

POST-WAR JAPANESE CONSUMER SOCIETY IN SEARCH FOR AN IDENTITY (A WAY TO APPROACH YUKIO MISHIMA'S THE TEMPLE OF THE GOLDEN PAVILION)

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The novel *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* was published in 1956, 11 years after the Japanese cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been bombed during the Second World War. 1956 was also the year when Japan became a UNO member. Starting with that year, the Japanese society underwent political and social changes and democratic reforms. Like no other novelist before or after him, Mishima, the author of the novel in question, captured the changing sentiment surrounding Japan's step into modernism and the country's steady embrace of the Western ideals. Although a period tormented by war and political changes, the name of the historical period this moment in the Japanese history belongs to is Shōwa, *the Era of the Shining Peace* (1926-1989), named after the Emperor of Japan and suggestive of the hopes of the Japanese.

Suicides in the texts of modern Japanese literature represent one of the forms by which the Japanese spirit tries to solve the contradictions in a changing society. There are two distinctive forms of suicide. The first is the traditional ritual suicide called *seppuku*. *Seppuku* is a ritual death rite with an ancient history in the Japanese culture. It was an integral aspect of feudal Japan (1193-1868) and it developed as an integral part of the code of *bushido* and the discipline of the privileged samurai warrior class. *Seppuku* ('stomach cutting') is a particularly painful method of self-destruction. It involves the insertion of a blade into one's own stomach. The person performing the suicide then continues by cutting across the length of the abdomen. The act is finished after an assistant finishes the suicide by cutting off the dying person's head. To the samurai, *seppuku* - whether ordered as punishment or chosen in preference to a dishonourable death at the hands of an enemy - was unquestionable demonstration of their honour, courage, loyalty and moral character.

In modern Japan, the act of killing oneself has taken on different forms and meanings. *Seppuku* in modern times has taken an anti-modern stance as evidenced by Yukio Mishima's literary characters and his own theatrical suicide.

The opposing type of suicide is the modern, intellectual suicide referred to as *jisatsu*. *Jisatsu* is a result of alienation and the fragmentation of society caused by modernization. Both *seppuku* and *jisatsu* are two different suicide forms separated by motive and process, yet the distinction between the two is unclear due to anachronistic persuasions caused by conflict between modernization and the legacy of the Emperor. In 1970, the dramatic *seppuku* of Yukio Mishima mimicked this ancient ritual. Many critics and followers have speculated on the reason for his suicide. Some claim the author was an extremist, who lived in pursuit of ideal beauty, and in his eyes death was the ultimate form of beauty and only in death could he become complete. In an interview, he commented that he worked hard on his body because he intended to die before he was 50 and wanted to make sure he had a good-looking corpse. This vision on beauty draws Mishima close to a Dorian Gray in disguise but who, as opposed to the latter, believes in beauty in and after death.

Others allege that Mishima was thoroughly infatuated with death, terror and the way of the samurai, themes which echo throughout his many works. Others believe his suicide was a political act intended as a protest against the Japan's post WWII Constitution, which he believed had stolen the soul of the tradition of his homeland. Despite having European friends and living in a house styled with Baroque touches, Mishima deplored Western influence, which he believed was raping Japan of its true identity. At times, Mishima said that the Emperor was part of a three-way

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relationship between lovers, representing the third point of a divine triangle that validates the love of the two persons involved. At other times, he said the Emperor represented a 'fort against Westernization'.

Like the protagonist of his novel 'Patriotism', Mishima uses *seppuku* (at the age of 45) to display his unfaltering nationalism and loyalty to the imperial system. His *seppuku* was filled with his affection for fascism and the resurrection of a romanticised samurai ideal. What Mishima hoped for in his demonstration was that Japan would recognize the romanticism of his ordeal and return to the Emperor system. However, while Japanese society largely dismissed his *seppuku* as an embarrassment, the West was more than willing to accept Mishima as embodying the true spirit of the Japanese society. This seems to be due to a condescending attitude by the West that posits Japan as reminiscent of an idyllic past lifestyle instead of welcoming modernization.

In Natsume Soseki's 'Kokoro' (1914), [1] the killing of oneself is presented in an entirely different manner, termed *jisatsu*. One way this contrasts with *seppuku* is that death is instantaneous, unlike *seppuku*, which is extremely painful and unceasing. In 'Kokoro' ('Heart'), the reason for the character's killing himself is the explanation that it was because he would never become the sort of man he wanted to be. The sensei's motivation (another character in the novel who commits suicide) comes from the sense of loss associated with the end of his era, the Meiji Era (*the Era of the Shining Government*, 1868-1912). [2] Though different in process, *seppuku* and *jisatsu* are two means of achieving the same end. In modern society, *seppuku* stands for an anti-modern desire to return to a more paternalistic past. *Jisatsu* is a trans-cultural alienated suicide that results from alienation in modern society. According to the concepts *uchi* ('inside') and *soto* ('outside'), the Japanese can only fully develop within a group (*uchi*). Everything or/and everybody that does not belong to the group is *soto*, hence rejected. The post-war crisis found the Japanese strangers in their own country whose newly implanted values they could not incorporate as being their own. Mizoguchi, the human character in 'Kinkakuji' ('The Temple of the Golden Pavilion'), commits, in fact, neither of the two forms of suicide. At the basis of his final pyromaniac act lie the reasons for his committing *seppuku* and/or *jisatsu* at a spiritual level. He is the image of Mishima seen through a broken window.

