Spiritual Alienation and Existential Crisis in Postwar Japan: Modernisation, Aesthetics, and Destruction in Yukio Mishima's The Temple of the Golden Pavilion

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Abstract. The present study examines the cultural, ontological, and aesthetic consequences of rapid post-World War II modernisation and Westernisation in Japan through the lens of Yukio Mishima's oeuvre, with particular focus on The Temple of the Golden Pavilion. The postwar adoption of Western political and economic models as a normative form of development led to the secularisation of traditional value systems, the museumification of sacred structures, and a profound crisis of collective identity in Japanese society. The study approaches modernisation not as a neutral historical process but as a Western-centred epistemological mechanism of cultural "othering."

The research demonstrates that this normative conception of modernity in Japan produced not only institutional and technological transformations but also spiritual alienation, existential void, and ontological fragmentation at the level of individual consciousness. This study analyses Mishima's aesthetic and philosophical stance as a literary articulation of this crisis. The protagonist of The Temple of the Golden Pavilion, Mizoguchi, is interpreted as an allegorical figure representing the subject who has lost the sacred foundations of modern Japan, yet cannot integrate into modernity. Within the novel, the Kinkaku-ji temple is depicted not as a living religious space but as a symbol of tradition preserved by modern society only as a display object, emptied of its original meaning.

The study concludes that in Mishima's work, acts of destruction should not be read as expressions of freedom or ethical rebellion; instead, they represent an inescapable response to the ontological pressures produced by modernity and the culmination of spiritual decline. In this regard, the Temple of the Golden Pavilion stands as one of the most vivid literary exemplars of fundamental critique directed at the aesthetic and metaphysical foundations of modernity.

Keywords: Yukio Mishima; postwar Japan; modernisation; spiritual alienation; existential crisis; ontological crisis.

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Japan underwent rapid modernisation, accompanied by the intensive adoption of Western political, economic, and cultural models; this, in turn, led to the secularisation of traditional values and to radical transformations in the country's socio-economic structure. As a result, Westernisation and rapid socio-economic transformation profoundly destabilised the mechanisms through which national consciousness had previously articulated and understood itself. Japanese society shifted its cultural structure from the sacred to the secular, displacing collective identity with individual psychological disorientation. It reconfigured aesthetic and moral values within the framework of Western capitalism and consumer culture. During this period, Western values increasingly displaced national ones: accelerating economic development and expanding technological achievement mechanised individuals, subordinated spiritual values to material and technical priorities, and forced all aspects of life

to conform to a new reality. Contemporary Japanese society thus emerged as a constantly moving mass of people, absorbed into large-scale industrial systems, uprooted by Westernisation, and stripped of emotional depth.

This transformation manifested itself not only at the socio-political level but also found profound expression in literature. To account for these developments, modernisation theory, as formulated in the postwar period, assumes particular significance. According to this theoretical perspective, modernisation does not function as a neutral model of development but rather as a new mechanism of "othering." Whereas the nineteenth century emphasised a transition from the "primitive" to the "civilised," the post–Second World War period promoted the transition from the "traditional" to the "modern" as a normative model. At the centre of this model lies the idea of Western superiority: the concepts of modernity and development are equated with the Western paradigm and imposed as normative criteria [1, 571].

It is precisely this normative conception of modernity that shaped Japan's modernisation process not merely as a technological and institutional transformation, but also as a mechanism of cultural and ontological pressure. Modernising elites and state institutions symbolically marginalised traditional value systems by coding them as "backward" or "bound to the past." At the same time, they presented Western-derived rationalism and capitalist thought as the sole legitimate path to development. Consequently, the crisis that emerged within Japanese society was not simply a result of the speed of modernisation, but instead of the epistemological framework that displaced cultural self-understanding.

