

## BOOK REVIEW

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### OFF WITH STUPOR AND ON WITH CHANGE

Yasunari Kawabata. 1987. *The Old Capital*. Tokyo: Tuttle Pub., 164 pp.

Reviewed by V. L. Mendiola

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Kyoto had served not only as the national capital but also as the cultural soul of Japan for a thousand years before the seat of the government moved out to Tokyo. But the ancient city has retained its penchant for holding quaint, distinctive festivals that attract both local and foreign tourists: bamboo-cutting, shrine and temple visit, hollylock festivities, participants purifying themselves by the Kamo River, cherry blossom-viewing, amulet rituals, procession floats, catching crickets, even the openly accepted custom of frequenting geisha parlors. The ancient city provides the setting that shapes and blows up the relationship of the main protagonists in the novel.

Chieko, once a foundling abandoned by her peasant parents on the doorstep of a fabric shop, lives with her adopted parents who run a home-managed *obi* business. Her other twin sister is separated from her – a lumber merchant raises her in a far-flung, forested area where she polishes cedar logs for commercial purposes. The siblings meet accidentally in the Gion Festival and intuitively feel their filial connection, but sticking to age-old ethos of not being seen together in broad daylight (the ancient times was wont to reject the idea of raising twins in the family, let alone the notion of having another mouth to feed). Chieko has to see Naeko clandestinely in the forest to disentangle her roots. Her foster parents have told her identity much earlier so that deep in her heart, she neither resents nor thinks ill of them.

The story reaches its crux when Hideo, the *obi* weaver-designer falls in love with Naeko whom he has passed for the real Chieko; the

peasant feels that the weaver's kind of affection is illusory, though Chieko thinks otherwise. The reader must settle the conflict her/himself, as Kawabata tends to be abstruse in resolving it, merely resorting to using Nature motif to subtly hint at the denouement. Another counterpoint juxtaposes Chieko's dilemma when Ryusuke, the graduate student-brother of Shin'ichi, her childhood friend, gives her pointers in upgrading their family business when it turns in the red, so to speak.

Yet this highly elegiac, melancholic, neo-sensualist work to which Kawabata is linked, along with *Snow Country* and *The Sound of the Mountain* – the other two novels cited by the Swedish Academy of Letters in 1968, for which Kawabata won the Nobel Prize. He readily admitted in his speech before the Academy that he was primarily interested in “beautifying death and in seeking harmony among man, nature, and emptiness.” Almost amorphous in composition, *The Old Capital* laments over the passage of a glorious era in Japanese history, the inexorable clash of modernity and change with tradition, the unmistakable interface of lassitude with the *vita elan* in Japanese postmodern life. In this philosophical construct alone, Kawabata contrasts with that of Haruki Murakami – the most world's renowned Nippongo novelist today that valorizes Western cultural values, embracing them with complete abandon to a fault.