

The Connection between Mishima Yukio's Depiction of Homosexuality and Misogyny

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Abstract. This paper aims to study Mishima Yukio's description of homosexuality and misogyny. It will review discourses about Mishima, his performance, works and sexuality. It points out Mishima's views on love, why the female characters in his books are always similar, and his attitude towards women. In conclusion, this paper will use the characters in Mishima's novels as examples, analyzing his motives by explaining the intrinsic relationship between homosexuality and misogyny found in his literature.

Keywords: Mishima Yukio; Homosexuality; Japanese and Greek Aesthetics; Misogyny; Homosocial.

1. Introduction

As a representative writer of postwar Japan, Mishima Yukio has a unique style and aesthetic view. His work sometimes describes the beauty of masculinity, including the masculine beauty of traditional Japanese *bushido*. The theme of homosexuality can be uncovered with a careful analysis of a narrow selection from his prolific literary production. At the same time, the female characters often appear as secondary roles in Mishima plots. These female images tend to have a shallow simplicity and they might even resemble each other. On the other hand, the male characters have multifaceted personalities and live as independent individuals in a spiritual world.

Certain strands of recent scholarship address homosexuality and misogyny as two characteristics of Mishima's literary work. This paper will attempt to establish a link between these themes that scholars tend to address separately. Attention will be drawn to how the narration of *Confessions of a Mask* explores the complex psychological activities of self-consideration and the expression of gay sexual desire in the form of an autobiography. *Forbidden Colors* combines the traditional Japanese *bushido* aesthetics with Greek classicism, revealing the distinctive characteristics of Mishima's philosophy of male beauty. Many descriptions of male bodies and emotional entanglements between men structure *The Abundance of The Sea*. What links these three novels is that the female characters appearing in stories tend to play the victim role in the plot.

One possible way to highlight the presence of homosexual and misogynistic themes in the work of Mishima might be the approach of psychoanalysis. After Freud divided the "desire for life" into "identification" and "libido cathexis", Sakuta Keiichi paraphrased those two terms as "the desire to become" and "the desire to have".[1] In terms of gender relationships, the desire to become of heterosexual men mainly refers to the assimilation between same-sex groups; the desire to have of heterosexual men typically refers to their need to possess women sexually. In the process of assimilation and possession, there will inevitably be a series of problems for heterosexual men. Misogyny is one of the results of this series of problems. Men began to "otherize" women, putting women into the category of "other" so that they can be subject to control by men. Even when separated and dominated as either saint and prostitute, misogyny occurs when men using these definitions are driven by the iron will to dominate women.[2] Such sights are visible in Mishima novels: there are images of Satoko in *Spring Snow* and Hatsue in *Shiosai*. In addition, female characters often played the role of docile wives, fulfilling an ideal that Mishima cherished and following the postwar expectations of Japanese men of women. In contrast, such as the wife of an army officer in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Mizoguchi would regard her as saint at first. When Mizoguchi found her indulging in carnal relations with various men out of loneliness, the saint had become a prostitute.

There are many different opinions about Mishima's sexual orientation. Chinese writer Mo Yan believes that Mishima "absolutely does not have the tendency of homosexuality [and] the so-called love for men is actually an act of inviting favor by Mishima, hoping to attract people's attention." [3] Having surveyed several Mishima novels, this paper will focus on outlining his attitude towards homosexuality and why he wrote about homosexuality, by making clear how the Mishima aesthetic combined the Japanese tradition of *bushido* with descriptions of homosexual desire that were safely sanctioned in a historical past. Then this paper will discuss whether his admiration for men is due to misogyny and will outline what attitudes he held towards women.

2. Factors Influencing the Portrayal of Homosexuality by Mishima

Since Mishima himself did not explicitly reveal his sexual orientation, speculation about his sexual orientation has been widely discussed in the critical literature. Some scholars believe that he was not heterosexual, for example:

Although Mishima did not openly admit it, there are various signs that he was at least a bisexual man with homosexual tendencies. As a result, his works depict few physical features of female characters, but unconsciously focus on male characters, using the physical appearance of those male characters to portray them as a kind of male physical beauty. [4]

Some writers believe that Mishima wrote about homosexuality in order to attract attention. Mo Yan, the Chinese writer who won the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature, said that Mishima "definitely does not have homosexual tendencies ... the so-called love for men is in fact an invitation for Mishima to be different and to draw attention to himself." [5]