Within such an ideological environment, concepts such as "spiritual alienation," "self-estrangement," "existential emptiness," and the "collapse of value systems" evolved beyond the confines of philosophical discourse to become central ideological categories of modern Japanese literature. These notions find particularly compelling articulation in the works of Yukio Mishima (1925–1970), where they function as aesthetic expressions of the ontological fragmentation produced within individual consciousness by modernisation and Westernisation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Yukio Mishima occupies a distinctive place in twentieth-century Japanese history as a figure who, simultaneously as a writer, public intellectual, and ideological actor, articulated the internal contradictions of modern Japan with exceptional sharpness. Formed within a historical context shaped by student movements, social tensions, and Japan's encounter with the West, Mishima's worldview – and particularly the manner of his chosen death through seppuku – can be interpreted as a critique and analysis of modern Japanese identity itself. According to the historian of Japan, Prof. Dr Selchuk Esenbel, Mishima's suicide may be understood as "the suffering of a civilisation – namely, the pain arising from the encounter of Japanese cultural identity with Western civilisation" [2, 135]. Although this interpretation does not fully explain the complex motivations behind Mishima's act, it offers an essential perspective for understanding the socio-cultural tensions and deep cultural fragmentation characteristic of the period. This approach draws attention to the collective identity crisis underlying Mishima's personal life drama and highlights the contradictions produced by Japan's confrontation with the West.

Mishima sharply criticised the constitution imposed on Japan after its defeat in the Second World War, as well as the political order operating under strong American influence. He believed that postwar Japan, under the pressure of Western values, had lost touch with its own traditions. For this reason, the defence of traditional Japanese values occupies a central place in both his literary works and public statements. As Mishima himself asserted: *"In the postwar years, that is, at a time when existing social values had collapsed, I believed (and often told others) that the time had come to revive the classical Japanese ideal of the unity of culture and the warrior spirit, of literature and the sword, of Word and Action"* [3, 140].

For Mishima, modernisation was not limited to economic development or technological progress; rather, it constituted a complex cultural transformation marked by the gradual erosion of aesthetic and metaphysical values and the internal disintegration of the traditional Japanese spirit. In his literary texts, the subject produced by modern life – what may be provisionally termed the "man of emptiness" – is portrayed as being trapped in a profound psychological and ontological crisis. Severed from his historical and

cultural roots, this subject is unable to establish a meaningful relationship with the past or to construct a stable and enduring identity oriented toward the future.

Mishima's protagonists cannot ground their existence in secularised, fragmented social structures and, in the absence of a moral ideal, experience a state of existential dissociation. The alienation they experience does not arise solely from the breakdown of social integration; at a deeper level, the collapse of symbolic and metaphysical frameworks that once endowed existence with meaning generates this alienation. From this perspective, Mishima employs his characters' inner monologues and states of withdrawal not merely as techniques of psychological depiction, but as analytical instruments that reveal the collective psyche of postwar Japan.

This idea is articulated clearly in Damian Flanagan's studies on Mishima's creative position: "Mishima's glittering literary career was played out against the background of a country coping with the trauma of wartime defeat and American occupation; one which had to learn quickly how to reinvent itself as a thriving capitalist powerhouse. Mishima flourished under the stream of Western influence in Japan, yet increasingly recognised suppressed parts of himself in aspects of Japanese culture that had seemingly been buried under the weight of Western influence" [4, 20]. Flanagan's observations conceptually articulate the ambivalent nature of Mishima's relationship with modernisation – namely, the tension between being shaped under Western influence and his growing unease regarding the suppressed layers of traditional Japanese culture.

The central problem at the heart of Yukio Mishima's literary oeuvre is not merely the confrontation between modernity and tradition, but rather the ontological fragmentation produced by this confrontation within human consciousness. Mishima sharply foregrounds the modern individual's self-critique, self-contempt, and moral dissonance when faced with traditional aesthetic ideals. The novel that brought Yukio Mishima international recognition, The Temple of the Golden Pavilion (Kinkaku-ji, 1956), constitutes one of the most powerful artistic articulations of this problem.

