

**CRISIS OF IDENTITY AND EXISTENCE IN POSTWAR JAPAN:
A STUDY OF SELECT WORKS OF OSAMU DAZAI AND
YUKIO MISHIMA**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
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PHILOSOPHY**

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STUDY OF SELECT WORKS OF OSAMU DAZAI AND YUKIO
MISHIMA

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Submitted

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “Crisis of Identity and Existence in Postwar Japan: A Study of Select Works of Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima” is the bonafide research conducted by P.C. Lalrinmuani under my supervision. P.C. Lalrinmuani worked methodically for her thesis being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Culture Studies, Mizoram University. This is to further certify that she had fulfilled all the required norms laid down under the Ph.D. regulations of Mizoram University. Neither the thesis as a whole or any part of it was ever submitted to any other University.

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DECLARATION
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May 2025

I, **P.C. LALRINMUANI**, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to do the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

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CHAPTER ONE

Voices from Japan: Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima

Literature in 20th century Japan was shaped by various influential figures, amongst whom Osamu Dazai (1909-1948) and Yukio Mishima (1925-1970) have earned their rightful places. Both of them are indeed remarkable authors whose works continue to resonate with both Japanese and international readers to this day. Emerging from the historical and cultural upheavals that characterized postwar¹ Japan, they have gone on to become leading figures in modern Japanese literature. They are considered to be postwar manifestations of “the genuinely alienated writer” and the “human symbol of despair”, “the shadow lurking behind the optimism of postwar reconstruction” (Wolfe 12). Besides their artistic talent and excellence as fictional writers, the line between reality and fiction is sometimes fairly thin in their novels; hence, much of the interest and allure around them are supplemented and sometimes even overshadowed by their highly tragic, dramatic, and unusual lives, which find a parallel with the characters in their stories.

Japan's defeat in World War II led to massive changes as the nation found itself in a period of major upheaval and disorder in the society, economy, politics, and culture. As Japan struggles with the destruction caused by the war, the atomic bombings, and Allied occupation, postwar authors like Dazai and Mishima started to examine ideas of self, alienation, and the quest for purpose and meaning in a world that appears to have changed forever. Despite their differing and often clashing views on life, literature and writing, they share recurring themes of identity, feeling cut off from cultural roots, and what it means to be human in postwar Japan. Their literary works, albeit being products of the same era, vary in tone, style, personal ideologies and philosophical outlook, thereby gifting readers ample sources for analyzing two differing responses to the same cultural and historical realities.

Context:

¹ Postwar is a term used to describe the period following the end of a war, especially World War II (1939-45) as per definitions from Collins and Merriam-Webster dictionaries.

Osamu Dazai was born as Tsushima Shuji in 1909 into a wealthy landowning family in the Tsugaru region of northern Japan. He took on ‘Osamu Dazai’ as his pseudonym in 1933. He has an almost cult-like following in Japan till today and his most popular novels, such as *The Setting Sun* (1947) and *No Longer Human* (1948), are considered modern-day classics and have been translated into several foreign languages. His father’s wealthy status provided him with privileges and advantages in society, but they were also a source of many of Dazai’s future woes and distress. It was during the years he went away to high school and college that his private world as well as Japan went through significant changes. The influence of the 1917 Russian Revolution was felt even by Dazai and the educated young people of his generation; by the late 1920s, they concerned themselves with the issues of class conflict in Japan (Lyons 2). It was “the contradiction of his own position – a wealthy child of what Marxists called the exploitative class, a sympathizer with at least the rhetoric of the exploited class” (3), and other personal miseries that led to his first suicide attempt in 1929. This was the onset of the decade long chaos prevailing in his life.

