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## Challenging Narrative Foreclosure: An Interpretation of Yasunari Kawabata's *House of the Sleeping Beauties*

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### Abstract

Yasunari Kawabata appropriates narrative elements from Western fairy tales in his late work, *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, applying the central image of the 'sleeping beauty' to a dark story set at night, shrouded in the gloominess and cold that often loom in people's late lives. Viewed through the lens of narrative gerontology, Kawabata deals with different forms of narrative foreclosure in crafting the story. At the subject level, old Eguchi, as the protagonist and main narrator, ventures into a secret place in pursuit of unusual experiences to restart his own life story and break through the narrative foreclosure in his old age. At the object level, the 'sleeping beauties' fall into narrative foreclosure in their deep slumber, becoming the 'Other', unable to speak for themselves. In his unique way, Kawabata endows them with expressive power through sincere sympathy. In addition, the writer also breaks through his own narrative foreclosure in his late career by subverting the classic fairy tale to explore and confront death, revealing an active attitude towards aging. However, Kawabata's suicide appears to counteract all these efforts, turning them into a mystery of ending.

**Keywords:** old age; *House of Sleeping Beauties*; narrative foreclosure; the Other; appropriation

### Introduction

Since its publication, Yasunari Kawabata's *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* (*Nemureru Bijo*, first published in 1961) has sparked widespread controversy due to its obscure setting, ambiguous ethical tension, and unique aesthetic sensibility. As a late masterpiece by the Nobel laureate, the novella is regarded as an extension of Kawabata's consistent aesthetic traditions of 'mono no aware' (the pathos of things) and in'ei (shadow and subtlety), while also forging an 'esoteric' exploratory path in terms of literary form and thematic content – earning its reputation as 'most certainly an esoteric masterpiece' (Mishima 1969: 7). It tells the story of Eguchi's five visits to a secretive establishment called the 'House of Sleeping Beauties', where young women, drugged into deep sleep, are put in locked rooms to serve as sleeping companions for old men, but there is a strict rule that they cannot be violated. Due to the story's engagement with the grey area of sexual transactions, in China its artistic value and social significance are often overlooked. As a result, 'most discussions of this important late work tend to simplistically reduce it to a narrative about 'sexual desire' (Meng and Yu 1988: 27). However, Ye Weiqu, a renowned Chinese translator of Japanese literature believes that the author's depiction of the old man in relation to the sleeping beauties expresses a quiet and refined surge of life's primal yearning, conveying the themes of 'indulgence, temptation, and redemption' (Ye 1983: 46). Scholarship in Japanese

and English initially focused on the ‘symbolic representations of the sleeping beauties’, interpreting them as ‘objects of desire, compassionate Buddhas, occasions to remember the past, and mother-figures’ (Montebruno 2003: 291). Although as early as 1971 Kimball observed that the novella is ‘at once traditional, from one called the “most Japanese” of writers, and modern – as modern as geriatrics, senior citizens, and “Sunset Villages”’ (Kimball 1971: 19), he did not elaborate further on this point, nor did scholars who subsequently mentioned ‘ageing’ (Hotta 2018: 38) or ‘old age’ (Hwang 2025: e207) in the story in recent years. Given the increasing prevalence of aging populations and the various aging issues today, the perspective of gerontology is certainly worth further exploration.