In his biographical study of Yukio Mishima, Damian Flanagan writes: "A defining work of Japanese post-war literature, it was translated into a diversity of languages and is claimed by some critics as the very apogee of Mishima's art. As with several previous novels, Mishima drew on a real-life event as his base material: an arson attack on the Golden Pavilion in Kyoto, on 2 July 1950. The Golden Pavilion, built by the shogun Yoshimitsu (1358–1408), is an iconic piece of Japanese architecture: sumptuous, painstakingly ornate and delicate. Mishima's model for his angry young man was the perpetrator of the attack: a stuttering, introverted monk at the temple called Hayashi" [4, 135]. As this quotation indicates, the novel's plot – based on real events of the 1950s – revolves around the arson of the famous Kinkaku-ji Temple in Kyoto by a young monk. According to Minami Aso's article "Kinkaku-ji as a Central Element in Yukio Mishima's 'Kyoto' and 'Postwar'," the temple was beautified and idolised by society in the postwar period for commercial purposes [5, 19–30]. Mishima presents the temple as a museumified tradition of modern Japan: the Golden Pavilion no longer functions primarily as a sacred space but rather as a national heritage site, a tourist attraction, and an aesthetic icon. It becomes a symbol of how tradition in modernising Japan is removed from lived practice and transformed into a display object.

In other words, the social perception of Kinkaku-ji is constructed upon interests and desires – what the protagonist Mizoguchi characterises as "evil thoughts." By deliberately choosing the Golden Pavilion, Mishima demonstrates that modern society preserves tradition only superficially, without truly inhabiting it. The burning of the temple thus serves as an exposure of this false preservation.

Renowned in world literature for his poetic style and dramatic intensity, Mishima brings into perfect harmony in this novel the recurring themes of violence, desire, religion, and history that define his work. Mizoguchi's obsession with the temple's beauty and his desire to possess it ultimately drive him toward an irreversible and destructive path: *"If I say that the greatest difficulty I have encountered in life is beauty, I would not be exaggerating. My father was a simple rural priest who could not speak eloquently, and I learned only one thing from him: 'There is nothing more beautiful in this world than the Golden Pavilion.' I knew that somewhere in the still mysterious world, 'beauty' already existed, and this thought found a permanent reflection in my heart, accompanied by both delicacy and anxiety"* [6, 24]. Here, Mishima clearly illustrates how beauty becomes a meta-

physical burden in Mizoguchi's consciousness. The Golden Pavilion ceases to be a mere aesthetic object and instead becomes an absolute criterion that determines the meaning of existence itself. Mizoguchi perceives beauty not as a value to be experienced, shared, or lived, but as a cruel idea that constantly judges him and confronts him with his own imperfection. At this point, Mishima presents beauty not as a redemptive force but as a power that fragments the self and alienates the individual from their own being.

In a manner characteristic of Mishima's aesthetics, beauty and death are portrayed as inseparable concepts. The author believed that only death allows one to apprehend beauty fully. In this context, the epigraph he chose for Confessions of a Mask from Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov is particularly revealing: *"Beauty is a terrible and dreadful thing! It is terrible because it is indefinable, and indefinable. After all, God has set us riddles. Here the devil struggles with God, and the battlefield is the human heart"* [7, 4].

The tension between the ideal beauty of Kinkaku-ji and Mizoguchi's internal sense of incompleteness constitutes one of the clearest manifestations of the dialectic of beauty and destruction that runs throughout Mishima's entire body of work. Mishima conceives beauty not only as an aesthetic category but also as a metaphysical force that directs human existence toward higher values. However, within the secular structures of modern society, this force lacks a meaningful counterpart and is consequently transformed into destructive energy in the consciousness of his protagonists.

Following Japan's defeat in the Second World War, sacred values weakened, imperial ideology collapsed, and Western rationalism and utilitarian thought gained dominance. For Mishima, these processes signified the secularisation of beauty. Beauty was no longer sacred but had become functional, commodified, and market-oriented. In the writer's view, this transformation amounted to the "death" of beauty itself.

