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Introspective Solitude and the Tragic Song of Life: A Comparative Study of Tragic Consciousness in the Novels of Guo Moruo and Kawabata Yasunari

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Abstract: Despite their vastly different cultural backgrounds and personal circumstances, Guo Moruo and Kawabata Yasunari both imbued their novels with a profound sense of life's tragedy. Through a close reading of Guo Moruo's Japanese-period novels and Kawabata's representative works, this paper reveals their deep resonances in themes such as the cruelty of fate, the disillusionment of love, and the futility of existence. It further examines the divergent roots of their tragic consciousness from the perspectives of social circumstances, literary trends, and aesthetic traditions. The study finds that Guo's tragic consciousness originates from the triple forces of exile and material hardship, the Creative Society's "anguish of life," and the sentimental atmosphere of the May Fourth era, whereas Kawabata's tragic sensibility is rooted in his orphaned loneliness and the Japanese aesthetic traditions of mono no aware (the pathos of things) and yūgen (mysterious depth). Though their paths diverge, both ultimately point toward the modern individual's profound existential questioning and tragic aesthetic transcendence in the face of an inescapable fate.

Keywords: Guo Moruo; Kawabata Yasunari; Tragic consciousness

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1. Introduction: Divergent paths, convergent tragic writing

On the literary map of East Asia in the twentieth century, Guo Moruo and Kawabata Yasunari stand as two towering peaks of markedly different styles. The former ignited the revolution of Chinese new poetry with the iconoclastic fervor of The Goddesses, his verse brimming with exuberant vitality; yet when he turned to fiction, his emotional register dramatically reversed, suffusing his novels with melancholy and sentimental sorrow. The latter, steeped since childhood in the subtle, obscure beauty of Japanese classical literature, permeated his fiction with a pervasive, gentle sadness and a resignation to fate, earning him the reputation as "the great synthesizer of the Japanese aesthetic of sorrow [1]." What is striking is that these two seemingly

unrelated writers achieved a spiritual rapport in the realm of fiction—both captured with keen perception life's various hardships—poverty, illness, love, desire, aging, and death—and elevated them into an inescapable tragic consciousness.

This tragic consciousness is neither simple pessimism nor cheap sentimentality, but rather a philosophical sorrow and compassion born from the writer's sober examination of individual destiny. Guo's Japanese-period works such as The Temptation, The Drifting Trilogy, and Late Spring repeatedly depict the spiritual struggles of impoverished creators, unrequited love, and futile resistance. Kawabata, in works like The Old Capital, Snow Country, The Dancing Girl of Izu, and Thousand Cranes, portrays with quiet, melancholic grace the identity anxiety of an abandoned child, the illusory efforts of a geisha, the bitter sweetness of first love, and the encroaching reality of aging and death [2]. Though each bears his own national and personal imprint, both pose the same fundamental question: How does an individual perceive and bear sorrow in the face of an irreversible fate, and how might one find a bittersweet poetry within that sorrow?

This paper aims to systematically compare the tragic consciousness in the novels of these two writers, first examining their specific manifestations and commonalities in their views of fate, love, and existence, and then analyzing the differences in the roots of their tragic visions, thereby illuminating the pluralistic generative mechanisms and aesthetic values of tragic consciousness in modern East Asian literature.

2. A shared melody of life's sorrow: Resonances in tragic consciousness

(1) The Cruelty of Fate and the Original Sin of Birth

In Guo Moruo's Japanese-period novels, fate often appears in a cold and irresistible guise. His protagonists are typically impoverished overseas students or literary youths struggling to make ends meet, suffering not only material deprivation but also the spiritual torment of xenophobia and self-doubt. In The Temptation, the protagonist steals a book for the sake of creative inspiration and subsequently falls into a deeper moral crisis and existential despair. He laments: "Tao Yuanming took a neighbor's meal home to feed his grandson... can that be called theft? Now I have stolen this book. My original intention was to gain artistic insight for my writing, and my writing was to earn manuscript fees to support my wife. For whom did I become a pickpocket? Ah, God! God! If you have eyes, you should forgive me [3]." Here, he reads the sorrow of life into his own self-justification, ultimately concluding that life itself is "a tragedy," and "he pitied his wife's future, and tears flowed from his eyes." In Midnight, Guo exposes his existential plight even more bluntly: "Day after day, night after night, sometimes he had to hear the cries of a hungry baby. Aimu, whose nerves had already deteriorated, grew dizzier and more blurred-eyed from lack of sleep, and the ringing in his ears grew louder [4]." In The Drifting Trilogy, he further writes: "But in a China where literature is not worth a penny, his material life was like a seed falling on stony ground, with no hope of taking root or sprouting." Here the tragedy of fate is no longer merely personal but bears the heavy imprint of the era and the nation. He also laments: "He fought once, failed once, like one unskilled in swimming, whose boat capsizes and falls into the churning, jagged waves—the more he sinks, the more he tries to rally; the more he sinks, and in the end he is submerged in the deepest depths of sorrow [5]." This despair born of futile resistance constitutes the core tension of Guo's tragic vision.

