbal dialogues and descriptions of poetry, with a more lifelike atmosphere.

The difference in the content tendency of the two books has something to do with the literary tradition of the two countries. China is a country of poetry, and poetry tradition lasts for thousands of years. Naturally, people’s aesthetic consciousness naturally values the display of “artistic conception”. Therefore, a large number of poems appear in “Flower and Moon Mark”, and some poems contain rich artistic conception combined with the plot. This tradition has been quite vividly displayed in a Dream of Red Mansions. In addition, before the appearance of Flower and Moon Mark, Chinese secular novels and dramas of talented and beautiful women have developed quite mature, and the description of secular life scenes and interpersonal communication is most vividly, such as The Golden Plum, A Dream of Red Mansions, Romance of the Western Chamber and so on. However, Japan has formed its own unique aesthetic consciousness of mourning, emptiness and literary tradition of “without politics”, and is more inclined to perceive and think about nature and individual life. For example, The Story of Genji, Out of rank, Dancing Girl of Izu and so on all show this tradition. This also creates the above-mentioned aesthetic tendency differences between Flower and Moon Trace and Snow Country.

In a word, The Snow Country focuses on the description of nature and psychology. On the one hand, it is the exquisite description and perception of natural objects, and on the other hand, it fully analyzes and shows the psychology of the characters’ mind. While “Flower and Moon Mark” focuses on the display of secular life scenes and the language dialogue of the characters, and the description of poetry, making the life atmosphere more intense.

3. Conclusion

By comparing and analyzing the similarities and differences between the two novels and the reasons for them, we can feel to a certain extent the highlights of each Chinese and Japanese novel. In terms of content focus, the delicate perception and depiction of the psyche in *Snow Country* is characteristic of many Japanese novels, while the poetic aesthetics and the focus on worldly human feelings in *Traces of the Flowering Moon* are highlights of Chinese novels. In addition, in terms of the spiritual connotation of the novel, the fatalistic view revealed in “*Traces of the Flower and Moon*” seems to be an important element in many Chinese novels, such as “*Dream of the Red Chamber*” and the “change of fate” in many contemporary immortal novels, while the deeper reflection on life and the nature of life in “*Snow Country*” is even more profound. However, many of the “funereal” tendencies of Japanese novels revealed in *Snow Country* can be reconciled and complemented by the positive Confucian sentiments of Chinese novels such as *Traces of the Flowering Moon*. This can enlighten the mutual reference and learning of novel writing between China and Japan.

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