It is precisely within this context that the act of destruction emerges in Mishima's work as an aesthetic revolt against modernity. As Mizoguchi reflects: *"If I were to burn down the Golden Pavilion, declared a national treasure at the end of the last century, it would, of course, be destroyed irreversibly; this would constitute an undeniable and evident loss to the total amount of Beauty created and preserved by humanity. These thoughts filled me with a strange exhilaration. Burning the temple would have an incredible pedagogical effect, I thought to myself. I would demonstrate to humanity that simple longevity does not guarantee eternity. Just because the temple has stood unharmed on the shore of Mirror Pond for five hundred years does not mean it will continue to stand. People would see that they can rid themselves at any moment of the empty and meaningless idioms they have invented for themselves. Once they realise this, they will become deeply unsettled"* [6, 203]. This passage articulates a paradoxical yet distinctly Mishiman idea: "pedagogical effect" through destruction – education achieved via annihilation. The protagonist presents the burning of the temple not as a crime but as a didactic act. In his view, modern society sanctifies beauty through hollow notions such as eternity, permanence, and immutability. Beauty becomes untouchable, safe, and free from responsibility. The burning of the temple violently disrupts this comfort and forces humanity to confront aesthetic values directly. Thus, the destruction of the Golden Pavilion is not an act of vandalism for Mishima, but a philosophical protest directed against dominant conceptions of being, beauty, and time.

Mishima's literary work does not merely depict the process of moral alienation in modern Japan; it also offers an artistic analysis of its aesthetic and ontological consequences. The psychological portrait of the novel's protagonist, Mizoguchi, is presented as an allegory of the general moral condition of modern Japanese society. He is a socially isolated young man who has a speech impediment, experiences his own body as alien, and remains detached from the social world: *"I was a frail, sickly child. In all children's games and amusements, I was always the last. Moreover, my congenital stutter forced me to remain distant from other children and inclined me toward solitude and withdrawal... It was hardly surprising that my stutter erected a wall between myself and my surroundings"* [6, 6-7]. His solitary consciousness represents an individual severed from tradition yet incapable of fully integrating into the modern world. As the ideals that once constituted Japan's traditional collective consciousness – Buddhist spirituality, Zen aesthetics, and the transcendental aura of sacred spaces – began to fade amid the dynamic, materialist rhythms of everyday life, Mizoguchi's inner world emerged as a manifestation of this void. For Mizoguchi, the temple serves as a symbol of lost sacrality, the

final monument of a spiritual centre left defenceless against the pressures of modernity. His object-deification of the Golden Pavilion is, in turn, conditioned by a profound inferiority complex.

The compensatory nature of religious experience may explain this psychological mechanism. Philosopher Akito Ishikawa, in his work What Does It Mean to Believe in Religion? conceptualises acts of faith as attempts to compensate for one's inner deficiencies by projecting them onto others or onto sacred objects [8, 21–172]. Mizoguchi's confession explicitly confirms this mechanism: *"I instinctively felt that this boy could never love the Golden Pavilion as much as I did. After all, my admiration for the temple was based solely on the awareness of my own ugliness"* [6, 41].

Yukio Mishima thus presents moral alienation in modern Japan on a dual level. On the one hand, there is the subject's alienation from their own body and existence; on the other, there is society's estrangement from its traditions and historical roots. Mizoguchi's dissatisfaction with himself, his shame toward his body, and his speech impairment become symbolic metaphors for the individual's loss of expressive agency within modern space. In his consciousness, the Kinkaku-ji Temple emerges as the embodiment of beauty and ideality, while simultaneously articulating a sharp critique of how contemporary society gradually reduces sacred values to aestheticised and touristic objects.

The absolute beauty of the temple generates in Mizoguchi's psyche a simultaneous sense of admiration and profound worthlessness; the aesthetic and metaphysical authority of the ideal suppresses individual consciousness, leading the subject to believe that he can affirm his existence only through an act of destruction. Thus, Mishima presents beauty not as a redemptive principle but as a destructive force that deepens the moral fragmentation of modern humanity. In the novel, spiritual alienation closely intertwines with existential decline, and this unity explicitly reveals Mishima's fundamental critique of the contemporary conception of the human being. The social and ideological realities of the twentieth century increasingly transform individual existence into a component of collective mechanisms; in this process, personality loses its essence and becomes a functional element.