He studied French literature in a Tokyo university but never graduated; after yet another failed attempted suicide with a woman, he was cut off by his family for marrying a geisha² and for his involvement with the leftist Communist movement in the early 1930s. This was ensued by another suicide attempt, a year of narcotics addiction, a failed suicide attempt with his geisha wife, divorce and emotional exhaustion (Lyons 2). In the midst of it all, he attempted to fulfil his wish of becoming a writer and recorded the catastrophes of his life through his writings. There was a sense of coherence in his life during the war years from 1940 to 1946 as he married again and had three children. He became more well-known as a writer through his fairy tales and his own versions of seventeenth-century stories. He returned to Tsugaru to seek out the significance of his provincial origins. However, his life after the war “mirrored Japan’s state of prostration as it began once again to disintegrate, and his stories reflected the public and private despair” (3). He partially took advantage of his

² Geisha is the Japanese term for a ‘woman of art’ trained to provide entertainment and light-hearted company especially for men (Dalby xiv).

extramarital affair with another woman to write *The Setting Sun*. He involved himself with yet another woman, and became increasingly weary from his ill health, alcoholism, and burdens from life. It was with this very woman that he committed suicide in 1948 after completing *No Longer Human*, a novel that illustrates man's failure to find purpose in life. Right till the end, "his stories chronicled the disasters, and frail successes, of his life" (4).

Osamu Dazai was among the earliest Japanese authors whose works got translated after the war. This is because in his postwar career, his novels mirror the condition of the defeated Japan. Some of his works have attained the status of classics; his life and his legend, much of it reflected by Dazai himself in his narratives, is a topic of general and critical interest (Lyons vii). His most famous novels, *The Setting Sun* and *No Longer Human* were translated into English in the mid-1950's, providing readers with some of the earliest literary views of a conflicted and occupied country. Osamu Dazai struggled with his writing, his personal relationships and with the changing postwar society for most of his life. He was well on his way to self-annihilation through alcoholism, drug addiction and self-destructive behaviours long before the surrender (Dower 32). Through his stories, he portrayed the individual's strange, pervasive sense of alienation and despair and the quest for an authentic self in a modern society where he struggles to conform. Alan Wolfe, a critic of Japanese literature, states:

Dazai's personal demons, however, came to seem emblematic of the confusion and demoralization of the postwar years.... No other work captured the despondency and dreams of the times so poignantly. Whatever he may have lacked, Dazai was not lacking in a self-pity that resonated strongly with the deep strain of victim consciousness then pervading society. (158)

Dazai's novels unveil the universal feelings of loneliness and defeat and the quantity of translated stories that have appeared since Japan's defeat, also mostly from Dazai's postwar narratives, contributes to reinforcing the idea of Dazai as the poet of despair. Dazai was eventually defeated by the harshness of life, and some parts of his life were in fact troubling enough to be called decadent. However, his works have other

qualities that provide him with not merely readers, but fans decades after his suicide. At his best, Dazai was an excellent writer, and it is “the way he told the story that holds the audience” (Lyons 3). Dazai created a unified narrative out of “the confused and accidental events of his life and presented it as the life struggles of a strongly engaging character we can call ‘Osamu’” (4) and it is Osamu, the literary incarnation of the writer, that captivates the reader. Osamu does terrible things and terrible things happen to him, but the readers come to care about what happens because Dazai’s skill as a writer makes possible the readers’ involvement with his stories. He put his reality and art together in “such a creative blend that fictionality itself is at question” (Keene 1023).

Although he encapsulates the atmosphere of defeat in the aftermath of World War II in his postwar writings, his literary voice speaks to not just one specific historical generation and it is due to this that his fame and popularity persist in Japan. He writes about “real people (literally, often with their real names) trying to understand how they fit into the world loving each other and yet often hurting each other” (Lyons iii). What Japanese readers respond to is the timelessness of Dazai’s stories, which speaks to the situation of each individual as he attempts to find his way in his own time and place (Keene 997). Dazai may be an autobiographical writer who writes about his own thoughts and problems. But this is carried out, according to Phyllis I. Lyons in *The Saga of Dazai Osamu*, in a way that allows the reader:

to become actively involved in the process of following the most private of experiences, so that the process becomes in effect an investigation of the reader’s life as well; and he does this often enough with a redeeming touch of humour – ironic, sad, bemused, and sharp, but humour nonetheless. Japanese readers feel that, whether he is writing of the 1920’s, 1930’s, or 1940’s, he is speaking of their lives; Western readers as well are invited into his stories to feel what it is to be Japanese. (2)