This article attempts to place *House of the Sleeping Beauties* within the framework of narrative gerontology, whose basic assumption is that ‘the biographical side of human life is as complicated and as critical to fathom as, for instance, the biological side, about which gerontology has acquired an impressive range of knowledge’ (Kenyon *et al.* 2011: XIII). Reminiscing and narrating life stories serves as a subjective means for elderly individuals to review their lives, inevitably accompanied by psychological activity and emotional fluctuation. Consequently, when studying how to care for and support the elderly, narrative gerontology ‘offers a focus on the psychological core of care: the inescapable human way of life, of not just having but rather being a life story’ (Ubels 2011: 320). An essential concept in narrative gerontology is narrative foreclosure, which happens when ‘the culture in which one lives fails to provide adequate narrative resources for living one’s life meaningfully and productively, one’s life story may be experienced as effectively over’ (Freeman 2000: 81). In short, narrative foreclosure is ‘the premature conviction that one’s life story has effectively ended’ (Freeman 2000: 83). While *House of the Sleeping Beauties* is not Kawabata’s only work featuring aging characters, it stands as a quintessential story that mirrors both the protagonist’s and the author’s resistance to narrative foreclosure. When Kawabata was writing *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, he had already entered his 60s. He intricately intertwined his own late-life circumstances and psychological state with the narrative in a complex battle against narrative foreclosure. On one hand, he sought to construct a literary figure for his elderly protagonist that tries to break free from narrative foreclosure. On the other hand, as a writer approaching the end of his career, he aimed to challenge the narrative limitations he faced in his own writing, continuing to delve deeply into character development and literary form.

However, an approach based solely on narrative gerontology may not be sufficient to fully address the multiple issues in the text concerning gender oppression, the politics of the body, and the author’s intent. To this end, this article also draws on feminist, ethical, and psychoanalytic frameworks. These perspectives are particularly valuable in analysing the silence and passivity of the ‘sleeping beauties’, the ambiguity of Eguchi’s actions, and Kawabata’s own creative posture, thereby introducing richer theoretical resources to uncover the hidden moral contradictions and perceptual fissures within the text.

### **Eguchi’s Struggle Against Narrative Foreclosure**

In *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, Kawabata portrays the protagonist, Eguchi, as an elderly man in a liminal state at the twilight of life. His physiological decline, psychological unrest, and moral hesitation converge to form a nexus of internal contradictions. From the perspective of narrative gerontology, Eguchi represents an individual who has been partially de-functionalized on social and cultural levels, and who attempts to rekindle a narrative of life’s meaning through an extraordinary, non-everyday experience. This article argues that although Eguchi’s actions may appear to resist narrative foreclosure, the path he chooses is fraught with moral ambiguity, repetitive desire, and semantic obscurity. His struggle ultimately resembles a lingering hesitation or a prolonged state of deferral, rather than a decisive act of transcendence.

The opening paragraph seems to abruptly push *House of the Sleeping Beauties* into the plot without any prior setup or introduction: 'He was not to do anything in bad taste, the woman of the inn warned old Eguchi. He was not to put his finger into the mouth of the sleeping girl, or try anything else of that sort' (Kawabata 1969: 13). In this way, the old man and the young girl immediately establish an active versus passive relationship, subverting the conventional power dynamic between the old and the young. The 67-year-old Eguchi's admission into the establishment is predicated on the perception that he is a customer the innkeeper 'could trust' (Kawabata 1969: 22) – a figure presumed to pose no sexual threat and thus socially accepted as de-gendered. However, Eguchi's internal sexual desire has not been entirely extinguished; the novella repeatedly suggests that he still exhibits a sensory sensitivity toward the female body. As such, he occupies a contradictory space between socially imposed de-gendering and residual desire, making him a paradigmatic case of identity rupture and anxiety of meaning, central concerns of narrative gerontology. This contradiction is also one of the psychological motivations behind Eguchi's entry into the 'House of the Sleeping Beauties': to attain the illusion of being re-endowed with subjectivity in the presence of youthful female bodies. Crucially, this illusion is sustained through the objectification and silencing of the female body in order to temporarily counteract the crisis of narrative agency brought about by the aging condition. Eguchi is at the critical juncture of narrative foreclosure: on the one hand, sensing that his life is about to stall, and on the other, hoping to experience the powerlessness and sorrow of aging in an extreme way before reaching that point. This is also a way to break narrative foreclosure by 'challenging the cultural order, refusing prevailing endings and fashioning alternative ones. Only then, upon "restarting" one's life story, will there emerge the possibility of self-renewal' (Freeman 2000: 81).