It is precisely within this context that the following idea, advanced in existentialist thought, acquires particular significance for understanding Mizoguchi's psychological and ontological condition: *"In the twentieth century, individuality is suppressed by universality; personality is crushed, its essence altered, and it is transformed into an element of the social machine, participating in the process of depriving other individuals of individuality. The unification of people within such aggressive institutions leads existentialists to seek a way out in human solitude. They come to believe that any form of human collectivity is, by its very nature, directed against the individual, and that the only way to eliminate aggression in interpersonal relations within human society is to renounce all possible forms of human association and pursue a path of radical isolation"* [9, 206]. This theoretical position articulated by Gorkhmaz Guliyev finds concrete artistic embodiment in Mizoguchi's inner world: *"My life lost its scope and continuity. I was condemned to eternal, inevitable solitude. How strange it is. I could not feel solidarity with anyone or anything—not even with nothingness itself!"* [6, 136]. Mizoguchi is unable to ascribe meaning to his existence within either traditional religious and social structures or the framework of modern society's claims to individuality. On the contrary, these structures are perceived by him as aggressive mechanisms that suppress individual existence, estrange him from himself, and propel him toward an ontological void. For this reason, Mizoguchi's solitude is not an act of free choice idealised in existentialist philosophy but a traumatic condition imposed upon the subject by force.

As philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev observes, "the human being recognised by biology and sociology – the human as a being of nature and social environment – is a product and derivative of the world and the processes unfolding within it" [10, 25]. At this point, Heidegger's concept of Geworfenheit ("thrownness") becomes particularly relevant for elucidating the novel's philosophical logic. Mizoguchi does not choose his historical moment, social environment, or cultural coordinates; he is "thrown" into a postwar Japan undergoing rapid modernisation, where tradition is transformed into an aesthetic object. This thrownness saturates his experience of being, imbuing it with a sense of meaninglessness and depriving him of the ability to perceive the world as either a space of aesthetic harmony or a metaphysical whole.

Consequently, the world ceases to be a habitable space for Mizoguchi and instead becomes a void that bears the unbearable weight of existence: *"I*

sat completely withdrawn into myself. The particles in the world around me would alternately cool and then heat up again. I cannot find the necessary words. The world seems covered in stains. Then, suddenly, stripes appear in place of these stains, and it pours into me. Those details that refuse to become part of my being shimmer shamelessly somewhere outside my personal 'self'" [6, 182]. The perception of the world described in these lines constitutes a phenomenological expression of Mizoguchi's existential and spiritual alienation. The world is no longer an ontologically meaningful and livable space; the bond between subject and object has been severed, reality has been fragmented, and existence has been rendered hostile. This condition resonates with Sartre's existential philosophy and the notion of the "unbearable weight of being": the world no longer provides meaning. Still, it is instead experienced as an excess of existence imposed upon the subject. For Mizoguchi, reality cannot function as an extension of the self, as the external world fails to be assimilated into his inner structure and therefore appears as an alien, aggressive element that "shamelessly shimmers." Through this depiction, Mishima exposes the ontological crisis of the modern individual: rather than living in the world, the human being is condemned to carrying its weight.

The burning of the Golden Pavilion functions as the culmination of this existential decline. This act is neither mere vandalism nor a crime arising solely from psychological disturbance; rather, it constitutes a radical attempt at freedom through which the subject seeks to affirm his existence. By destroying the ideal, Mizoguchi intends, in effect, to shatter the metaphysical and aesthetic dominion that the ideal has imposed upon him. Through this destructive act, he simultaneously annihilates beauty and attempts to free himself from the ontological pressure it exerts.