Kawabata, by contrast, elevates the tragedy of fate to a more transcendental and mysterious dimension. In The Old Capital, Chieko was abandoned by her impoverished parents as an infant, taken in by the merchant Takichiro and his wife, and raised according to ancient Japanese customs. Yet she can never escape the

loneliness and shame of her "abandoned child" identity. According to Japanese folklore, abandoned children are doomed to a life of misfortune, and Chieko's status as a twin adds a further layer of stigma. Chieko reflects: "I have been an orphan since childhood and have received too much kindness from others. I have become someone who cannot get angry at others, nor can I ever hate anyone." "Because I am an orphan, a child without a home, sorrowful and wandering thoughts constantly entangle me. I am always dreaming [6]." Here the tragedy of fate is sealed from birth, with no possibility of reversal. Kawabata writes this "unsolvable" sorrow in a quiet, restrained tone—not as fierce resistance but as introspective endurance and gentle melancholy. In contrast to Guo's indignation and helplessness, this forms a subtle counterpoint, yet both affirm fate's innate constraint over the individual.

(2) The Illusion of Love and the Futility of Desire

Unrequited love is one of the oldest and most moving themes of tragic consciousness. Many of Guo's novels revolve around unrequited or fruitless love. In works such as The Karumeru Girl and Late Spring, the protagonists harbor deep yet unattainable desires for certain women—the more intense the desire, the more profound the eventual disillusionment. Guo situates the tragedy of love within the broader context of life's hardships, making it yet another testament to the difficulty of existence. Love offers no salvation; instead, it exacerbates the emptiness and pain of being. In The Drifting Trilogy, his protagonist laments: "Where is my talent? ... I am truly ashamed... Ugly! Ugly! The ugliness of mediocrity, the sorrow of mediocrity!" This self-negation, intertwined with romantic failure, constitutes a pervasive existential melancholy [7].

Kawabata's treatment of love tragedy is more subtle and restrained. In The Dancing Girl of Izu, the first love between the young narrator and the dancing girl is pure and elegant, but ultimately fades away due to differences in social status and life trajectories. The bittersweetness does not erupt in passionate outcries, but lingers as a parting glance at the end of the journey, an unspoken farewell [8]. Thousand Cranes goes further, weaving a tapestry of love and desire, transgression and guilt, into a web of beautiful harm—love is both the source of beauty and the abyss of pain. Particularly noteworthy is Komako in Snow Country, who strives to "live properly" and pursue purity and dignity, yet all her efforts appear to Shimamura as nothing more than "futility [9]."The more earnestly she tries, the more cruelly fate mocks her. This dual sense of futility in love and existence bears a striking spiritual resemblance to Guo's tragic cycle of "fight once, fail once"—both reveal the Sisyphus-like predicament of human beings in the realms of emotion and survival.

(3) Futile Resistance and Existential Despair

Faced with the oppression of fate and the disillusionment of love, Guo's protagonists typically choose to resist, yet each act of resistance leads to a deeper failure. As noted earlier, "He fought once, failed once... and in the end he was submerged in the deepest depths of sorrow." This is the logic of a classic tragic hero—the more he strives, the deeper he sinks; the more he seeks, the more futile his quest. Guo elevates this ineffective resistance into a philosophical interrogation of the essence of life: Is humanity destined to sink forever into the bottomless abyss of sorrow? He states outright: "Too sentimental! Too sentimental! ... This bomb of my life cannot be detonated meaninglessly at this moment."Here we see both his self-awareness of his own sentimentality and the suppressed despair that finds no outlet in reality [10].

Kawabata, in contrast, tends to present a form of "despair without resistance." His protagonists rarely engage in fierce rebellion; instead, they accept their fate with a nearly Zen-like composure. Yet this does not mean numbness. In A Sixteen-Year-Old Diary, the narrator returns home to find no one there; he writes: "I left school at half past five and came home [11]. The front gate was tightly shut, to keep visitors away... I called out, 'I'm home,' but no one answered. It was utterly quiet. I felt lonely, and sorrow welled up from within."This

sorrow arises from the emptiness and solitude of existence itself. In The Flower That Does Not Wither, Kawabata perceives "a mournful beauty" in the full-bloom crabapple flower at four in the morning, awakening to both "the will to live" and the realization that with each small step forward, one draws closer to death's misery and despair [12]. This lucid awareness of life's terminus is not pessimism but a kind of clear-eyed, melancholic enlightenment in the face of impermanence. Guo's resistance, though heroic, ends in emptiness; Kawabata's non-resistance, though serene, is equally laden with despair. They reach the same philosophical destination by different roads: life is essentially tragic, and sorrow is the supreme aesthetic response to that tragedy.