During his first night sleeping beside the unconscious girl, Eguchi recalls a memory from his youth in which he was the object of an older woman's unspoken affection, and feels a sense of shame at having been objectified. This mechanism of memory reveals a certain ethical sensitivity within him and partially explains his restraint in the present. In other words, Eguchi's own experience of being objectified contributes to his internal resistance against fully succumbing to desire within the 'House of the Sleeping Beauties'. However, this ethical mechanism gradually deteriorates over the course of the novella. During his second visit, he exhibits clear impatience with the rules and shows a voyeuristic curiosity toward the information that the girl is a virgin – curiosity that even seems to motivate his actions. Although he ultimately does not cross any explicit boundaries, his psychological inclinations begin to lean toward imagery of violence and domination. This oscillation between desire and shame reflects Eguchi's failure to construct a coherent self-identity, and casts a deeper moral ambiguity over his attempt to break through narrative foreclosure.

At the climax of the story, Eguchi witnesses a girl die in her sleep, yet all he can do is follow the madam's instructions and return to continue resting with another girl. This emotional detachment signals not only a personal exhaustion of feeling but also reflects the systemic logic of exploitation inherent in the 'House of the Sleeping Beauties'. Eguchi's passive silence to respond to the death borders on complicity with the violence. In this moment, he does not break through narrative foreclosure; rather, he falls into a deeper state of ethical foreclosure – a refusal to assign moral meaning to the event of death or to assume any narrative responsibility. Eguchi's 'story' has not truly changed. Although he undergoes new episodes with five visits, recurring dreams, and the direct encounter with death, his narrative structure remains locked in repetition, avoidance, and non-transformation. He gains no new self-understanding, nor does he integrate or reframe past experiences. Therefore, his supposed resistance to narrative foreclosure is less a breakthrough than a temporary tactic of deferral, a stalling strategy rather than a narrative renewal.

The dark story that takes place in the 'House of Sleeping Beauties' seems devoid of victims at first glance as, according to the innkeeper, the girls who sleep there are not forced but voluntarily take large doses of sleeping pills in exchange for money. However, in their state of complete unconsciousness, they become the playthings of old men, subjected to both the life-threatening effects of the drugs and the loss of human dignity as they are objectified. Thus, they become complex victims, entangled in a mix of subjective and objective factors. Undoubtedly, the co-sleeping service covertly tramples on the moral and social order. When Eguchi steps through the door leading to the secret chamber where an unconscious girl is waiting for him, he steps into a 'demonic world'. Kawabata's fascination with the 'demonic world' stems from his admiration of the Zen monk Ikkyū (1394–1481). Ikkyū's Zen saying, 'The Buddhist world is easy to enter, but the demonic world is hard to access', deeply moved Kawabata, leading him to contemplate that without the 'demonic world', there is no 'Buddhist world'. Entering the 'demonic world' is even more difficult, and those with weak wills cannot enter it. Ikkyū also composed a Noh song titled 'Eguchi', which is why the name of the character, Eguchi, is often thought to have originated from this. It is pointed out that in this work that 'seems to border on "erotica"', we do not experience sensual sexual stimulation; instead, we profoundly feel the deep pain of this ugly fate and the desperate thirst for relief from it' (Zhang 1991: 131). Eguchi wants to defy the 'House of the Sleeping Beauties' rule as a way to resist the 'injustice' of time, but 'when he verifies, to his own satisfaction, that girl is a virgin he stops, unable to bear the ugliness of virginity being stolen by an old man' (Keene 1984: 836). In this way, he withstands the temptation to completely succumb in the dimly lit 'demonic world'.