Mishima's sexuality is a mystery. In *Confessions of a Mask*, when he writes about the flesh of St. Sebastian being pierced by arrows, the "I" narrator became sexually aroused. Thereafter that character committed almost blasphemous acts against the Martyrdom picture. From the perspective of life environment, one of the reasons for the interest of Mishima in this St. Sebastian image was that it was a gift received from his often-absent father while Mishima was being raised by his grandmother. The lack of male role models in the family made him unusually curious about men and strengthened their attraction to him. On the other hand, from a Freudian point of view, Mishima misidentified himself during the narcissistic period around the age of six, which is what Lacan called the mirror period. [6] This mirror period is reflected in his growth process as the impairment of the Oedipus complex: if he does not get what he wants, he will assume that he is affiliated with the other side (the maternal or feminine aspect), and will tend to become infatuated with men who are similar to him.

Apart from the Mishima's sexual orientation, his attitude toward homosexuality also coincides with his pursuit of purity. Mishima characters repeatedly mentioned purity. In *Runaway Horse*, Iinuma cleans up himself by committing *seppuku*, thus achieving purity. In his opinion, "If the essence of purity must be limited by age, then it must be acted upon ... Once you have shown your loyalty by action, you must immediately commit *seppuku*. Only death can purify everything." [7] The Mishima pursuit of purity is not only reflected in his final ultimate performance of the samurai spirit, but also in his view of love:

Homosexuality is not allowed and suffers from the hateful eyes of the world, but I think it is because of this fear that it can become the purest form of human love ... Literature always finds purity in what the world does not recognize, what people do not like, what they hate, and what they exclude, then explore the true gesture of humanity. [8]

In the Mishima view, homosexuality is unrecognized, and love that confronts society is pure love, more in line with what literature should pursue. Love that conforms to social conventions is "a manufactured product sold in supermarkets ... [where it is] trapped in the rules and regulations of the

world.”[9] These restrictions cannot contain the amoral feeling of love of his novels. The amoral feeling of love of his novels overcomes these restrictions.

Moreover, Mishima was influenced by Greek culture and was keen on depicting energetic young men. Unlike the transient and fleeting beauty of Japanese aesthetics, the *wabi* acceptance of inevitable change and the *yugen* embrace of dark mystery, the classical beauty of Greece is a timeless beauty full of power, calmness and unshakable force. In particular, the Greek concept of worshipping physical beauty, with the beautiful human body as an idealized model, appealed to Mishima. This is evident in the Mishima depiction of the martyrdom of St. Sebastian:

In the background, the Titianesque dark forest and the shadowy vista of the sunset sky, the slightly tilted black trunk of the tree is the torture rack of Saint Sérgestian. The handsome young man is bound naked to the black trunk, his arms crossed high above the tree, and the ropes that bind them are tied to the tree. No knot could be seen. Covering the youth's naked body was only a piece of white coarse cloth loosely wrapped around the waist ... For the incomparable flesh of Antinous bore no traces of the hardships of preaching and old age that are usually seen in other saints, but only youth, only light, only beauty, and only pleasure. This white and unparalleled nakedness was placed in front of the backdrop of the dusk and shone brightly.[10]

Mishima celebrates physical beauty with a youthful atmosphere. In addition, Omi is portrayed as a man with a solidly sculptural Greek body, all wild flesh and strength, which aroused the admiration of the narrator. The sensuous display of these two alluring male bodies shows that Mishima has already revealed desire for youthful flesh and energy. In *Forbidden Colors*, Yuichi embodies the Mishima ideal image of male beauty. His appearance and temperament are perfect in the eyes of the old writer Shunsuke:

a surprisingly beautiful man, said to be like the statues of ancient Greece, but he is more like Apollo made by the bronze sculptors of the Peloponnesian school, with a body overflowing with an impatient and gentle beauty. Elegant temperament, straight neck, dainty shoulders, smooth and broad chest, rounded arms with delicate atmosphere; slender, clean and lean torso, gathering feet as majestic as swords ... pretty and charming eyebrows, deep with some melancholy eyes, slightly thick with childish lips, the roundness of the shoulders, the chest reveals the immaculate, the delicate of the lips.[11]

This image of a man with youthful vigor and stunning beauty not only attracted women, but even the old writer finally fell in love with him. In these descriptions, Mishima presents readers with young men through the lens of the sexual gaze, making no secret of the attraction of a healthy, masculine body to himself. The following section explores this interest in the male body in terms of how Mishima appropriated elements of Japanese and classical Greek aesthetics.