For the Japanese, after Japan’s excessive militarism and World War II defeat, *The Setting Sun* provided in “its title alone a metaphor for their defeat, and the phrase entered into the popular vocabulary” and *No Longer Human*, the story of an alienated

man who is unable to understand the feelings of others, “domesticated that image to show the defeat of an individual removed from the large historical stage” (Lyons 1). Dazai was a stranger in his own land, an outsider in his family, and an alien whose involvement with the central culture was always self-conscious and difficult. These made his writing, while classically Japanese, open and relatable to all readers (2). In 1968, a survey conducted among Japanese students by one of Japan’s premier newspapers, the *Asahi Shimbun*, showed that students at four major Japanese universities placed Dazai’s novel *No Longer Human* ninth on the list of books that had most influenced them, in company with Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, Camus’ *The Stranger*, and Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (Keene 1022).

Yukio Mishima had an undeniable presence in Japanese art and media as a novelist as well as a playwright, critic, actor, model, body builder, Samurai and nationalist. He was considered for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1968, though he did not win. He was born in Tokyo on January 4, 1925 as Kimitake Hiraoka. He adopted his penname ‘Yukio Mishima’ at the age of sixteen. His father, a government official, was the son of a governor-general who resigned his post because of the misdemeanor of a subordinate. He had Samurai ancestry as his grandmother’s family belonged to a samurai class. He was raised by his grandmother, a cultured but erratic and tyrannical woman with a tendency toward hysteria who insisted that he live in her room and forbade him to play with other boys (Keene 1169). As a weak and feeble boy, he was sent to The Peers School, perhaps at his grandmother’s insistence, where a pattern of Spartan education was practiced and the students were more likely to develop into soldiers than into poets. His early story from 1946 “The Cigarette” and the 1954 poem “The Boy who Wrote Poetry” are autobiographical accounts of his experience as a misfit from a literary club in a school devoted to healthy, outdoor sports. The grandmother was often blamed for his “deviation from wholesome adolescence and ultimately for his suicide” as well as “his precocious literary tastes” and “his interest in the theater” (1168).

Mishima published *Confessions of a Mask*, his most self-revelatory work, in 1949 that launched his literary career and established his reputation as a critically

acclaimed writer. For the next two decades, Mishima had a formidable presence in Japan's cultural scene and he published work in almost every genre. Mishima was "unashamedly a "celebrity" intellectual, an indefatigable self-promoter, socialite, and public speaker" whose eccentric non-literary antics frequently made people call him a "sensationalist, a contrarian, an irrationalist, an egomaniac, a fake, a nihilist, a genius, a fascist, a madman" (Rankin 2). He was fascinated by the unselfish idealism of men who gladly laid down their lives for the emperor. For Mishima, the emperor was "the abstract essence of Japan itself, and only incidentally related to any particular emperor, including the present one" (Keene 1182). By the mid-1960s, he publicly expressed views that were interpreted by some as fascistic or ultra-nationalistic, though he often seemed to say no more than that "Japan's unique traditions must be preserved" (1203).

He created a civilian militia of one hundred volunteers named the Tatenokai dedicated to defend the emperor, whom "they revered as the supreme symbol of Japan's enduring cultural unity" (Rankin 3). After a failed coup d'état of the Tatenokai, he committed seppuku, a ritual suicide, at the age of forty five on 25 November, 1970. His sensational death shocked the literary world and it brought him the attention of people all over the world, including those without a prior interest in Japanese literature. The actions of the last moments of his life created widespread concern as to "a possible revival of Japanese militarism", and some commentators even in Japan suggested that "Mishima's flamboyant gestures, culminating in a ritual seppuku, were the first signs of a resurgence of the ultra-nationalism of the 1930s" (Keene 1167). For reasons he did not reveal, Mishima had chosen November 25, 1970, as the date of his death and he had inscribed this date on the last page of the manuscript of *The Decay of the Angel* (1971), whose final section he had completed three months earlier. The manner of suicide also mattered greatly to him. He did not wish to die a "stupid" death and instead went through the elaborate ritual of a "death of remonstrance", beginning with the formal photograph of himself and his companions "taken in an old-fashioned studio, and ending with the farewell poems to be found after his death" (Keene 1216). Throughout his career, Mishima was in the pursuit of a "fiercely eroticized vision of violent death", and after repeatedly writing "his own

death sentence in art”, he finally carried it out in reality thereby seemingly accomplishing a perfect unity of artist and work (Rankin 3).

