

Wabi-Sabi and Aesthetic of Love in Lang Leav's *Love and Misadventure*

Muhammad Adek^{1,*} Nesa Riska Pangesti¹ Asmawati²

¹Indonesian Department, FBS Universitas Negeri Padang, Padang, Sumatra Barat 25131, Indonesia

²Department of Indonesian Language and Literary Education, STKIP YDB Lubuk Alung, Sumatra Barat 25581, Indonesia

*Corresponding author. Email: marximalize@fbs.unp.ac.id

ABSTRACT

The appearance of poetry in the media Instagram (*Instapoetry*) in recent years has changed the world of poetry to become more attractive to readers. However, some experts still criticize this genre of poetry, especially its lack of craftsmanship and substance aspects. Based on the above problems, this study seeks to explore the points of Wabi-Sabi's philosophy offered by *Instapoetry* in a collection of poetry books entitled *Love and Misadventure* (2014). The content analysis method is combined with semiotic analysis to investigate the aesthetic values of Wabi-Sabi in a discussion of the various experiences of love. The results of the analysis show that mysterious, pessimistic, and disappointing experiences of love are used as the main tool by the poet to highlight the Wabi-Sabi philosophy. The findings also suggest that unpleasant experiences of love can be viewed as something that is no less beautiful if the reader interprets it based on Wabi-sabi's philosophy.

Keywords: *Wabi-Sabi, Instapoetry, Love and Misadventure*

1. INTRODUCTION

If the Western world knows the concept of Romanticism as an artistic and intellectual movement in the late 18th century to invite enlightened humans to appreciate feelings, feelings, and subjectivity as real beauty [1], philosophical studies in the Eastern world have "Wabi-Sabi" as a matching pulse. The majority of researchers and scholars argue that the concept of Wabi-Sabi was born much earlier than Romanticism particularly in the 6th century [2]. Developed as a legacy from the teachings of Taoism [3] and later Zen followers in Japan, Wabi-Sabi indeed adhered to the principle of resistance towards the absoluteness which only relies only on intellectualism and idealism [4].

In essence, Wabi-Sabi shows a tendency to take the values of beauty and exemplary of the spontaneous and volatile natural motion [5]. Because 'Nature' is always present as a barrier to human efforts to achieve perfection. Therefore, Wabi-Sabi emphasizes the human intention to accept imperfection as an essential condition, not as a threat or failure [6]. Through this path, humans will find true beauty and peace. The suggestion of the Wabi-Sabi mechanism above is manifested in several cultural practices and customs that have survived until now, such as *Chanoyu* (tea ceremony), *Ikebana* (flower arranging), and *Raku* (pottery making)[4].

Although the concept of Wabi-Sabi is synonymous with Japanese noble values and the teachings of Taoism, the sentiment that was brought was actually universal [3]. It can be said that Wabi-Sabi is the basic feeling of all

human beings who share spirits and emotions without knowing cultural boundaries. Because of the characteristics mentioned above, the Wabi-Sabi doctrine is often manifested in symbolic works like a painting or Japanese poetry (Haiku) which is strongly connected to the theme and symbolization of nature [7].

Furthermore, this article attempt to explore the values of Wabi-Sabi aesthetic philosophy contained in Instagram poems (next *Instapoetry*) written by New-Zealand writers, Lang Leav. The selection of Lang Leav and her work is based on the phenomenal public acceptance of Insta-poetry allowing other fellow poets dramatically followed this genre and created quite a horrendous literary breakthrough [8]. Also, this inquiry becomes an equitable examination of the universality of Wabi-Sabi philosophy and its acceptance by connoisseurs of cross-country and multicultural literature. Equally important is this study also sought to find peculiarity in Leav's Insta-poetry to balance the literary discourse which often stereotyping the *Instapoetry* genre as a superficial and trifling work [9], [10] The key subjective view to take into consideration is the popularity of this genre of poetry is increasingly irresistible, on the other hand, it never seize equivalent appreciation by most critics and literary academics.

