

## Wabi-sabi: A Tale of Reformation

Sarjana Mukhopadhyay\*, Bijoy Krishna Panda and Muktipada Sinha

Department of Education, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India

\*Corresponding author: sarjanam.edu.rs@jadavpuruniversity.in

Received: 02-06-2025

Revised: 05-07-2025

Accepted: 26-07-2025

### ABSTRACT

*Wabi-sabi*, a Japanese aesthetic philosophy, emphasizes the concept of imperfect beauty and beauty of imperfection. The *Wabi-sabi* aesthetics exposes the bitter truth of our resonance with death and trains us for acceptance and accountability of our past, present, and future. The *Wabi-sabi* philosophy, through acceptance of continuity, blossoms with the tolerance of pain, tranquilizing cosmic pleasures and reducing indulgence and is rudimentary to the appraisal and approval of Mental Health issues worldwide. A parallel theory of 'becoming' proposed by Greek philosopher Heraclitus also goes along with *Wabi-sabi*'s idea of impermanence. In conclusion, *Wabi-sabi* aesthetics emphasizes the importance of imperfection in our lives, addressing mental health issues and promoting a more mindful and accepting lifestyle.

**Keywords:** *Wabi-sabi*, beauty, imperfection, way of living, indigenous practice

Most of our Mental Health issues are inflicted due to the perception of 'beauty', perhaps we can envision our life and its parameters of happiness when the idealistic standards of beauty and perfection is capable of mitigating the deficits we encounter in our life. *Wabi-sabi*, a Japanese idea of beauty and imperfection (What Is *Wabi Sabi*?, n.d.), has been regarded as an alternative way of lifestyle where minimal and imperfect has achieved its acknowledgment as a whole new way of inviting wellbeing and happiness. This aesthetic philosophy vouches on the notion of imperfect beauty. According to a Japanese legend (Sen Rikyū | Japanese Tea Ceremony, Tea Culture, Tea Utensils | Britannica, n.d.), Rikyū wanted to learn about the elaborate tea customs from Takeeno Joo, who was the tea master. Takeeno obviously resolved to test Rikyū, he asked him to help out clean his garden. Rikyū affirmed to his call and did his job 'perfectly', no leaves were left unattended, the grass was moaned, every dry leaf and flowers were cleared. But before presenting his master he voluntarily shook a cherry tree, he understood the necessity of the scattered beauty of fallen leaves unkempt upon

the green grass, he recognized the 'imperfect beauty'. This Japanese philosophical essence of imperfection roots back to the traditional Japanese Tea Ceremony initiated on Kyoto (Prusinski, 2012). Tea is served in the cracked or chipped, overused cups, which in the conventional mannerism is approved as 'ugly' or disposable. Yet the Japanese tradition hold on to them specifically to address their importance in their life, they value the 'old' and 'fragile', the cups which have passed the irregular path of life with the person is the part of his reminiscence, the dilapidated cup is the reminder of 'conservation' of the past, rudimentary to ease up your present. Moreover, this ceremony also recollects the activity of the inevitability of 'flux'. Not only the sapiens who are the credentials of the ceremony but even the abiotic external world is not out of the shackles of transience. The reality of time and space, the two main categories of Immanuel Kant, are the absolute determiners of transience (Janiak, 2022).

**How to cite this article:** Mukhopadhyay, S., Panda, B.K. and Sinha, M. (2025). *Wabi-sabi: A Tale of Reformation*. *Educational Quest: An Int. J. Edu. Appl. Soc. Sci.*, 16(02): 135-139.

**Source of Support:** None; **Conflict of Interest:** None



*Wabi-sabi* aesthetics exposes the bitter truth of our resonance with death, it somehow trains us for its acceptance (Prusinski, 2012), illuminates us with accountability of our past, present and future (What Is Wabi Sabi?, n.d.). Empirical wisdom is the real construe of nature, Time is the real creator as well as upholder of the created, *Wabi-sabi* respects this ideal of acknowledging the influence of time and its power above everything else on earth.