Mishima had a love of language that persisted throughout his life, evidenced by his unusually rich vocabulary. He was one of the rare writers of his generation who refused to adopt the simplified orthography introduced after the war; he constantly expressed irritation with authors who did not use words properly. Unlike most of the postwar writers who insisted on the break between themselves and pre-Meiji literature, he read the classics for pleasure and for inspiration (Keene 1174). However, his devotion to Japanese tradition was combined with a strong attachment to the West. When Japan was on the brink of war with Britain and America and the literature of these countries was frowned upon by those in power, Mishima continued to read the translated works of Oscar Wilde and other Western writers who had been condemned as decadents (1173). The depth of his commitment to art is suggested by the fact that he went on writing in 1946 without touching on the war, the postwar chaos or any other subject related to the life around him (1177-78).

The conflicting attractions of Japanese and Western traditions can be seen in Mishima, whose influences range from Wilde, Radiguet, Mauriac, Mann, and Dostoevsky to the Japanese classics, and who ultimately decided to die as a samurai (Keene 1190). More than any other writer of his time, he had combined knowledge of both the traditional Japanese literature and the entire range of Western literature. Even before his suicide, he was the Japanese writer best known to people abroad due to the many translations of his writings, articles about him by foreign critics and journalists, and even television programs. The Japan he loved was “an abstraction”; the West he loved was “what made up his daily life – the house he lived in, the clothes he wore, the food he ate, the majority of the books he read” (1212). He expressed disgust and condescension toward Japan’s increasingly consumerist culture industry, yet he took every opportunity the industry offered him, from participating enthusiastically in musicals and gangster movies to photo shoots, boxing matches and much else. His “traditionalism, his veneration of the imperial throne, and his worship of cultural purity, strength, and manliness were continually offset by his cosmopolitanism and by

his irreverent and campy exhibitionism” (Rankin 2). He resembled an awkward hybrid reflective of the postwar individual because each aspect of his persona seemed to be contradicted by another.

Throughout his life, Mishima was tormented by the elusiveness of his own existence and identity. His stories are a portrayal of his struggles with his own identity and the entwined evolution of his internal and external lives. Most of Mishima’s core attitudes can be summed up as a “willful contrariness, a refusal to empathize, a narcissistic concentration on the self, a substitution of ethical categories with aesthetic ones, an equation of beauty and evil, a conception of artistic creation as an antisocial activity” and exaltation of death (Rankin 1-2). Themes such as violence, alienation, sexuality, death, beauty and destruction are recurring throughout his works. The critic Andrew Rankin states:

In Mishima’s furious sensationalization of his identity crisis, in his search for authenticity and relatedness, in his restless vacillations between East and West, in his violence and his melodrama, and even in his emptiness, many Japanese have recognized reflections of national anxieties that remain unresolved. (9)

Critical Tradition and Reception of Dazai and Mishima:

Critical interpretations of Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima have shifted significantly over time, reflecting broader transformations and developments in postwar Japanese literary studies. The dominant early critical interpretation tended to approach Dazai and Mishima through a biographical framework and moralized the authors, reading their works as direct expressions of personal mindset and lived experience. The early reception of both writers was also deeply tied to the moral and psychological climate of postwar Japan, where Dazai was associated with the dissolution of the self, while Mishima was associated with its active construction and control.