3. "Soul" and "Body": The Combination of Traditional Japanese Aesthetics and Greek Aesthetics

As Kato Shuichi said, “The root of today's Japanese culture is fed by both traditional and foreign cultures in a dilemma.” [12] Modern Japanese culture is a hybrid culture that infuses foreign elements with Japanese values. In *Runaway Horse*, Inuma embodies the pure *kamikaze* spirit, which despite being an ideology imposed upon Japanese university students in the final days before the Japanese defeat, presented itself as the timeless spirit of perseverance and sacrifice.[13] In expressing the masculine details of strong and powerful flesh, the writing of Mishima inevitably mixes his particular variation of Japanese aesthetics with a nostalgic desire for the ideals of classic Greek culture. These

two major sources constitute the cultural background of his homosexual writing, emerging precisely from the two paths of soul and body.

The creative consciousness of Mishima is structured by these opposing tendencies:

The complex reality of the major political, economic and cultural transitions that Mishima faced after *World War II* caused his creative consciousness to reflect an antinomic tendency, resulting in two extremely opposite concepts, one of death and stubbornness, the other of healthy life and vitality, which were intricately intertwined, resulting in a cycle of psychological balance and imbalance.[14]

The Japanese aesthetics of aristocratic culture emphasize fragile and fleeting beauty, while Greek aesthetics emphasizes the display of vitality. In Greek art, there is a respect for life and a Spartan openness to a military death, as well as a belief in the indestructibility of beauty. Combined with the influence of the traditional Japanese culture, Mishima the bodybuilder had embraced an emerging view that men should die when they are at the peak of their physical health and beauty. This could be one explanation for why so many of the male characters in his novels die in their best years. No one can prevent the young flesh from aging: “This is a fatalistic defect, because it is closely linked to life. It will soon have to decline as life declines, and die as life dies.”[15] However, Mishima did not compromise in the face of this contradiction because he wanted to “go against the laws of nature”,[16] that is, Mishima gave his male characters youthful vitality and physical beauty which were then taken from those bodies by early death.

The death of male youth is the beauty of extinction that flows throughout several Mishima novels. Mishima was only 24 when *Confessions of a Mask* was published, in which the protagonist Kochan says that “I did not love the princesses. I only love princes. Moreover, I love the princes who are killed, who suffer the fate of death.”[17] This Kochan predilection is also advanced by a story-inside-a-story structure. In one of the fairy tales from Andersen, a prince is drowned, burned to death, stung to death by bees, fatally bitten by snakes, thrown into the abyss covered with knife points, stabbed to death, and stoned to death by a large stone. Kochan enjoys witnessing the resurrection scene after each of the six deaths, experiencing a private kind of pleasure watching the handsome young man die. This male desire for other men is also visible when Kochan is astounded by the unparalleled nakedness of St. Sebastian, and when the marble skin being pierced by lethal arrows, Kochan is not stricken with sadness but is overcome by a surge of unresolved lust.

Mishima was 44 when *Runaway Horses* was published in February 1969 and he committed *seppuku* on November 25 1970. The action of the novel occurs between June 1932 and December 1933 when the protagonist Inuma is a physically strong young man who is skilled in *kendo*. When Inuma was the last one to finish killing the merchant Kurahara Takesuke, his mind reverberated with the scenes of young samurai committing *seppuku* in the *Historical Stories of Kamikaze*. [18] As the sun was rising, Inuma stabbed his blade into his abdomen, killing himself under the sunrise. His youth remained forever in the best years of his twenties.

This series of strong men with youthful physical beauty all died in their prime, their deaths infused with the glory of a beauty that Mishima himself wanted to embody. The analysis of the previous paragraphs shows that Mishima does not want to accept natural aging and decay, but instead he wants to use literature as one way to defy the inevitable law of night following day. By blessing these youthful bodies that he loved with an eternal beauty, Mishima sometimes employs the story-inside-a-story structure device as he presents readers with the extreme spectacle of beauty moving in the direction of its extinction.

Mishima combines his interpretation of certain Japanese aesthetics with classical Greek culture through death, merging the soul that yearns for destruction with the body that thrives on life. In this dynamic tension between the lethal with the vital, Mishima embraces death as one way to achieve eternal physical beauty and spiritual purity, and that creation is one hallmark of Mishima-style male

characters. The following section explores the connection between male worship and misogyny in the context of Mishima's life and experience.