'Kinkakuji' is based on a true story. In July 1950, a mentally disturbed Buddhist novice sets on fire the famous national piece of art, The Golden Pavilion of the Temple Rokuon in Kyoto. Mishima turns this piece of news in brief into a literary work choosing the

Golden Pavilion to be the central character in the novel and not Mizoguchi, the replica of the Buddhist novice. Mizoguchi lacks all the extraordinary qualities that could turn him, according to Frye's theory, into a high mimetic hero in the novel. His complex of inferiority due to his stuttering, ugliness and frailty condemn him to premature seclusion and, thus, passivity which brings him closer to the feminine rather than masculine sex. According to Shirane Haruo's theory, the true essence (*makoto no kokoro*) is, in fact, feminine or childlike. The true essence is not masculine in nature, firm and determined. If one seeks into the depth of one's heart, not even the strongest human being is any different from a woman or a child. The only difference is that, out of embarrassment, he tends to hide his true essence [3:31].

If we were to relate to this theory, Mizoguchi's passivity at the beginning is more likely to be associated with a child's who acts towards its masculinity and maturity. His actionless, passive behaviour is put an end to when he actually sets Kinkakuji on fire. On his way to commit the crime, Mizoguchi experiences an anticipatory split within himself. 'I don't know why but I was convinced that the student was heading towards the fire. [...] I slowed a little and set my mind to follow him. Walking behind him, I noticed one of his shoulders was lower than the other and I felt that his back was, in fact, mine. He was much more handsome than I was, but I had no doubt that what had forced him into doing the same deed I was about to do was the same loneliness, unhappiness, confused view on beauty that I had.' [4: 185] For him, the Temple represents beauty in all its splendour, everything that he lacks. It becomes an obsession, the ideal he can never reach and destroying it becomes the purpose of his life. There is a close relation between the Temple, the Golden Pavilion implicitly, and the human body. They both stand for exterior structures. The character's ugliness is exterior. Destroying the temple, the body, he destroys his ugliness. Just like all the matters relating to the act of committing *seppuku* are carefully prescribed and carried out in the most meticulous manner, Mizoguchi plans his crime and spiritual suicide in detail.

On the other hand, the Temple is a microcosmos isolated from society. [5: 879] Mizoguchi's alienation is deepened by his stuttering which isolates him both from other children and his personality. Thus, his stuttering could be viewed as lack of assertion and self-assertion altogether. Words always come too late to him. He can never speak his mind the way he would like to. As a final decision, Mizoguchi resorts to burning down to ashes the Golden Pavilion instead of committing suicide as it might have been expected as a

consequence of infinite dissatisfaction with oneself. As with Mishima's suicide, Mizoguchi's would pass unnoticed by people, whereas burning down the Golden Pavilion is an act of destruction that appeals to them.

Though incapable of heroic acts, the character succeeds in destroying the object of his obsessions, fears and frustrations culminating with his final purification, liberation and fulfilment. In Northrop Frye's apocalyptic conception of human life, there are three kinds of fulfilment: individual, sexual and social. [6:148] Mizoguchi's sexual fulfilment is denied to him by the power of conflicts inside him. "The Temple stood there between me and life", says Mizoguchi at a moment when the centre of his focus should be the girl next to him. 'The girl fled away like a peck of dust [...] and I failed to find life.' Needless to say, the character's sexual fulfilment fails in favour of the individual one.

In the light of what has been said, the novel concludes with an unexpectedly powerful line that belongs to Mizoguchi, either thought or spoken: 'I wanted to live.' The hero's will to live in the end proves his power to assert his true self, find his own identity, find life.

The axial imagery (Mizoguchi - The Temple - Heaven/Divinity) is found in a context where the myths and traditional values are displaced. An instance of *cha no yu* ('tea ceremony') (one of the rituals held almost sacred by the Japanese) in which a young woman who invited a young officer for tea is pouring milk from her breast into his cup, has a sense

of perversion and lost ethical codes. The spiritual split within Mizoguchi as a representative of the modern post-war society is a result of both breaking with the past and consequent reconstruction from the ashes of a new Temple.

'No holy tree exists as Bodhi known
No mirror shining bright is standing here
Since there is nothing from the very past,
Where can the dust itself accumulate?'

(Hui Neng, Zen monk)

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