Critics of Dazai emphasized his self-destructive tendencies and emotional despair shaped by the immediate postwar climate of cultural disorientation. They

frequently blurred the line between author and protagonist, interpreting works such as *No Longer Human* and *The Setting Sun* as direct reflections of his personal collapse. Phyllis I. Lyons, in *The Saga of Dazai Osamu* (1985), noted how Dazai intentionally crafted a literary persona that invited an interpretative merging of his life with his narrators, shaping his reception as the emblematic voice of postwar disillusionment and collective trauma (16). By contrast, Mishima was initially received as a writer of aesthetic refinement and cultural continuity. His works were taken as reflections of his aesthetic discipline, his refined classical style and ideological worldview amid postwar cultural disorientation. Donald Keene, in *Dawn to the West* (1984), described Mishima as a writer who brought formal elegance to a destabilized literary scene and placed him within a lineage of modernist stylists concerned with beauty, form, and the idealization of selfhood (1169).

As Japanese literary scholarship expanded in scope, there are other critics and scholars who expanded beyond the biographical framework and re-evaluated both authors through formal, structural, and ideological lenses. This shift encouraged readings that treat their works not as transparent autobiographical accounts, but as crafted narratives that confront the instability of identity in a rapidly transforming society. Dazai's narrative voice was understood as a strategic performance rather than pure confession, revealing the self as something fragmented, contradictory, and mediated. For Dazai, scholars moved beyond the "confessional" label and examined his complex negotiation between sincerity and performance. Okuno Takeo, in *Dazai Osamu Ron* (1972), argued that Dazai's narrative self is deliberately performative rather than transparently autobiographical (198). He contended that Dazai constructs a literary persona that is aware of itself as representation, thereby turning confession into a stylistic and cultural performance. Tomi Suzuki, in *Narrating the Self: Fictions of Japanese Modernity* (1996), reconsidered Dazai's work by examining how the confessional I-novel tradition constructs the illusion of sincerity and personal revelation (186). She argued that Dazai's prose repeatedly draws attention to the act of narration itself, revealing the "self" not as the inner true self, but as something actively produced through language, genre, and reader expectation.

Mishima's works were analyzed for their symbolic treatment of the body, desire, and nationhood. Identity in his writing came to be seen as something staged and aestheticized rather than inherited or stable. Critics examined his obsession with the body, masculinity, and the nation as symbolic attempts to reconcile Japan's traditional ethos with modern alienation. Mamoru Iga's psychological study titled "Psychological Factors in the Suicide of Yukio Mishima" (1973) examined the ideological and psychological dimensions of self-fashioning and reconsidered Mishima's public persona and literary production as intertwined expressions of a constructed and aestheticized self (262). John Nathan, who knew Mishima personally and professionally, introduced readers to the inseparability of Mishima's art and life in *Mishima: A Biography* (1974) by portraying his literary career, public identity, and ultimately his death as parts of a continuous aesthetic performance (96). He emphasized that Mishima's cultivation of the self through writing, physical discipline, and political actions was not just personal expression, but a deliberate act of crafting identity as art.

Contemporary criticism of Dazai and Mishima continues to engage with questions of subjectivity, performance, gender, trauma, and cultural memory. This broader approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the authors' engagements with the crisis of the modern self that characterized postwar Japan. Dazai's narratives have been revisited through trauma theory, identity politics, and modernity studies, with scholars examining his protagonists as figures negotiating alienation in a rapidly modernizing society. Feminist and cultural critics have also questioned the treatment of women in his works and how his female characters articulate postwar vulnerability. Douglas Slaymaker's *The Body in Postwar Japanese Fiction* (2004) applies theories of gender and embodiment to postwar literature, including Dazai, arguing that the body in his works becomes a site where vulnerability, identity, and emotional exhaustion are inscribed (52). Slaymaker shows how Dazai's characters express psychological fracture not only through voice and narrative stance, but through bodily gestures, deterioration, and affective fatigue, making the body itself a register of postwar selfhood. Alan Stephen Wolfe's *Suicidal Narrative in Modern Japan: The Case of Dazai Osamu* (1990) further examined how Dazai's recurring

representations of suicide function as narrative structures rather than purely autobiographical revelations (138). Wolfe argues that these suicidal motifs shape a literary logic in which the self seeks legitimacy through its own erasure, revealing how Dazai's fiction converts personal despair into a cultural language of postwar identity crisis.