What draws Eguchi to return repeatedly to the 'House of the Sleeping Beauties' is its ability to continuously provide new narrative resources. Each of Eguchi's visits to this place is accompanied by dreams, memories, and shifts in identity. According to narrative gerontology, 'identity development is a life-long process and that identity is grounded in narrative structures' (Steunenbergh and Bohlmeijer 2011: 302). In the presence of different sleeping girls, he successively evokes memories tied to various roles – lover, husband, father, son – each marked by incompleteness, failure, or a sense of guilt. For instance, he recalls his inability to protect his young daughter from sexual assault, his emotional indifference toward his wife, and his passive presence during his mother's final moments. These fragmented memories surface between sleep and semi-consciousness, forming a negative life review, i.e. a failed version of autobiographical narration. This narrative structure reveals a crucial feature: Eguchi is not engaged in reconstructing a positive self-narrative, but rather repeatedly returning to the ruptures and traumas of his life. His repetitive, almost uncanny experience – hovering between ethical taboo and the threshold of consciousness – resembles a form of self-punishment or moral fatigue more than any meaningful sense of renewal or rebirth.

### **Sleeping Beauties' Exposure to Male Gaze**

Due to its distinctly male perspective,

it would be easy to write off *House of the Sleeping Beauties* as a depraved male fantasy where women can only be the object and never the subject [...] some might claim that it is an oppressive text not worthy of critical attention. (Mebed 2019: 91)

However, when writers portray women as oppressed subjects in their works, it doesn't necessarily mean they condone such oppression; in fact, they might be giving voice to those very women. Kawabata excels in writing about the world of women, vividly and delicately crafting diverse female characters in works such as *The Izu Dancer* (1927), *Snow*

*Country* (1937), *The Sound of the Mountain* (1954), *The Tokyoites* (1955), *Born as a Woman* (1956), and *The Old Capital* (1962). This quality in Kawabata's writing is actually his ability to penetrate the female psyche, a quality few male writers can claim. Kawabata captures the consciousness and emotions of women with remarkable accuracy. Although women in his world are often in subordinate positions, they serve as the foundation of his art. It can be said that Kawabata 'sees through and moves freely within both the bodies and minds of women' (Zhou 1998: 137).

But it should be noted that *House of the Sleeping Beauties* presents a fundamental difference from the women in Kawabata's other works: aside from the innkeeper who attends to Eguchi, the rest of the women are unconscious and immobile. The slumbering girls form the visual centre and ethical focus of the narrative. They are both projections of Eguchi's desires and the silent figures within the narrative strategy – their existence suspended between living beings and inanimate objects. Mulvey's pertinent critique is illuminating for us to understand these girls' exposure to male gaze:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (Mulvey 1975: 11; emphasis in original)

Depicting the features of these objectified girls is undoubtedly challenging, as they are placed in a special state of narrative foreclosure, with 'a function neither of prevailing cultural storylines nor of one's unshakable convictions about the dead end of the future but instead of the irrefutable fact of one's inevitable decline due to physical and/or mental deterioration' (Freeman 2011: 4). This situation is typically associated with Alzheimer's disease due to aging, but it also applies to the helpless state of the 'sleeping beauties' in the story. Under the influence of medication, their own narrative processes have been put on hold, rendering them the doll-like Others. They do not represent the end of narrative, but rather its interruption – or, in the worse case, its termination, should they die in their sleep: they may have had stories of their own, yet have no means to tell them; their physical lives are preserved, yet their spiritual or subjective agency is stripped away. This condition exemplifies the problem of ethical silence: can a person be deprived of meaning simply because they cannot speak? And can literature serve as a voice for the silenced?

Kawabata can be seen as bravely tackling this narrative foreclosure, skilfully portraying these voiceless Others through his writing. Donald Keene, an American expert in Japanese literature, has noted this characteristic of Kawabata's work:

Nowhere else in his works is Kawabata's genius for evoking beauty more conspicuously displayed than in *The House of the Sleeping Beauties*. The naked girls cannot be distinguished one from the other by dress, jewelry, speech, or the other external features that normally allow us to form opinions about a person's background and character, yet they all remain distinct in the reader's memory, partly because of the details chosen in describing each, but mainly because of the memories each woman arouses in Eguchi. Random associations and dreams, two familiar devices in Kawabata's writings, here supply not only extra dimensions in time, but provide the complexity that a story with only one person in it would otherwise lack. (Keene 1984: 836)

'A story of only one person' here refers to Eguchi's solitary journey of exploration and discovery. The girls sharing the room with Eguchi lack any means of expression, which

naturally tests the author's writing skills. However, as Donald Keene notes, each of these girls is vividly depicted, leaving a lasting impression on the reader.