### **Fortress & concept of *Wabi-sabi***

Three simple realities dominated the fortress of *Wabi-sabi* i.e., nothing lasts, nothing is finished, rather nothing ever is perfect. That comes as a straight blow to our 'western architecture of beauty'. A rather antagonistic ideal of beauty, imperfection, unkemptness, simplicity, and authenticity is put at the pedestal position withdrawn from the Hellenic artificial perfections of exaggerated grandeur. The 'well finished' end product is twisted or devalued to uplift the 'raw'. *Wabi-sabi* is a rebellion against the westernized mouldings (Łaziuk, 2020), this rebellion has helped the excavation of our addressal and respect for the 'imperfect' the one which is "authentic" not the one which is 'framed'.

'*Wabi*' and '*Sabi*' are / were two separate concepts regardless their keenness with each other. They stand for distinct ideas, but their inherent concomitance is undeniable. *Wabi* indicates understated beauty. White supremacy is overstated, what is understated is the pile of black, brown and Hispaniola labour upon which the empire stand. *Wabi* stands for 'Rustic Simplicity' (2020), like the engraved moral traditions of Ahimsa and Asteya, Satya and Brahmacharya of Jainism (Somasundaram *et al.* 2016) endorsing the most transparent way of life. *Wabi* is the voice of modesty, inclines us to the ideal of 'less is more', trains us for the acceptance of the 'inadequate'. Symmetry as an indication of beauty and fineness is challenged with the roughness and uneven world-view. The conventions thereby remain sacrosanct no more. Time and its influence upon objects both animate and inanimate are irreversible, but the worldwide trend of 'un-understanding' it is really abnormal, this fact has been imprinted by the western cultural influence, but Japanese tradition of *Wabi-sabi* well acknowledged the fragility of this world (Venzo, 2019). Erosion is the bare truth, *Wabi-sabi* beholds the tradition of conversing the

imprints of change. Kintsugi the traditional Japanese pots, whose cracks are mended with gold dust to expose their indulgence with time, the cracks are the evidence of wearing out and fragility, yet the cracks are mended to make it prominent to our eyes, they are assets not-flaws to the pot. The fragility and impermanence of objects are the real essence of Kintsugi pottery (Kintsugi, n.d.). *Wabi-sabi* philosophy is a technique of anti-fragility (Cheung, 2023), it boosts our morals for overcoming the grief of structural as well as functional erosion of life.

### ***Wabi-sabi*: the aesthetics of waste**

There is a long drawn civil war surged between the ideals of 'things as they are' and 'things as they appear to us / how they should be' (Notehelfer, 1990), in which the later demands artificial restructuring as per subjective claims therefore pushing individuals to the verge of worshiping the unnatural. But the former reminds us of the reality, reality is just there it needs no delusional sanction, it is remote and thus pure. *Wabi-sabi* as a philosophy is pure, simple and solemn. This Aesthetic philosophical note is a representation of tranquility which is achieved with wise insights. *Sabi* is the threshold for empirical wisdom, age and experience created. It is like the Autumn season where the old leaves choose to give way to the new ones, they perish to regenerate, this is the vision of wisdom, the acceptance of dissolution in order to experience creation. *Wabi-sabi* is the Philosophy of fall, which attends to elevate. The 'fall' here is positive dismantling, just like the aging. The humble and slow cessation of things is the essence of this philosophy, it is the preparedness for transience and imperfection. Distinctly it is the philosophy of tolerance and compassion for the imperfect and uncertain, it's basically a pattern of pragmatism where the stress is on 'recovery'. Recovery of our habitual attitude of dismantling the waste, this is the aesthetics of 'waste', it makes us question the concept of 'waste'. *Wabi-sabi* is the philosophy of embracing the waste and making the most of it. Moreover, the trend towards simplicity in décor, living and art has encouraged sustainability in fashion, consumption etc leading towards a wastage free ideology which has evolved for good. Japanese traditional confluence with *Wabi-sabi* is resultant in the ideals of their minimalism, *wabi* even means 'poverty', but by choice, this is a spiritual upheaval

of denouncing the material cravings in order to implement the dictum of Minimalism. The life of a hermit in Japan is regarded as 'Wabizumai' (Wabi and Sabi: The Aesthetics of Solitude - Articles - House of Solitude - Hermitary, n.d.), because of his liberated grandeur of life. Sabi stands for solitude and *Wabi-sabi* as traditional take over is the cure to our overtly aggravated desires. This is a philosophy of aesthetic overcoming. Rather we can claim *Wabi-sabi* as a state of Mindfulness.