Mishima's writings and public persona are discussed in relation to performance, embodiment, posthumanism and queer identity, where the self is crafted through external forms such as gesture, discipline, and aesthetic will. His performances and public persona are now studied as extensions of his art, blurring life and literature in ways that anticipate postmodern self-fashioning. His representation of beauty and violence is read less as political ideology and more as an aesthetic strategy for dealing with loss and desire in postwar Japan. Roy Starrs, in *Deadly Dialectics: Sex, Violence, and Nihilism in the World of Yukio Mishima* (1994), reads Mishima's recurring themes of eroticism, violence, and self-annihilation as evidence of a self that is forged through the deliberate confrontation with nihilism, where beauty and destruction become mutually sustaining forces (89). Andrew Rankin's *Mishima, Aesthetic Terrorist* (2018) extends this view by examining how Mishima's writing, political gestures, physical cultivation, and public performances were consciously orchestrated acts of self-stylization, revealing identity not as innate essence but as a consciously constructed aesthetic project (148).

Research Gap and Rationale:

Although both Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima have been widely studied, the comparative dimension of their work remains underdeveloped. Existing scholarship frequently treats the two authors as symbolic opposites, contrasting Dazai as the voice of postwar dissolution and emotional collapse and Mishima as the writer of self-assertion and aesthetic discipline. This binary framework obscures the extent to which both writers were responding to the same historical moment in which traditional notions of identity were destabilized by Japan's wartime defeat, occupation, and rapid modernization. Their works articulate different responses to a shared cultural and existential crisis of meaning, belonging, and self-definition.

Despite this shared context, scholarship has tended to examine Dazai and Mishima separately or to contrast them primarily in psychological or ideological terms. While earlier scholarship has offered important analyses of identity formation in each writer's work, few studies consider how their differing representations of the self respond to the same historical conditions. The modern Japanese self, as their writings demonstrate, is not stable or inherent but negotiated, constructed, performed, fragmented, and continually reimagined in response to cultural upheaval. This gap in comparative scholarship limits our understanding of how postwar literature grappled with the crisis of subjectivity.

This study addresses that gap by undertaking a comparative and theoretically informed reading of Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima, analyzing how both negotiate the tension between individual despair and collective identity in the aftermath of Japan's defeat and allow a more nuanced understanding of how personal crisis intersects with broader cultural trauma. It examines how Dazai's narratives trace the dissolution and disintegration of the self under the weight of emotional alienation and social displacement, while Mishima's works explore the deliberate reconstruction of identity through aesthetic will, discipline, and performance. Reading the two authors together reveals not opposition but variation within a shared experience that shapes human existence and meaning in times of cultural dislocation in postwar Japanese literature.

Therefore, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of identity and subjectivity in postwar Japanese literature. By examining the authors within the broader cultural discourse of modernity and self-representation, this thesis illuminates how personal crisis intersects with collective trauma and national transformation. It demonstrates that Dazai and Mishima, despite their ideological and stylistic differences, respond to the same cultural moment and engage with common questions of alienation, meaning, and negotiation of the crisis of the modern self. In doing so, the study expands the critical conversation on postwar existential literature and offers a more nuanced framework for understanding the formation and negotiation of the modern Japanese self.

Significance of the Study:

The subject matters of Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima encapsulate the moral ambiguity and existential concerns of the postwar era through their exposé of the human condition and the meaning of existence. As Japan struggles with the destruction caused by World War II, the atomic bombings, and the American occupation, the two writers started to examine ideas of self, alienation³, and the quest for purpose and meaning in a world that appears to have changed forever. The individual and the society are found to be at odds with each other in their narratives, where issues relating to identity, existence⁴ and the impact of Japan's encounter with the West in the postwar climate persist. Deprived or freed of paternalistic and imperialist patterns and led into a new society of freedom and democracy, the individual does not realize his true identity or purpose. The material aspects of social existence do not answer the deeper self that battles uncertainty and inner conflict.