2. METHOD

The data sourced from the poetry-collection book entitle *Love and Misadventure* [11] which have been won out recent popularity through some social media, especially Instagram [12]. Aside from its rapid and wide approval,

this type of poetry then gained several follower-writers to form a new genre called “Insta-poetry.” Despite that, Lang Leav is widely recognized as a pioneer of Instapoetry compared to names like Rupi Kaur, Atticus, Nikita Gill, and Warsan Shire [13].

The book mainly consists of three chapters: ‘Misadventure’, ‘Circus of Sorrow’, and ‘Love’. Every episode has a different number of a poem which is respectively 20, 32, and 23. Each section features its theme, which overall implies the journey of love itself. Still, the main theme is a complicated love which at one point is painful but enjoyable at the same time.

The collecting data of this research is mainly related to the values of the Wabi-Sabi aesthetic. Apart from the reasons for the popularity and immense effect caused by the publication of the work, in it also highlights issues that are closely related to the concern of Wabi-Sabi itself such as the symbolization of nature, the dominance of subjectivity, and the feelings of the main characters and difficulty due to the complexity of the human relationship.

The data analysis through the content analysis method is conducted to deepen, strengthen, and validate the tentative hypothesis [14] regarding the existence of Wabi-Sabi values in the structure of Instapoetry. At last, it can be confirmed whether the Insta-poetry of Lang Leav contains the presumed values or not.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this section, it is worth noting that the concept of beauty in Leav’s Instapoetry generally lies coinciding with the element of love. Variants of meaning regarding love are pieces of beauty value which compose the main theme of this poem. As stated earlier, the love experienced by the main character (the I) that is spread throughout this book, not only described on the “happy part”, but it is also colored by “bitter experiences” along with small and large obstacles that follow.

3.1. Mysterious Love

The first type of love that is related to the concept of beauty according to Wabi-Sabi is the depiction of mysterious love. The terminology of ‘mysterious’ in this case focuses on one’s unawareness of the whole incident and the elements that surround the experience of love that is being lived. In the end, unknowingness was seen as a real threat to the hope of perfect love.

For most couples, the mystery is in love could be a disaster or excruciating torment. Nightmares such as blurred circumstances between two lovers or uncertain feelings between the two can lead human feelings to endless anxiety and prejudice. Such dynamics recurrently lead to the conclusion that mysterious love is flawed affection and unworthy to defend.

Intriguingly in Leav’s Instapoetry, mysterious love is viewed as something less terrifying. On the contrary, the

mystery in love is a natural part that cannot be separated from the presence of the love feeling. This view can be found in the first verse of the poem entitled ‘A Toast!’:

To love is dare,
when hope and despair,
are gates upon it hinges

From the beginning, Leav has offered an uncommon perspective in her Instapoetry that *to love is dare*. This is in line with the suggestion of the Wabi-Sabi aesthetic which challenges humans to dare to face imperfection as a generality [6]. Like everything under the sun, love is imperfect too. One of its imperfections is the mystery that always surrounds the journey of love. Furthermore, the mystery can give *hope and despair* as well as chances. This depends entirely on how the lover views the mysterious aspects of the love itself.

The identical spirit is also reflected in the second-order poem, ‘Xs and Xo’. In this verse, the author analogizes the mysteriousness of love as a game. For more details, look at the following line:

Love is a game
of tic-tac-toe
constantly waiting,
for the next x or o

The game referred to in the verse above is *tic-tac-toe*. In the rules of this game, everyone has a chance or turn to go forward and backward in an attempt to win the game. Analogous to the experience of love between the lovers above, both have the choice to move forward and backward. However, this choice can backfire if used untimely.

In this sense, humans do play a big role as actors who determine the path and success of love. However, as expressed in Wabi-Sabi, humans are incapable to conquer all factors which in this case are related to the aspect of time. The characters in this poem are depicted as simply stunned, waiting for the right turn *constantly waiting* to take the next step.