3. Different Streams, Same Source: Divergent Generative Mechanisms of Tragic Consciousness

Though Guo and Kawabata resonate deeply across multiple dimensions of tragic consciousness, these similar insights emerge from distinctly different cultural soils and personal histories. Examining these differences helps to define more precisely the unique character of each writer's tragic vision.

(1) Social Circumstances and the Stamp of the Era: Guo's Real-World Roots

Guo's tragic consciousness is rooted first and foremost in his visceral experience of life's hardships. After going to Japan in 1914, he endured prolonged financial difficulties, academic pressures, family burdens, and racial discrimination, even developing neurasthenia. As quoted earlier from Midnight, the lack of sleep, the crying infant, the deteriorating nerves—these concrete hardships gave him a bodily understanding of life's sorrow, which naturally flowed into his fiction [13].

Second, as a core member of the Creative Society, Guo's tragic consciousness also reflects the collective aesthetics of that group. The Creative Society championed the expression of "the anguish of life," emphasizing the conflict between spirit and flesh and a sentimental tone. Yu Dafu, in his preface to Sinking, described the society's works as "an anatomy of young men's melancholy," expressing "the conflict between soul and body," and even asserted that "sentimentalism is the very ferment of literature [14]."The youthful, passionate psychology and melancholic sensibility of the Creative Society found concentrated expression in Guo's novels. Zhu Ziqing likewise noted: "Some say Romanticism and sentimentalism are the hallmarks of the Creative Society, and Guo's poetry is a prime example." Moreover, the May Fourth era itself was a period of profound tragedy—the ancient nation beset by internal and external troubles, reform movements repeatedly thwarted, and sensitive souls steeped in the sorrow of the age. Guo's tragic consciousness is the personal crystallization of this historical mood, imbued with sharp social critique and patriotic anxiety, thus lending his tragedy a more urgent, worldly tension and impulse toward resistance than Kawabata's.

(2) Orphaned Origins and Aesthetic Traditions: Kawabata's Spiritual Underpinnings

Unlike Guo's socio-historical roots, Kawabata's tragic consciousness stems more from a deep entanglement between individual psychological structure and national aesthetic genes. Orphaned early in life, losing his grandparents one after another, and teased as a "funeral celebrity" and "Mr. Crematorium," Kawabata's unique orphaned circumstances shaped a personality marked by loneliness, introversion, sensitivity, and a sense of abandonment.

More crucially, Kawabata was profoundly influenced by the Japanese aesthetic tradition of mono no aware (the pathos of things). The Japanese people revere sorrow (aware), mystery (yūgen), and elegance (fūga) as the three pillars of beauty, with "sorrow" at the very core. Kawabata was particularly moved by

the "Japanese-style consolation and redemption" evoked through "moving sorrow and grief" in The Tale of Genji, finding its beauty unparalleled. When viewing Uemura Utei's famous paintings Freezing Clouds Sifting Snow and Crows in the Forest, he immersed himself in "a deep sadness and loneliness permeating the picture surface," moved by "a natural charm[15]."Japanese literature and art place special emphasis on projecting sorrowful emotions through quiet scenes and circumstances, achieving a seamless fusion of environmental stillness and spiritual grief, allowing the reader to perceive the delicate, elegant beauty hidden within that sorrow. Kawabata's novels are the modern incarnation of this aesthetic tradition—his tragic consciousness is not a critique of society but a poetic acceptance of life's impermanence, a quiet aesthetic contemplation that generates compassion and beauty from within pathos.

4. Conclusion: Two tragedies, one humanistic concern

In sum, though Guo Moruo and Kawabata Yasunari share a profound engagement with tragic themes—the sorrow of existence, the cruelty of fate, the disillusionment of love, the futility of resistance—the generative paths and expressive forms of their tragic consciousness differ fundamentally. Guo's tragic consciousness is the triple overlay of his difficult circumstances in Japan, the Creative Society's "anguish of life," and the collective sentimentality of the May Fourth era, characterized by worldly immediacy and echoes of resistance. Kawabata's, by contrast, is the internal fusion of his orphaned solitude and the Japanese aesthetic of mono no aware, manifesting as a serene, mysterious, and mournful vision of life.

Yet it is precisely this phenomenon of "different streams from the same source" that underscores the universality of tragic consciousness as a shared human spiritual experience. Whether directed at social critique or the lamentation of impermanence, both transcend mere sentimentality, ascending to a sober reflection on the human condition and aesthetic redemption. Guo's indignation reveals helplessness; Kawabata's tranquility conceals despair. Both point to the same truth: when the modern mind confronts an inescapable fate, only through aestheticized expressions of sorrow can one achieve a moment of clarity and release. This humanistic concern remains profoundly instructive today—in a world of ever-growing uncertainty, how to reconcile with our own finitude and suffering may well be the eternal question that tragic consciousness leaves for us.

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