## Amending perspectives with *Wabi-sabi*

### Editing

*Wabi-sabi* is not sufficiently a concept to be rubbed into our minds, it isn't just a theory to be circulated rather its potential and its essence gets eroded if we analyse it as an aloof treatise. This aesthetic philosophy needs to be absorbed in our lifestyle intact there are instances in this current world scenario which deserves some amendments and those can be made acceptable with *Wabi-sabi* as a pragmatic ideology. With this article we will try to question the need of such propaganda of perfection, the inclination of our generation towards making something other than what it was meant to be.

The foremost of them is the craze for editing, the very concept of editing was absent primarily. Editing of pictures, writings and photographs make a huge market and industry these days. World-class editors are hired my directors, and story tellers to edit their own piece of work. It seems the artists have somewhere lost their confidence upon their creation; they are required to rectify their own creative skills. The prospect of editing has many potential and economic benefits, this is the business of 'flaw amendments'. A writer creates his own world of imagination by intricately sculpting every character, plot, situation gives life to those imaginations crafts the relations arranges the climax and every other detail which he/ she finds fundamental for his creation. But, yet he seems dissatisfied he looks forward to a person who will contemplate his work of art, an editor culminates and twists his art claiming to make it more appreciable. The art which till days remained sanctioned only to the artist now becomes a species which is injected in the laboratory for the sake of 'perfection'. Editing is an enigma; it plays with our insecurities and idealization of

adequacy. On a similar platform if we lend down our movies, paintings, pictures and photographs to the hands of editing industry where we presumably kill our creation.

### Science and modernism

*Wabi-sabi* acknowledges our creation as we create it, it defuses the need of rectification for the inauguration of 'ideal'. The trending inclination of science to create the accurate models, robots and machines is regarded to be novel invention, every theory is a critical recovery of the previous one, every machine is the rectified version of the prior, every medicine is the better version of perfect. With all these edifying efforts of science progress saw no hindrance. But aren't we the victims of the progressive world too? Perfection or extravagance is the gift of science, leisure and finer momentum of life has been the best achievement of human species from the bag of science. Science has made the indispensable occupations of people worthless, authentic fibers inexpensive, traditional machines useless and self-reliance a distant dream. Surely it has perfectly aggravated the crop yield, Globalized the civilization and land us on Mars, but the question is how far this science' cravings for a 'perfect world' can sustain. Absolute dependence upon Science is transpiring us to become fragile, vulnerable and weak so much that it crumbles with the next scope of 'perfectness'. *Wabi-sabi* helps us see beyond this ugly race of science, it penetrates our mind with the ideas of tolerance and acceptance withstanding the earthquake of constant futuristic conflict with the present. By this we don't want to degrade science or its essence of objectivity, but we find this sheer-maintenance of objective outlook for this whole phenomenon is a severe walk back to the pre-renaissance age. *Wabi-sabi* is the pinch of greyness, which was forgotten by science, as pointed out by Julia Pointer Adams "*Wabi-sabi* is the Antithesis of Modernism" (Julie Pointer Adams On A Wabi-Sabi Mindset In Life, 2019). In fact, it is the outbreak of the new renaissance of mental aspirations. Imperfection, asymmetry and crudeness is what science denounces and doing that costs incognito amount of sacrifice of originality everyday. *Wabi-sabi* teaches us to embrace and hold tight the worn out, the ones which has succumb the foundation of time.