*House of the Sleeping Beauties* consists of five parts, depicting Eguchi's five experiences in the inn. Many researchers focus on Eguchi's psychological activities and dreams, uncovering that Kawabata

does not believe in the existence of beauty in reality, yet cannot completely detach himself from it; beauty and ugliness remain intertwined. Ultimately, he is forced to reflect on the illusory 'beauty of humanity' through the extreme condition of an ugly, twisted old man. (Wei 1993: 59)

As for the girls who accompany Eguchi and hover on the brink of life and death, they serve merely as symbols of youth and beauty, contrasting with Eguchi's old age and sorrow. Furthermore, some scholars connect these girls to Kawabata's own childhood experience of losing his mother, suggesting that 'the suppression of female personalities and agency is not solely a misogynistic tendency, but a depiction of the desire to place the female body into a kind of suspended animation, in order to construct a fantasy reunion with the lost mother' (Mebed 2013: 16). In fact, if we do a closer reading of the text, we may find that Kawabata observes the fallen young women through Eguchi's eyes, infusing his writing with a certain sympathy for them or a subtle protest against their objectification. For instance, when Eguchi grasps and gazes at the hand of the first girl, 'as if it were alive' (Kawabata 1969: 20), the narrative suddenly diverges from Eguchi's third-person limited point of view to the authorial voice: 'She was not a living doll, for there could be no living doll; but, so as not to shame an old man no longer a man, she had been made into a living toy' (Kawabata 1969: 20). The authorial voice is used to 'identify narrative situations that are heterodiegetic, public, and potentially self-referential' (Lanser 1992: 15). It means that 'where a distinction between the (implied) author and a public, heterodiegetic narrator is not textually marked, readers are invited to equate the narrator with the author and the narratee with themselves (or their historical equivalents)' (Lanser 1992: 16). In this sense, Kawabata, behind the text, not only expresses his own dissatisfaction with Eguchi's treatment of the girl, but also encourages readers to form their own judgements.

In portraying these 'living dolls', it is difficult to convey anything beyond their appearance, breath, and smell, resulting in a literal case of narrative foreclosure for the author. However, Kawabata employs the form of dream dialogue to grant them a voice. Notably, at the end of the first section, after being awakened from a nightmare, old Eguchi takes sleeping pills and drifts off again. At this moment, 'from her mouth or her nose . . . came a small voice. "Are you having a nightmare too?" he asked' (Kawabata 1969: 33). The inclusion of 'too' especially brings the girl into the audience: a young woman, completely naked, being scrutinized and toyed with by unidentified old men in a closed room – isn't that a nightmare? It's not only Eguchi and the first girl who are tormented by nightmares. While Eguchi's actions toward the first girl are minimal, the second girl is not so 'fortunate'. She suffers from Eguchi's rough treatment, nearly losing her virginity, and her sleep is deeply disturbed. She continuously utters murmurs, even engaging in brief exchanges with Eguchi. The first girl's murmur reveals little about her personal life, background, or attitude toward her profession. The second girl, however, is different. Her fragmented speech subtly unveils her tragic past and her inner resistance to the companion service. As Eguchi pulls her closer, the girl shows signs of resistance, repeatedly responding to Eguchi's advances with brief words like 'don't', 'stop it' while physically trying to avoid him. Of course, she is powerless to escape, forced to seek help and express guilt in her dream, crying uncontrollably before breaking into hopeless laughter. This contrast between the two girls highlights the depth of the second girl's inner turmoil, and the involuntary nature of her suffering becomes even more evident through

