



## Soren Kierkegaard's Concept of Irony in Motojiro Kajii's Short Story

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**Abstract.** *Motojiro Kajii was a Japanese writer from the early Showa period, born in 1901, who left behind twenty-three great short stories and several other unfinished works, which are always closely related to fundamental questions about life and death, as well as the existence of darkness. Many of Kajii's works contain ironic meanings. Therefore, through a study of irony by Soren Kierkegaard, we describe Motojiro Kajii's thoughts as conveyed in his short story entitled "Sakura ki no shita ni wa". This research is qualitative research using descriptive research methods. This study will analyse data that shows the explicit or implicit meaning of Soren Kierkegaard's Concept of Irony contained in "Sakura ki no shita ni wa". The results of the study show that Kierkegaard's concept of irony appears in the short story, such as the negation of the beauty of the cherry blossom tree, but on the other hand, that beauty evokes feelings of restlessness, emptiness and gloom. Beauty does not always bring peace, but rather makes humans aware of transience and the dark side hidden behind something that appears beautiful. Beauty and death are inseparable, and it is thanks to this that beauty is created in life.*

**Keywords:** *Concept of Irony; Existential Philosophy; Motojiro Kajii; Sakura; Soren Kierkegaard.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Literature in Japan began to be known in the seventh century and has continued to grow until now. Aston (1989) divides the era of Japanese literature into six periods starting from the Archaic Period (700 BC), Nara Period (800-1186), Kamakura Period (1186-1332), Nambokucho and Muromachi Period (1332-1603) Yedo Period (1603-1867), and the Tokio Period (1868-1900s). Each period has a unique work. In the Tokio Period (Meiji, Taisho, and early Showa period), Japanese literature is increasingly recognized because of Japan opening the border and the influence of European countries at that time (Aston, 1989). At this time there are many writers who are famous for their literary works. Such as Natsume Soseki (1857-1916) with his works such as *Wagahai wa neko dearu*, Shiga Naoya (1883-1971), who was nicknamed 'The God of Novel' from his work *Watakushi shosetsu*, and other famous writers. Among these famous writers, there is a writer who is not as famous as they are, but has works that can inspire his readers, and he is Motojiro Kajii (Ulmer, 1982).

Motojiro Kajii is a Japanese writer from the early Showa period, born in 1901. He died in 1932 at a relatively young age due to tuberculosis, leaving 23 great short stories and several other unfinished works (Dodd, 2012; Wada, 2004). Kajii grew up watching several members of his family die from the same disease. In 1913, it was believed that her grandmother, who died of tuberculosis-related symptoms infected all of her children. When he was young, Kajii showed signs of tuberculosis, and then he entered the Third Grade High School (*San Koutou Gakkou*), which is a prestigious school in Kyoto. But one year after attending school, he

withdrew from school due to pneumonia. Tuberculosis has existed for centuries in Japan. In 1900, the disease was officially declared an epidemic with the highest mortality rate (Albrecht, 2014). The cause of the spread of tuberculosis at that time was due to the encouragement of the Japanese government to intensively industrialize urban areas. Kajii, who lived most of his youth in the industrial city of Osaka, finally caught the disease. Therefore, Kajii grew into a person who is very sensitive (Dodd, 2014). Through his work, Kajii imagines a world that he might still be able to live in even though his physical body no longer exists. Although his life was short, Kajii has left an imprint on the world of Japanese literature that is still known today. The first published work and one of the works that raised his name is *Lemon*, which has a poetic writing style with an interesting narrative plot. Motojiro Kajii's work has always been closely related to the basic questions of life and death, as well as the existence of darkness. Kajii's writing style and genre have influenced his way of life as well. Kajii begins to be interested in 'darkness' after being transferred to Yugashima due to tuberculosis, which he suffered at the age of seventeen. In addition, his work highlights the socio-political conditions of Japan at that time. Therefore, a lot of his works have an ironic meaning (Satou, 2017).

The studies above give us an explanation that with irony, we can change the reader's view of the story that the author makes. However, according to Kierkegaard, irony is basically not a matter of sharpness of mind or tongue but the colouring of the personality of the individual as a whole (McCarthy, 2015). Kierkegaard thinks that irony is not just twisting words, but there is also a philosophical side to the concept of irony (Stewart, 2015). On the other hand, Kajii with his works full of irony is very interesting to analyze. Through the study of irony analysis, we will describe the thoughts of Motojiro Kajii conveyed in his short story entitled *Sakura ki no shita ni wa*. The reason we chose this short story as the subject of research is because this short story is one of the famous old Japanese literary works and the content of the story is very interesting and full of ironic meaning.

## 2. THEORY

Literature studies interpret irony as a stylistic device that is used to give an expression, but has a meaning that is inversely proportional to its actual meaning. The irony style is effective in influencing the reader's understanding in seeing the situation of a discourse (Zafarovna, 2021). Where he earned a master's degree from the University of Copenhagen and also "Master of Irony" by the public. For Kierkegaard, irony is not basically a matter of sharpness of mind or tongue but the coloring of the individual personality as a whole. In addition to literature, the word irony is also often used by humans to negate something from the side of life, namely an

affirmation that is negated. Irony is used to provide an implicit explanation in spoken or written language. Irony arises when humans express the negative side to criticize something but use the opposite form (Prativi & Siraj, 2021).