Underneath their morbidity and dark tonality, the selected narratives highlight the shifting norms of a world traumatically thrown into a state of confusion and rapid Westernization and yet haunted by its traditional past. In the postwar era of reconstructing Japan into a cultured nation, there was an attempt to “sanitize culture” by repressing its “dangerous and subversive elements” (Rankin 123). However, Dazai and Mishima subversively bring to the forefront the dark, immoral and undesirable parts of human nature and life itself by featuring in their narratives dissolute and often perverted protagonists “outside proper society” (Dower 61) who subvert traditional and conventional norms regarding identity and way of life. These abnormal, improper anti-heroes are put up against normal, proper characters who seemingly constitute the ordinary, homogeneous Japanese identity.

³ This study uses the term ‘alienation’ within the context of Japanese society where it refers to a feeling of disconnect or isolation from social norms, values and expectations, social withdrawal, a sense of not belonging or feeling estranged from society (Tamaki 10).

⁴ Existence is used in this study to refer to the fact of being, in contrast to non-existence, and the individual, subjective experience of being present in the world as put forth in Existentialism (Scholar's input).

There is a pervasive alienation central to Dazai and Mishima's characters in their experience of the world which places them in a permanent state of despair and unbelonging. Some characters succumb to despair through excessive self-indulgence in alcohol, drugs or women, while some tacitly defy the social and moral conventions by living in direct opposition to them. These can be interpreted either as an attempt to ward off, even just momentarily, the existential concerns looming over them, or an attempt to relearn how to navigate their lives in the absence of familiar structures of authority and morality. In their quest for identity and meanings for their life and existence, the characters are confronted with the tragic elements in human existence that birthed feelings of alienation, angst, despair, uncertainty and identity crisis. Dazai and Mishima's works are therefore literary narratives that "document the failure of the individual to adapt to "modern" society" (Wolfe 16).

Many of the writers from the same era had explored themes similar to Dazai and Mishima. Kawabata Yasunari (1899–1972) was the first Japanese writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1968. His most popular works include *Snow Country* (1947) and *Thousand Cranes* (1952) and remains an influential figure in modern Japanese literature. A sense of loneliness and loss permeate his literary works because he was orphaned at an early age. He fused classical Japanese aesthetics with modern existential concerns, and it was his poetic prose that introduced Japanese literature to a global audience (Lau 44). His themes range from the fleeting nature of beauty, alienation, eroticism, death, and traditional aesthetics. Shohei Ooka (1909–1988) was a Japanese author and war veteran best known for his brutally honest depictions of World War II. His most popular novels include *Fires on the Plain* (1951) and *Taken Captive* (1952). Captured in the Philippines during the war, his literary works were influenced by his personal experience of being captured in the Philippines during the war as well as Catholic thought and Western literature. He mainly delved into themes such as war trauma, moral ambiguity, guilt, and spiritual warfare (McKay 10). Ooka provided one of the most visceral and morally complex chronicles of Japan's war experience and remains influential in modern day discussions of war and ethics.

Shusaku Endo (1923–1996) is a devout Catholic author in a largely non-Christian Japan. His most popular works are *Silence* (1966) and *The Sea and Poison* (1958). Having been educated in France, he examined the intersection of faith, cultural crisis and human frailty. He sought to reconcile his religious beliefs with Japanese identity. His themes include faith as well as doubt, forgiveness, moral failure, and the East-West religious conflict. Endo's significance persists due to his introduction of a Christian voice into Japanese literature after the war (Keuss 275). He offered complex moral narratives that challenged Japan's secular and Buddhist traditions that earned him global acclaim. Kobo Abe (1924–1993) was a Japanese writer who was often likened to Franz Kafka for his incorporation of surreal, absurdist and existential themes in Japanese fiction. His most popular works are *The Woman in the Dunes* (1962) and *The Box Man* (1973). Originally dedicated to studying medicine, he pursued literature and theatre and rejected conventional realism. His works frequently feature protagonists who are isolated in absurd or dystopian settings. His themes include identity crisis, alienation, social conformity as well as the dehumanizing force of modernity (Sakaki 372). Abe remains a pivotal figure for the evolution of avant-garde and philosophical literature, impacting experimental writers both in Japan and abroad.