her distressed sleep-talk, showing a profound inner conflict. Although the ‘sadness in her voice stabbed at him’ (Kawabata 1969: 46), Eguchi does not stop, and even takes her more tightly in his arms, relishing the warmth of her body and labelling her ‘unmistakably a witch’ (Kawabata 1969: 46). If we consider this detail alongside the fact that Eguchi encounters a different girl each time, we cannot keep ourselves from imagining that ‘some of the girls were simply abducted and dragged away, or that they will be secretly disposed of – dead or barely alive – once their value as commodities has been exhausted’ (Stahl 2018: 173–174). One of Eguchi’s last two companions unexpectedly dies and is silently dragged away as though she were trash. The innkeeper, shockingly unfazed, instructs him to return to his room to rest, as there is still another girl to keep him company. This cold and callous handling seems to confirm suspicions about the girls’ origins, reminding readers that these Others in the shadows are real, flesh-and-blood beings, who should have the right and opportunity to speak. Kawabata cracks open these girls’ narrative foreclosure, documenting the exploitation and abuse they endure one by one, thereby exposing the crimes hidden beneath the veil of night.

### Kawabata’s Appropriation of Western Narrative Elements

When people think of the imagery of the ‘Sleeping Beauty’, the first thing that comes to mind is the familiar fairy tale: a princess is cursed by a witch, falls into a deep sleep, and is only awakened by the true love’s kiss of a prince, who breaks the spell. They live happily ever after, and then the story ends. Kawabata borrowed the central figure of this fairy tale – the sleeping beauty – and reinvented her to broaden his own narrative horizon, or to challenge his own narrative foreclosure as a late-career writer. At the time, Japan’s literary world had already opened its doors to foreign literary works, drawing on Western narrative techniques. But why did Kawabata choose to dig material from a fairy tale? In January 1960, while he was in the midst of conceiving *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, he wrote in an essay:

During the Meiji period, Western novels were introduced to Japan. However, subsequent Japanese novels failed to fully digest Western literature; I feel that Japanese novels have yet to reach a mature state. I also doubt whether the modern Western style of novel is suitable for the Japanese, at least for me, it is not. (Kawabata 2000: 185–186)<sup>1</sup>

Despite this, he still aspired for Japanese novels to gain more readers in the West, acknowledging that the ‘export of Japanese culture remained minimal and progressed with great difficulty’ (Kawabata 2000: 182). The fact that Western novelistic forms didn’t suit him personally did not mean that Western narrative resources couldn’t be utilized. On the contrary, integrating Western elements – especially familiar fairy tales – into his writing was a strategic way to bring his works closer to Western readers. This reflects his vision of ‘finding the roots of Japanese culture through a comparison of Eastern and Western cultures, exploring the idea and methods of recreating traditional culture, and using that to establish one’s own historical position’ (Ye 1995: 61).

Kawabata’s *House of the Sleeping Beauties* is wrapped in the outer shell of the familiar fairy tale stereotype of ‘Sleeping Beauty’, yet he completely transforms both the setting and the characters. The castle becomes an inn, the witch turns into an innkeeper, and the ‘Sleeping Beauty’ is no longer a cherished princess but rather a group of young girls, exploited and abused. The male protagonist shifts from the young, handsome prince and saviour to a grotesquely aged man, a predator seeking pleasure. What’s more disturbing is that the ‘Sleeping Beauties’ never regain consciousness, and one of them even dies. Kawabata’s

retelling of the fairy tale is undoubtedly subversive, transplanting it into a Japanese context and shifting the perspective from innocent, childlike wonder to the weary outlook of old age. This stark contrast creates a dramatic tension, providing readers with a powerful and strikingly memorable experience. Indeed, this rewriting has left such an impact that it has already become part of literary lore, cementing Kawabata's work as a profound and unsettling reflection on desire, aging and exploitation. This story deeply moved Gabriel García Márquez (1927–2014), the winner of the 1982 Nobel Prize in Literature. As a tribute to Kawabata, Márquez borrowed the framework of *House of the Sleeping Beauties* to create his novel *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* (2004). This, in turn, caught the attention of the 2003 Nobel Prize winner J.M. Coetzee, who wrote a literary critique discussing the connection between the two works. In this way, Kawabata's vision of 'cultural export' has been realized, as his work has had a significant influence on world literature. His contribution helped elevate Japanese literature onto the global stage, fulfilling his aspiration of establishing a deeper presence of Japanese narrative within the broader realm of international literary discourse.