4. Male Worship, Homophobia and Misogyny

In the literature of Mishima, the male protagonists of the stories replace women as the objects of sexual gaze under the traditional patriarchal perspective, making his writing completely "male stories." Although depictions of male sexuality and homosexuality exist in his stories, Mishima himself cannot be said to be a gay supporter. On the contrary, he would even worry about being called a "gay writer." *Forbidden Colors*, which followed *Confessions of a Mask*, was published to great acclaim and made Mishima's reputation as a gay writer unassailable.[19] Although Mishima did not publicly comment on being labelled a gay writer, the fact that he stopped working on gay themes after receiving the description suggests that he was concerned that he would be affected by homophobia. It was not unrealistic to imagine that such a limited description of his writing would have a negative impact on his writing career, especially after his 1949 *Confessions of a Mask* was shelved for several years before being published in the United States in 1958 because it dealt with homosexuality.[20] In this case, Mishima regretted that although "Japanese society is very tolerant of this kind of homosexuality during puberty ... in Europe and America, this kind of thing is rejected as perversion." [21]

It may be too arbitrary to bluntly say that Mishima is homophobic, but from the perspective that he does not accept his femininity, it may serve as a useful basis to examine his work. Mishima was dissatisfied with his weak and thin appearance and after his first trip around the world, he actively worked out, transforming his body closer to the ideal of the Greek sculptures that appeared in his fiction. Mishima was also deeply influenced by the notion of juvenile love found in classical Greek culture.

Juvenile love in Greece existed between beautiful underage boys and older aristocratic men. In this situation, the teenager often functions as the "other" because of his low status, which is similar to the status of the female in the misogynistic world of male heterosexuality. Due to gender differences, when women act as sexual objects for heterosexual men, it is described in the language of being "penetrated" and "gotten." Heterosexual men emphasize their superior subject position to women by excluding women from positions of social power, widening the gap between subject and object. To be penetrated, to be given, to be a sexual object, all of these expressions can be considered as identifying a feminized position, relative to a superior male. Men are afraid of being feminized because it leads to them losing their subject status as superior. In order to maintain the orthodoxy of male heterosexual desire, heterosexual men form a group and collectively attack homosexual men, trying to kick them out of the default-normal heterosexual male group.

This overview of the group-forming impulse is a simple outline of the formation process of homophobia, and is intended to show how male-male sexual desire and being feminized can be equated. It could be argued that such a pairing is a central problem for Mishima as a Japanese man because of the considerable energy he devoted to transforming himself physically away from what he felt was an unacceptably feminine body.

Sedgwick introduced the concept of "male homosocial desire" to describe the motivation and desire for male bonding among male individuals. She argues that unlike the simplicity and consistency of relationships between women, homosociality and homosexuality present a dualistic and radically different dichotomy in men because "homophobia is a necessary part of patriarchal institutions, just like heterosexual marriage." [22] The Japanese scholar, Ueno Chizuko, also further elaborates Sedgwick's theory from the perspective of the local Japanese culture:

The bond of male homosocial desire is the bond between mutually recognized sexual subjects ... In a world made up of subject members, if someone has homosexual desires, he may become a sexual object ... Men's fear of "homosexuality" lurking in their group is a fear that they might be treated as sexual objects and lose their subject status.[23]

The nature of patriarchy is homophobic, but Mishima was very concerned about what patriarchal society thought of him because “what guarantees a man as a man is not a woman of the opposite gender, but a man of the same gender.”[24] Sedgwick also argues that “male homophobia against gays is misogynistic.” [25] In this context, misogyny refers not only to an aversion of female identity but also a devaluing of femininity. From a young age, Mishima feared that he would be ridiculed for his weakness, which reflects his lack of masculinity. When Mishima was born as the eldest son, his grandmother had high expectations for him and wanted him to become a distinguished person. However, his grandmother was overprotective, forbidding him to play with boys in the neighborhood or play outside, so his only friends were the three girls that his grandmother chose for him at a nearby girl’s house. Moreover, Mishima was petite, frail and pale, and was the target of bullying because of his frequent use of female terms. This made Mishima resentful of his own femininity. When Mishima was fifteen years old, he submitted articles to poetry magazines under the pseudonym “青城”, which was derived from his nickname “青白” in elementary school because they have the same pronunciation in Japanese. When he was young, he suffered from *jikachudoku*, with a pale face. So he was teased by his classmates and given the “青白” nickname. When Mishima entered high school, he still remembered the insulting nickname from his childhood, in his pen name, he took the pronunciation of the word “青白” and replaced it with the character “青城”, which is more suggestive of male fortitude and strength. This renaming is not only a kind of artistic processing to increase his masculinity, but also a deconstruction and reconstruction of the original meaning of childhood nickname. The following section will discuss some typical female characters in Mishima novels under the influence of male worship and misogyny.