Kierkegaard developed the concept of irony from Socrates' thought which defines irony with a purely negative principle of absolute subjectivity (Eastham, 2011). Kierkegaard compares irony in the form used by Socrates with modern irony, represented by the German Romantics of his day. In both cases, attempts were made to use critical reflection in questioning traditional beliefs and ways of thinking. While Kierkegaard was critical of the Romantics, he nevertheless highly praised Socrates. Kierkegaard took Socrates as his model in his attempt to criticize Danish culture and his conception of religion in the 19th century. On the other hand, the Romantics seem to represent the typical types of modern problems just mentioned: subjectivism, relativism, nihilism, alienation, lack of meaning, and so on. As expressed by the modern movements of existentialism, post-structuralism, and post-modernism, the issues that Kierkegaard addresses are still one of the central problems of philosophy today (Frazier, 2006; Nagley, 1968).

Kierkegaard asserts that irony is a form of negation that undermines certainty, dismantles the status quo, and causes people to question a reality that was considered "certain". Also, irony as a critical existential attitude intended as a phase in human self-development. With irony, a person does not simply accept the values that are common in society, but delves deeper until they discover the positive truth. Therefore, irony can be productive (encouraging the discovery of new meaning) or destructive (trapping people in scepticism).

In 1841, a Danish existentialist philosopher named Soren Kierkegaard wrote *The Concept of Irony* as his master thesis which examined various forms of subjectivism and relativism to be understood as a critique of culture (Stewart, 2015). In his work, Kierkegaard compares the irony proposed by Socrates. Socrates is a philosopher who became his inspiration in research on modern irony in his own time when he criticized Danish culture (his own culture) as well as the Romantics. The analysis of irony in a short story has previously been researched by Hassan and Tayib (2020), with the research title "Irony in Kate Chopin's Selected Short Stories". The study analysed the existence of three types of irony, their function, message of the story, and also the reasons for using irony in the three short stories namely *The Story of an Hour*, *The Storm* and *Desiree's Baby* written by an American writer named Kate Chopin. From this research, it can be concluded that Chopin through his three short stories uses irony to change the content of the story which is considered boring into an interesting story by adding several

plot twists to make the story feel tense. Then, Chopin uses irony to convey his message and direct the reader to the main theme of the story. The stories highly value women's autonomy, criticizing the discriminatory society of her time in America.

Oktarini (2020) analyses the irony in a short story entitled Harrison Bergeron by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. which discusses the equality that is enforced in America, which results in people with beautiful faces having to hide their beauty, smart people must also hide their intelligence. Through irony analysis, it is described how Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. expresses his feelings, what the author really wants to convey in the story. The results of this study suggest that there are two types of irony in Harrison Bergeron's short story, namely verbal irony and situational irony.

Previously it was said that the concept of irony is also used in discourse. Discourse is linguistic communication a unit of text used by linguists for the analysis of linguistic phenomena that range over more than one sentence seen as a transaction between speaker and hearer, as an interpersonal activity whose form is determined by its social purpose (Hawthorn, 1922; Collins Concise English Dictionary, 1988). From this definition, we can categorize that literary works are included in discourse. In this regard, Motojiro Kajii wrote many of his literary works with a strong sense of irony. One such work is *Sakura ki no shita ni wa* (1928).

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is qualitative research with descriptive research method. Descriptive data taken in this study in the form of words not numbers. Then the analysis carried out is to find out the existence, meaning, and relationship of words and concepts with the theory taken. Researchers recorded detailed data on matters relating to the problems raised in this study. The data source is taken from the short story *sakura no ki no shita ni wa* by Motojiro Kajii. The data of sentences or phrases that have the meaning of irony in the short story are then identified with Soren Kierkegaard's concept of irony. This research will analyze data that shows the explicit or implied meaning of Soren Kierkegaard's concept of irony contained in the short story by Motojiro Kajii which is used as the data source in this study.

### 4. FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

The opening sentence of the short story *Sakura no ki no shita ni wa* reads,

*Sakura no ki no shita ni wa shitai ga umatteiru.*

Beneath the cherry tree lies a buried corpse!

Through this sentence, the main character (I) expresses a beauty (the cherry blossom tree) that appears alongside something terrible (the presence of a corpse under the tree). I spend two or

three days feeling anxious and pensive because I cannot believe in the beauty of the cherry blossom tree, which is in such full bloom. He does not understand these feelings, because behind the beauty that fascinates him, there is also a feeling of restlessness, emptiness, and gloom. The main character imagines that the beauty of the cherry blossoms is born because the roots of the cherry trees absorb the fluids from the carcasses of animals and human corpses rotting underground, as if these fluids were nutrients and food for the growth of the cherry trees.