If the 'Sleeping Beauty' fairy tale emphasizes 'awakening', Kawabata's *House of the Sleeping Beauties* instead focuses on 'dying', offering a distinct narrative centred on death. The seaside inn in the story is far from 'being a site of rebirth or a return to a more pleasant past, this is a world where the past in the form of memories is disturbing and where only death awaits' (Napier 1996: 63). Eguchi's act of 'seeking refuge in the past can be explained as an attempt to come to terms with the dilemma of fearing death' (Ibrahim 2023: 110), psychologically preparing himself for the inevitable challenges of old age. Within the surreal experiences of the inn, Eguchi encounters four types of death: the death of an infant, the death of an old man, the death of a mother, and the death of a young girl.

From the very moment Eguchi first visits the inn, the awareness of death is an ever-present shadow. Before entering the secluded room, he recalls a line from a poem written by a young poetess who died of cancer at an early age: 'the night offers toads and black dogs and corpses of the drowned' (Kawabata 1969: 16). He links these eerie images to the girl he is about to meet, making his steps feel heavy with foreboding. After sharing the bed with the girl, Eguchi dreams of his daughter giving birth to a deformed child, who is then dismembered on the spot, while he and a doctor stand by, watching. Upon waking, he asks himself: 'Was it that, having come in search of misshapen pleasure, he had had a misshapen dream?' (Kawabata 1969: 32). In his subconscious, Eguchi draws a comparison between the much younger girls and his own daughters. J.M. Coetzee (2007: 269) even suggests that 'his attraction toward young women may screen desire for his own daughters', leading to an incestuous sense of guilt. This guilt manifests in his dream as the destruction of the 'forbidden fruit' – the scene of infanticide. Eguchi finds himself powerless, merely observing the horrifying act in fear. The doctor, traditionally a figure of healing and life-saving, stands by in silent approval, symbolizing Eguchi's projection of societal judgement upon his own actions. This is a death-dream where life is snuffed out before it even begins. Beyond ethical reflections, the dream conveys a profound sense of helplessness – the realization that while humans cannot control the beginning of life, they must inevitably face its end.

Kawabata employs a technique of framing by placing the dream of the infant's death in the first chapter, which not only highlights how his 'Sleeping Beauty' story diverges from the typical happy-ending fairy tale but also lays the groundwork for the subsequent death events. After building up the narrative tension through the next three chapters, the final chapter intensively depicts the other three types of death, bringing the dramatic conflict of the entire story to a climax. At this point, the New Year has just begun, yet it seems to bring no vibrant new atmosphere to Eguchi's life. Upon entering the 'House of the Sleeping Beauties', he cynically mentions death: 'To die on a night like this, with a young girl's skin to warm him – that would be paradise for an old man' (Kawabata 1969: 81). He says so

because he has learned that an old man named Fukura recently died in this inn, with a sleeping girl lying next to the cold body, completely unaware of what had happened. From a gerontological perspective, winter is a dangerous season for the elderly, as it can trigger various illnesses. Moreover, to fall asleep, older men must take sleeping pills provided by the inn, and although the type and dosage differ from those taken by the 'Sleeping Beauties', they still pose a potential risk to life. However, despite knowing this, Eguchi insists on going for two reasons: first, he believes himself to be healthier than the late Fukura, thinking such misfortune won't befall him; second, when death occurs among his peers, he feels the footsteps of death drawing nearer. He clings more to the vitality and beauty of youth, which he can only embrace at close range in the 'House of the Sleeping Beauties', where the sleeping girls can be touched without fear and anxiety and 'Eguchi knows he is safe, because the girl is sleeping without realizing what he has done to her body. This is the security obtained due to the absence of the other: specifically, the absence of the other's awakened consciousness' (Innami 2015: 38).