Another form of the mysterious love is suspicious feeling. This discussion appears in the third verse entitled ‘A Dangerous Recipe’. For more details, look at the following line:

To love him
is something,
I hold highly
suspicious.

Again, Leav emphasizes that *to love* (someone) *him* requires the awareness that love is not always perfect and beautiful. Sporadically, love is something tricky and *highly suspicious*. Therefore, the act of loving can also be interpreted as the act of embracing suspicion after suspicion. This suspicion stems back from human intellectual inability in many ways, whether associated with a loved one or other related things such as the person’s past-future.

The red thread of the three analyzes above which is related to human unknowledgeable of all things is one of the core teachings offered by the Wabi-Sabi philosophy. After all, humans should be able to accept something as it is, without searching and questioning all kinds of shortcomings, incompleteness, or imperfections since all of that comes from the work of intellectuality and human rationality itself. Thus, the endless pursuit towards the perfection of these things will only culminate in failure which immerses someone even more in endless disappointment and restlessness.

3.2. Pessimistic Love

The second type of love related to the Wabi-Sabi aesthetic is a portrait of pessimistic love. Pessimism in this circumstance relates to the main character's incapacity in controlling and choosing the experience of love that will be lived. Considering that making love is performed by two people with their respective limitations and hurdles. By the end, the vulnerability has the potential to be the destroyer of perfection of the expected journey of love. Incapability in living great love can be experienced by anyone regardless of social class, gender, or race. This inadequacy can come from things beyond human reaches, such as time, destiny, even trivial problems. In Leav's Instapoetry, pessimistic love is not viewed as a negative paradigm. Conversely, pessimism in love is a piece of the part that makes up the whole meaning of love itself. This suggestion can immediately be seen explicitly in the poem entitled 'Just Friends':

What I feel—I shouldn't show you,
so when you're around I won't;
I know I've no right to feel it
but it doesn't mean I don't

The verse above indicates the element of a pessimistic attitude from the character I who is feeling love for the character you. On several occasions, the I shows signs that she is holding back from expressing her true feelings as recorded in *I shouldn't show you and I know I've no right to feel it*. However, in the shadow of unrequited love, the character I cannot deny the ultimate truth in her that she felt that love as stated *but it doesn't mean I don't*.

In the Wabi-Sabi concept, the action chosen by the I character reflects the authenticity of the nature of love itself. That love does not always have to be reciprocated and always ends in happiness. Love in this poem is interpreted as it is, in particular, a face of love that is pessimistic and more inclined towards failures. It is also through this mechanism that Wabi-Sabi's teachings find its way to hinder human involvement in such a way to ensure that the journey of love feels so pure and beautiful as it should be.

Leav indeed warns her readers to understand the nature of love in her poetry. Leav does not attempt to just offer her reader such premature, fake, or artificial love experiences filled with happy moments and conveniences; But she

tends to offer alternative experiences that may also inspire other forms of beauty through sheer and complicated love. For clarity, consider the following poem entitled 'A Voyage':

To be guided
nor misguided
in love,
nor brokenhearted.
But to sail in waters—
Uncharted

In the verse above, the experience of love is positioned as equal to heartbreak as stated in the parallelization *in love nor brokenhearted*. Both of these have the same opportunity to emerge as experiences of feelings involving a pair of humans. This is none other than due to the absence of certain guidelines in walking on it as analogized in *to sail in waters-uncharted*. Leav also reminds her readers that love will not always end in the single ending that many people dream of, in this instance, happiness. Loving is the same as heartbreak, taking one's own risk. Therefore, pessimism is considered the most rational choice of attitude in living whatever the results of this love voyage.

Human helplessness in realizing a joyful love experience with absolute power is one of the points of the teaching value by the Wabi-Sabi aesthetic. Thusly, humans can only try up to a certain point and must surrender to other forces to determine the sustainability of their efforts. At first glance, this condition seems negative and unilluminating. However, this choice will prepare one's mental state for all kinds of results which are beyond one's will including the results in the form of failure of the love effort itself. Through this path, one can let go of all mental burdens and adjust to the natural flow of nature.