### ***Politics of accountability and accommodation***

“There is a crack in everything, that is how the light gets in” writes Lionard Cohen (McGuire-Adams *et al.* 2022), a very simple explanation to justify the importance of ‘Cracks’ in an object as well human life. Well, as a matter-of-fact light resembles memories, and memories of degraded past. But *Wabi-sabi* aesthetic help us reconcile excellence in adjustments, be it with our dilapidated self-wisdom, our wobbly mental malfunctions or our very own hysteric self. *Wabi-sabi* according to us can provide a very pleasant perspective of resonance to the exodus crisis all over the world. The aesthetics of simplicity rethinks the root of this problem. Objective forums will gather several well-prepared justifications like population boom, urbanization, industrialization, scientific advancements, even materialism. *Wabi-sabi* doesn’t bother explaining the dreadful causes, rather its dimensions are welcoming. A simple, moderate and authentic lifestyle requires the minimum, that is the whole point of the Tea ceremony propounded in Kyoto, with this ideology we can accommodate. Accommodation and adjustment or the key objectives which when adhered makes us tolerant. The light shines right at the back of those who secure wisdom through the practice of *Wabi-sabi*.

### ***Happiness and Wellness through Wabi-sabi***

Most of us these days are struggling to convince ourselves the idea of wants, which is far beyond and stretched than our needs. This everyday tussles are the main reasons for our escalating stress, anxiety, depression and all the other modern day mental quivers and unrest which has terminally plagued our lives. In fact, there’s always a continuous pursuit of perfection in every sphere of life like our possessions, consumptions, achievements, goals even relationships. This whole race of obsession with extravagance, renovation, accuracy, and flawlessness is infectious as it tends to erode the appreciation for authenticity, for all that is modest, humble and simple. *Wabi sabi* is more of a feeling than a concept, it needs to be cultivated at a personal level not as a discourse but awakening. It leads us to the new track where rustic elegance and underrated beauty is treasured, this evolves us to cognize old as vintage not as a scrap, it soothes our eyes with an empty room with just a flower pot, it encourages us to find aesthetics in stiches,

patches and any form of amends made to recollect and rebuilt the broken. It is hence regarded as the aesthetic philosophy of vision to gaze demolition and erosion as natural inevitable process, where our perseverance to acknowledge the shattered and vanquished is valorised. *Wabi sabi* is an ancient Japanese way or philosophy of life which links to Zen Buddhism (2020), but it has the essence of several core ideas of Buddhism associated with it like the theories of Anityavada (Impermanence), Dukkhavada (Suffering) and Anatmavada (no Soul). Along with these fundamental concepts it also transpires with the seven Authentic Principles of Zen Buddhism (Nagatomo, 2020) viz;

- (i) Kanso -Simplicity
- (ii) Fukinsei – Asymmetry or irregularity
- (iii) Shibumi – Beauty in the understated
- (iv) Shizen- Naturalness without pretension
- (v) Yugen- Subtle Grace
- (vi) Datsuzoku- Freeness
- (vii) Seijaku- Tranquillity

These principles can be ascribed as a guide towards a content life where drastic adversities like trauma or shock or any sort of impact upon our mental stability can be addressed and handled by building an internal resilience and wisdom. Trusting the prevalent fragility and constant flux heads us towards a strengthened realistic life. Dealing with the adversities in life demands resilience and that comes with acceptance and patience which is well practiced in the idea of *Wabi-sabi* where we are recommended to aspire in the most difficult and congenital situations. With a crude and unworkable paradigm *Wabi-sabi* teaches us to keep our spirits high when in opposition with the elements of crisis. The pillars of excellence comes beyond a deep trench which is essential for the erectness of the monument, *Wabi Sabi* gives us the strength to endure the dig in order to confirm the elevation in life. Self and other appreciation has paved the path for enriched compassion and self-acceptance. Certain behavioural transitions are also visible when feeling and following *Wabi sabi* in daily life. Gratitude, peace and content has emerged as perceivable endowments, patience and regard for the past has motivated us towards preservation, protection and conserving. A societal growth can be



cathected with such pure and noble outlook where harmony and tranquillity prevail. We can definitely consider the idea of *Wabi Sabi* as the Philosophy of Acceptance where regardless of anything else living at the present moment undisturbed and unaffected by the conflicts of the treacherous stimulus of life is cherished.

## CONCLUSION

Everywhere there are wabi-sabi, we have to be more microscopic in focus, so that we can see wabi-sabi that goes along with the nature of imperfection evolved through our genes. Society's continuous effort to reshape our gene characteristics in the face of modernization unknowingly deteriorates the natural tendency to go with imperfection. Therefore, believing and practising *Wabi-sabi* would be pertinent in self-acceptance, self-preservation and harmony with nature.

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