In the inn, two girls have been arranged for Eguchi, possibly because they hear about Fukura's death and, out of fear, choose to sleep together. One girl is dark and rugged, while the other is fair and delicate. As he embraces them on either side, 'a spasm came over to him, as if to say: "Initiate me into the spell of life"' (Kawabata 1969: 91). On this winter night, Eguchi in his old age experiences the warmth and vitality of the young girls, yet what surfaces in his mind is the memory of a winter night from his youth, when his mother lay dying. His mother, who suffered from tuberculosis, passed away, and the vivid image of her blood – bright red and gushing – mingles in his memory with the deep crimson drapes of the private room in the inn. The illness took his mother's life, leaving him with an enduring psychological scar. As a critic explains, Eguchi's enjoyment of the co-sleeping service originates from his 'unconscious desire to join her in death' (Stahl 2018: 161). In his dreams, his deceased mother participates in his adult life, compensating for his pity. However, the red flowers symbolizing death and the blood-like juice dripping from them shatter this illusory happiness. Eguchi wakes from his dream to find that the black girl has stopped breathing. At this point, the death of the deformed infant in his dream connects with the deaths of the girl in reality, his mother in memory, and the old man Fukura he heard about, encompassing the stages of death from infancy, adolescence, middle age, to old age. Kawabata completely tears away the romantic packaging of the fairy tale, presenting a work that serves as a testament to death.

## Conclusion

Mishima (1969: 7) uses the metaphor of a coin to classify the works of great writers into two categories: 'those that might be called of the obverse or the exterior, their meaning on the surface, and those of the reverse or interior, the meaning hidden behind; or we might liken them to exoteric and esoteric Buddhism'. In the case of Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties* falls in the latter category. This story lacks a historical background and is not related to politics; the protagonist's actions are also unspoken secrets that must be kept hidden within. Therefore, it can be considered a work that probes the depths of the human soul. In interpreting *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, Coetzee (2007: 270) states, 'The question regarding all sleeping beauties is of course what will happen when they awake'. In fairy tales, the sleeping princess awakens after a hundred years thanks to the prince's love, leading her to a life of happiness. But what if the sleeping beauty is a girl from the lower classes, subject to the whims of others? Kawabata takes this idea further: what if she never awakens at all? And if the prince is an aging man, what would the ending look like? His *House of the Sleeping Beauties* presents a cruel adult narrative, devoid of daylight and grand banquets, filled instead with sordid transactions. Standing on the threshold of old age, he

reflects on the vibrant youth depicted in his earlier works such as *The Izu Dancer* and *Snow Country*, casting the hesitant shadows of those youthful figures onto the character of the elderly Eguchi, using the lens of aging to write stories of old age.

Death is an unavoidable topic in narratives about old age, serving as the inevitable finale of the human life. Kawabata strives to confront death through his writing, aiming to break through the narrative foreclosure often associated with aging. After *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, he continued to write prolifically, embodying a positive attitude toward aging. His novels can be appreciated purely on an aesthetic level; however, like all great literary works, they transcend this dimension, delving deeply into the human condition in a manner that is uniquely Kawabata and reflective of Japanese culture. For this reason, his works belong to world literature, and he is rightly acclaimed as a 'bridge builder to the West' (Mathy 1969: 217). Yet, when Kawabata took his own life in his 70s without leaving a word behind, it seemed to erase all traces of his struggle against aging and death, making his challenge to narrative foreclosure similar to that of Eguchi: both had attempted, but ultimately failed, to engage in active aging. In this sense, rather than breaking through a kind of narrative foreclosure, Kawabata constructs a space riddled with contradictions and ambiguities: the struggle of aging desire, the silence of the female body, and the pervasive shadow of death. These elements intertwine to form an open field of inquiry, compelling us to reconsider: in a contemporary society marked by aging, ethical ambiguity, and gendered imbalances of power, can literature still serve as a site for the generation of meaning? Or is it merely the witness to an echo in the ruins? Kawabata's *House of the Sleeping Beauties* is not an answer, but a question that continues to resonate.

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## Note

1. Quotes from the same source were all translated by the author from the Chinese edition.

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