5. Characteristics of Female Characters Created by Mishima

During Mishima’s growth process, the absence of male characters, such as his father, allowed the female side of Mishima’s inner world to develop, and the extreme desire of his grandmother to control him made him fearful of women. Mishima was born into a famous samurai family. His grandmother hated his grandfather for his infidelity and scorned him. As a prop for the revenge of his grandmother, shortly after his birth, young Mishima was taken away from his mother and raised by his grandmother until he was 11 years old. Growing up in such an environment and surrounded by women every day, Mishima developed the aspect of his latent feminine psychology. At the same time, he also creates a misogynistic mentality. The influence of his grandmother on Mishima can be seen in some of the characters portrayed in his works. The most obvious one is Kiyooki’s grandmother in *Spring Snow*, in which she assumes a positive image of uniting with Kiyooki, supporting the romance of Kiyooki and Satoko, and hating her disloyal husband. It’s overlapping with Mishima’s grandmother. Meanwhile, in *Running Horse*, the grandmother, who seems to love Kiyooki dearly, is preoccupied with whether she will recover the money she has lent out when she is about to die. This in turn makes the figure of the grandmother cold and stingy.

In *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, the elderly female characters directly embody ugliness. From the male perspective, old and ugliness are amongst the most unattractive aspects of women. Therefore, women with these two traits, regardless of their inner world or spiritual beliefs, will be scorned and abused by men in a male-dominated society. It is in this way that the elderly female characters become a negative image in the novel. In this regard, this negative evaluation of women is not only a microcosm of the characteristics of women in Mishima’s works, but also a microcosm of the patriarchal ideology that pervaded Japanese society at the time. The value of women often depended not on women themselves, but on male preferences.

Male expectations of women are mainly based on their own subject position to find a woman who will not threaten their position. In an interview, Mishima mentioned that his ideal woman was an “obedient wife and good mother.”[26] The most important function of a woman for a man is to protect his self-esteem, to be submissive and never to hurt his pride. In other words, women are somehow

objectified and transformed by their subordination to men. Therefore, men “otherize” women, put them into the category of “other” that they can control, and even use the rules of domination to separate “saint” and “prostitute” from their definition of women. In Mishima’s novels, there are the “saint” characters, such as Satoko in *Spring Snow* and Hatsue in *The Sound of Waves*. Such characters often played the role of wives and held up the good expectations of Mishima, or men of that time, for women. In *Spring Snow*, Satoko is not only a noble lady with good moral character and bright appearance, but also able to behave appropriately in front of foreign princes. This is a stereotypical aesthetic under the influence of Confucian philosophy, which requires the three obediences and the four virtues from women.

In *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Mishima portrays four female characters: Uiko, a mother, the wife of an army officer, and a prostitute. The main character, Mizoguchi, sees Kinkakuji as the ultimate expression of beauty and he considers Uiko to be the ideal woman. When she first appeared, she assumed the image of a saint, but when Uiko told his uncle of Mizoguchi about his obsession with her, the illusion of her being a saint in Mizoguchi’s mind was shattered, and he began to curse her death. Later, Uiko fell in love with a deserter. Forced by the gendarmerie, she revealed her lover and was shot dead. After Uiko’s death, in Mizoguchi’s life, whenever he met a woman who matched the beauty of Uiko, such as the wife of an army officer, Mizoguchi would regard her as a Uiko. When Mizoguchi found her indulging in carnal relations with various men out of loneliness, the saint had become a prostitute. If such a saint and prostitute could exist in the same character, those characters do not change from prostitutes to saints, but instead fall from being saints and become prostitutes. If this shift occurs, the character often suffers a tragic demise.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the connection between Mishima Yukio’s depiction of male homosexuality and misogyny. It opened by surveying what factors influenced the portrayal of homosexuality by Mishima. Representations of male sexual desire in the fiction of Mishima fluctuate during his career in terms of how explicit the homosexuality of his characters appeared to his readers. Some of the male characters combine the traditional Japanese *bushido* aesthetics with Greek classicism, revealing the distinctive characteristics of Mishima’s philosophy of male beauty. On the other hand, male worship and misogyny make female characters more under-appreciated and highly similar. Reflected in the specific female characters, the most important feature is that the female characters are divided into two categories, namely, saints and prostitutes.

The homosexuality depiction of Mishima is the product of a multicultural mix, rooted not only in the Japanese tradition of male sexuality but also influenced by Greek culture. At the same time, due to his family and society background, Mishima did not create independent female characters with a rich spiritual world. As for patriarchy, Mishima has both compromise and dependence, as well as rebellion and criticism. However, due to the constraints of objective conditions, his rebellion is doomed to be incomplete.

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