Nonetheless, Mishima does not present this act of destruction unambiguously as freedom, either ethically or existentially. Instead, in the novel, the act functions not as an affirmation of the subject but as the climax of his moral and ontological decline. For Mizoguchi, the destruction of the temple may superficially appear to be a moment in which he asserts his existence in relation to history and beauty; yet, in reality, it represents a forced reconciliation achieved through the recognition of life's meaninglessness. In the closing lines of the novel, the protagonist's inner monologue states: *"My heart now beat slowly, as it does after a task performed with conscience. 'We shall yet live,' I thought"* [6, 269]. This statement should be read not as a confirmation of freedom but as a symptom of subjective emptiness and spiritual collapse. A key point in this passage is the contradiction between the sense of "relief" following the destructive act and the classical existential conception of freedom. Whereas Sartrean philosophy links freedom to the weight of responsibility and the burden of choice, Mizoguchi instead grounds his relief in the renunciation of responsibility and the annulment of meaning. The phrase *"a task performed with conscience"* here is deeply ironic, for conscience has been stripped of ethical content and reduced to a mere psychological relief. At this juncture, the destruction reveals not moral salvation but the total neutralisation of the subject's ethical consciousness. The thought "We shall yet live" cannot be interpreted as future-oriented existential hope; it rather signifies acquiescence to the mechanical continuity of existence. Mizoguchi no longer questions the purpose of life; existence is detached from meaning, goal, and value, reduced to mere biological persistence. In this way, Mishima exposes the tragic condition of the modern human: at the very moment the individual believes he is affirming his existence, he is, in fact, negating its metaphysical foundations.

In this regard, the existential decline in The Temple of the Golden Pavilion is neither resolved through social integration nor through withdrawal into individual solitude. On the contrary, this decline is presented as an inevitable consequence of the rupture in the ontological connection between the subject and the world. The destruction of the temple is not an act of rebellion against the world but the final stage of being left without a world; this demonstrates that Mishima neither romanticises nor idealises the modern human's existential crisis, but portrays it in all its tragic nakedness. The tension between moral alienation and existential decline in the novel also carries a historical-sociological dimension. The trauma caused by the war, the collapse of imperial ideology, and the loss of social value of national symbols created a sense of void in the psyche of the younger generation. Mishima represents this void through Mizoguchi's internal monologues, in which he describes the world as a *"black emptiness"* or "stagnant silence." The transformation of beauty from a sacral meaning into a mere object of visual pleasure constitutes another aspect of moral decline. In contrast, in

classical Japanese aesthetics, beauty was associated with profound spiritual harmony; in Mishima's novel, this harmony remains only in external form. When Mizoguchi fails to internalise beauty, he attempts to assert himself through its destruction, thereby depicting the modern human's struggle with the absence of meaning within the absurd cycle of existence.

For some critics, The Temple of the Golden Pavilion is considered a canonical example of twentieth-century literature, as the novel employs contemporary social events to convey a unique worldview [4, 137]. They argue that if Madame Bovary classically analyses post-Revolutionary French society – showing how romantic fantasies and imagination are crushed by reality, expressed through the naturalist style – then a Japanese equivalent exists here: a work that reflects the hidden, persistent memories of war and guilt still resonant in the postwar period [4, 137].

CONCLUSIONS

Yukio Mishima developed his remarkable literary career against the backdrop of a nation grappling with wartime defeat and U.S. occupation. During this period, Japan rapidly reconstructed itself as a capitalist power centre, a process that exerted significant pressure on the deeper strata of its culture. Although Mishima was initially influenced by the growing impact of the West on Japan, over time, he came to recognise more clearly the elements of Japanese culture that had been suppressed and marginalised under this influence. It is precisely this tension – the hegemony of Western modernity and the compression of traditional Japanese aesthetic and metaphysical thought – that forms the central conceptual thread in Mishima's work, shaping his exploration of the modern human's spiritual crisis. His masterpiece, The Temple of the Golden Pavilion, has become a literary model for depicting moral alienation and existential decline in contemporary Japan. Mishima demonstrates the connection between individual psychological crisis and national identity crisis, showing that the secular structures of the modern world erode traditional sacrality, leaving human consciousness in a profound void of meaning. Mizoguchi's burning of the temple is not merely a personal tragedy but also a metaphor for the fragmented spirit of modern Japan, torn between tradition and modernity. In this sense, the novel functions not only as a psychological drama but also as one of the most compelling literary critiques of modernity.

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