3.3. Disappointing Love

The third type of love that represents the values of Wabi-Sabi is disappointing love. The concept of "disappointing" in this situation relates to a deficiency that ruins the main character's feelings and love journey. Because in living one love, there are always things that make romance become damaged, defective, or even fail. Thus, disappointment is often perceived as a destructive factor of dreamed love.

Disappointment in love is made possible by several reasons such as the issue of lies, acts of adultery, or the waning of love itself. Basically, disappointment is a natural human response to something that is not acceptable due to one's lack of deep understanding of interpreting the situation they are experiencing.

From several of Leav's poems, disappointment in love is not interpreted as a bitter sensation. On the contrary, disappointment in love can relieve one's feelings from the burden of questions that always haunts. This idea can be found clearly in the poem entitled 'Rogue Planets'.

There is a depiction of a love journey story of the main character in numerical sequence analogy. The number 10 is the beginning and the number 1 is the end. When the journey of love has reached number 2, a sign of separation looks closer as recorded in the line *At two you tell me you can't go on any longer*. Supposedly, the next stage is number 1 which means that the separation becomes a reality. However, the You asked the I *to stay* and refuse from that destiny as stated in *and then at one, you ask me to stay*.

At this point, the I expresses both relief and disappointment in [...] *I am relieved, so relieved — and a little disappointed*. The I feel relieved when she finds out that she can negate the course of the destiny that has been outlined. However, on the other hand, the I felt disappointed because this matter had been predicted beforehand. The disappointment experienced by the I character is a manifestation of Wabi-sabi's teachings where one should not disturb the naturalness of a stream. Besides, the disappointment also means that the I character fails to abandon the prejudices and conventions that have been learned that conditioned the adjustment [15]. Disappointment at this verse ultimately is functioned as a lamentation of failure to achieve the beauty offered by the teachings of Wabi-Sabi [16].

In another poem entitled 'A Betrayal', the main character is described as someone enlightened after successfully reaching wisdom from fruitless love. This point is clearly stated in the first stanza:

I cannot undo
what I have done;
I can't un-sing
a song that's sung

In contrast to the situation of the main character in the previous poem 'Rogue Planets', in this verse, the I no longer tries to impose his ego-personal desires to achieve happiness and the perfection of love. In this circumstance, the main character is already in the "full awareness" stage to ignore the evaluation of the previous conditioning from standard perfection. According to the Wabi-Sabi principle, this state can only be achieved going through a process of constant contemplation to experience life as it is without any intention of imposing a wish [17].

Also, the I character has also practiced the understanding of 'Kintsugi' (金継ぎ) which contains a similar spirit with Wabi-Sabi. This is evidenced by the understanding that 'disappointing love is not something to hide but to display with pride'. This understanding of Kintsugi is in line with the main point in the teachings of Wabi-Sabi, especially in appreciating imperfection in its own beauty value. In this verse, the main character's awareness of imperfect and even disappointing love is an implicit representation of Wabi-Sabi's teachings.

In the above discussion, disappointing love is not actually a threat or the end of the world if someone can accept it as it should be. This kind of acceptance is actually the ultimate matter in the Wabi-Sabi tenet. This acceptance in

the perspective of Wabi-Sabi means to have put oneself in the position they should be without imposing an egoism and minimizing human involvement in natural occurrence [17].

Moreover, a human is not encouraged to follow the blind pursuit of an ideal motivated by self-interest. Because of this "coercion" according to Wabi-Sabi will disrupt the process of attunement with nature. As well as disappointing love affairs, Leav inspires her readers to see disappointment as an integral part that cannot be separated from the whole experience of love. Furthermore, disproving the element of disappointment in matters of love will only erode its meaning and uniqueness.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper presents a novel interpretation of non-Japanese and non-conventional poetry as manifestations of eastern-rooted philosophy, Wabi-Sabi. Besides, this research was driven by the need for a balanced literary discussion, it is very important to approach this new-wave of poetry through a different perspective from afore to find its worth. Drawing on the analysis of philosophy, pop culture studies, and semiotics, this paper tried to focus on the discovery and infiltration of Wabi-Sabi philosophical values which seeks to invite the readers to the connection of materialism, perfection, and failure in modern life.