Kajii shows the irony of a cherry tree that grows beautifully, but behind that beauty he sees something terrible behind it. He conveyed it by assuming that under the cherry tree buried corpses and animal carcasses. On the other hand, when viewed from the irony that is explicitly explained, the irony has something to do with Kajii's condition at that time (Eastham, 2011; Mádrová, 2013). Kierkegaard suggests that the concept of Irony is initially the most unpredictable mood. Irony is the mood of rebellion and rejection of individual limitations as humans (McCarthy, 2015). This is shown when the main character feels anxious, gloomy and empty after seeing Sakura looking so beautiful.

Furthermore, the irony is shown when the main character with his dilemma walking down a riverbank and saw *kagero* (dragonfly-like insects) flying beautifully as they mated in the air. Then, he saw on the bank of the river where the water was drying up, there was a light that reflected on the surface of the water and seemed to be floating. When he looked further, it turned out that the reflection came from the wings of thousands of *kagero* corpses piled up. The bank of the river became a mass grave for the *kagero* after they laid their eggs. This incident pierced the heart of the main character, because he saw dragonflies flying with full sexual desire, without thinking about the carcass of his partner which he had killed during the marriage. On the other hand, he also feels calm because he knows that it is true that in every incident there must be a story behind it.

The meaning in the above passage shows that beauty and death are inseparable. A beautiful life is always followed by a sad death. And it is precisely the existence of tragedy (death) that creates balance in life. By realising the tragic side of life, humans can understand true beauty. Kajii invites readers to look at the beauty of the world with ironic eyes: to see cherry blossoms or insects not only with admiration, but also with the awareness that there is death behind them.

*Sakura ki no shita ni wa* uses a lot of metaphors with a strong image of irony, especially the concept of irony proposed by Kierkegaard, namely, irony as negation, Kajii rejects the common meaning of sakura as the beauty of spring and temporary beauty. However, restoring that meaning to beauty is false (negative meaning) because beauty stands on top of destruction.

Then, irony as existential awareness forces readers to realise that life is not entirely beautiful, but also accompanied by unpleasant things. Here the irony is shown by Kajii by describing the crisis atmosphere in a living existence at the level of sensual pleasure centered on the personality exclusively. The concept of irony in this bit is exactly the Kierkegaard irony described (McCarthy, 2015). *Sakura no ki no shita ni wa* tells of a character who experiences the psychology of decadence because he sees corpses and death through cherry blossoms that bloom beautifully (Dodd, 2012).

The cherry blossoms in full bloom represent the state of Japan under Meiji's reign with growing industrialization and modernization that helped the military's first Sino-Japanese War financially. This makes Japan grow into a developing country, but there is a price that must be paid by the Japanese people, namely poverty, the emergence of a tuberculosis epidemic that spreads in dense urban areas and industrial areas. Most of the population in the area lived in small towns where sanitation was poor at that time. So that at that time Japan was hit by a tuberculosis epidemic with the highest death rate. This is what Kajii describes as carcasses under a cherry blossom tree, and the cherry roots seem to take nutrients from the carcasses below so that they can grow beautifully.

Then, Frazier (2004) said that the issues handled by Kierkegaard were modern issues of existentialism, post-structuralism, and post-modernism which matched the background of Kajii's story which echoed modernism a lot which was conveyed in the style of irony, namely as in the last part of the story, when the main character experiences gloomy and scary events regarding the cherry tree, in the end he surrenders to all the gloomy things he has seen. Here the main character decides to drink under the cherry tree without thinking there is a corpse buried like the villagers who always have a banquet under the cherry tree. Here we can see that the irony implied in the passage is that no matter how bad Kajii's view of the Japanese modernization era is, he still can't avoid it, so what he can do is accept modernization like other Japanese. Therefore, Kajii describes in the last part of this story the main character who wants to enjoy cherry blossoms and forget his anxiety. Here we see the emergence of the productive potential of irony. Nevertheless, *Sakura no ki no shita ni wa* brings out both productive and destructive potential for irony. The productive potential is that readers can reflect on how beauty in life is always linked to transience and an awareness of death. However, there is also destructive potential, namely that all beauty is merely an illusion, causing readers to close themselves off to hope.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The short story *Sakura no ki no shita ini* (Under the Cherry Tree) by Kajii Motojiro clearly shows the presence of irony in the Kierkegaardian sense. The beauty of cherry blossoms and the dance of *kagero* insects are not presented as something pure and soothing, but are always associated with decay, death, and tragedy. This is in line with Kierkegaard's concept of irony, which emphasises that seemingly beautiful realities are never entirely true, because behind them lies another layer of truth that is deeper and often painful. The irony in this short story reveals an existential contradiction—between beauty and decay, life and death, light and darkness—which actually enriches human understanding of life. Thus, Kajii shows that true beauty can only be understood when humans dare to look at the tragic side of life. This is the form of Kierkegaard's irony that lives on in modern Japanese literature, while also serving as a philosophical reflection on the essence of human existence.

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