In this study, poetry is redefined as a method of contemplation of a human being is struggling and understanding the meaning of the true nature of beauty in life, especially related to love. Poetry, in whatever form and media, approximately the power to encourage writers and readers to transcend the power of logic and rationality through the optimization of human feelings and subjectivity as a manifestation of the limits of human capability as enshrined in Lang Leav's poetry collection.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper has emanated from research conducted with the financial support of Research Grants of LP2M Universitas Negeri Padang (PNBP) under Grant Number 1584/UN35.13/LT/2020.

REFERENCES

- [1] D. Syofyan, "Romantisisme Inggris Dan Amerika: Perbandingan Frankenstein Dan Scarlet Letter," *Lingua Didaktika: Jurnal Bahasa dan Pembelajaran Bahasa*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 105–113, Jul. 2011.
- [2] S. Heine, T. Izutsu, and T. Izutsu, "The theory of beauty in the classical aesthetics of Japan," *Philos. East-West*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 227, 1984.

- [3] T. M. Cooper, "The wabi-sabi way: an antidote for a dualistic culture?", *Journal of Conscious Evolution*, vol. 10 no. 10, 4, 2013.
- [4] A. Juniper, *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese art of impermanence*. Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014.
- [5] L. Prusinski, "Wabi-sabi, mono no aware, and ma: Tracing traditional Japanese aesthetics through Japanese history". *Studies on Asia*, vol. 4, no. 2, p. 25-49, 2012
- [6] Y. Orgad, "On wabi sabi and the aesthetics of family secrets: Reading Haruki Murakami's Kafka on the shore," *Cult. Psychol.*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 52–73, 2017.
- [7] D. H. Williams and G. P. Shipley, "Japanese poems with strong nature themes as a tool for environmental education," *Creat. Educ.*, vol. 10, no. 11, pp. 2457–2472, 2019.
- [8] J. M. Rue, "The Future of Poetry in the Digital Era-Instapoetry and Remediation," Utrecht, Utrecht, 2019.
- [9] A. Vadde, "Amateur creativity: Contemporary literature and the digital publishing scene," *New Lit. Hist.*, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 27–51, 2017.
- [10] R. Watts, "The cult of the noble amateur", *PN Review*, vol. 44, no. 3, pp. 13-17, 2018.
- [11] L. Leav, *Love & Misadventures*. Missouri: Andrews McMeel, 2013.
- [12] J. Naji, "The Posthuman Poetics of Instagram Poetry," in *EVAC Copenhagen*, 2018.
- [13] H. Qureshi, "How Do I Love Thee? Let Me Instagram It," *The Guardian*, 23-Nov-2015.
- [14] U. Flick, E. von Kardoff, and I. Steinke, Eds., *A companion to qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2004.
- [15] D. M. Richard, "Holzwege on Mount Fuji: a doctrine of no-aesthetics for computer and electroacoustic music," *Organised sound*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 127–133, 2000.
- [16] Desi Tri Cahyaningati, "Portraying the Wabi Sabi philosophy of beauty in Kawabata's Snow Country". *Dinamika: Jurnal Sastra dan Budaya*. vol. 6 no. 1, 2018. pp. 628-638
- [17] L. Koren, *Wabi-Sabi for artists, designers, poets & philosophers: For artists, designers, poets and designers*. Point Reyes: Imperfect Publishing, 2008.
- [18] M. Bucca, "The clinical thinking of Bion and the art of the Zen garden (Ryoan-ji)," *J. Am. Acad. Psychoanal. Dyn. Psychiatry*, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 659–667, Winter 2007.