These writers, though well respected and celebrated, lacked popular recognition compared to that of Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima. It is not a matter of their literary quality, but how they did not fully resonate with the emotional core of postwar despair and identity crisis defining much of the immediate postwar psyche. Both Dazai and Mishima lived the crisis they wrote about. Their personal lives were dramatic, tragic, and highly public. Their blurring of the line between art and life makes readers emotionally invested in their work as an extension of authentic postwar suffering (Iga 263). Kawabata, Ooka, Endo and Abe addressed the various human concerns not with the raw personal agony found in Dazai or the tragic theatricality of Mishima, but with an intellectual, aesthetic, or moral detachment. Their works were more introspective and reflective, rather than being raw symbols or representations of a generational malaise. They lacked the sensational or tragic aura that encircled Dazai and Mishima. They remained primarily literary figures, respected by critics, scholars,

and serious readers, but never mythologized. By contrast, Dazai and Mishima became icons in literature, films, and manga (Japanese comic/graphic books), and romanticized as tragic geniuses or doomed rebels. While Kawabata, Ooka, Endo and Abe processed trauma and analyzed despair, Dazai and Mishima were the postwar symptoms and embodiments. This is why they continue to serve as emotional mirrors of postwar despair and alienation.

Many of the available studies and research done on Dazai and Mishima have often focused on the deeply pessimistic, depressing and nihilistic views of the writers. Their sensational and dramatized suicides have also overshadowed and limited the analysis of their literary works to a great extent. This research investigates further aspects and features that have not been fully explored and comprehended. It looks into not merely the philosophical concerns, but the complex nature of identity and existence in the selected narratives and facilitates a deeper insight into Japanese identity and cultural expression in the postwar context. The characters' relationships with others, the world and themselves are analyzed to highlight the individual, cultural and societal concerns prevalent in postwar Japan which literature in its modern form has examined.

Primary Texts:

The primary texts selected for this study are Osamu Dazai's *Otogizoshi: The Fairy Tale Book of Dazai Osamu* (1945) *The Setting Sun* (1947), *No Longer Human* (1948), and Yukio Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), *The Temple of the Golden Pavillion* (1956) and *The Frolic of the Beasts* (1961).

Otogizoshi: The Fairy Tale Book of Dazai Osamu (1945) is a collection of four stories reinterpreted by Osamu Dazai from classic Japanese folk tales. These stories are narrated by a father to his child while hiding in a bomb shelter during the 1945 air raids of Tokyo and Dazai explores a number of themes which will be recurrent in his later works. In this book, Dazai combines folktales with his own personal touch, reflecting his special style of mixing humour with melancholy and existential rumination. The tales included within this collection are "The Stolen Wen", "Urashima Taro", "Click-Clack Mountain" and "The Sparrow Who Lost Her Tongue". Dazai

transformed the old folktales into manifestations of the human condition while retaining their cultural roots, focusing in particular on the fleeting nature of happiness, the complexities within human relationships, as well as the existential anxieties that define his work. Dazai's special talent to give new perspective to old tales with a modern existential lens is truly testified by this book.

“The Stolen Wen” is the story of Oji-san, a man with a largely hideous wen (a minor tumor) on his face who, while traveling through the mountains, encounters a group of ogres called Oni drinking and having a lively celebration. He pleases the Oni with his dance, for which they offer to remove his wen as a reward. Another man with a similar wen whose dance fails to impress the Oni got cursed by having the first man’s wen attached to his face and doubling his burden. The tale emphasizes themes of contentment and the dangers of greed. “Urashima-san” tells the story of Urashima Taro, a refined gentleman who rescues a turtle and is rewarded with a visit to the underwater palace called the Dragon Palace. He meets the beautiful and stoic Princess Oto there and spends what seemingly feels like a few days in bliss. Before he leaves the palace, Princess Oto hands him a jeweled box that should never be opened as a parting gift. Upon returning to land, Urashima finds that centuries have passed, and everything or everyone he knew are long gone. He then opens the box out of sadness and despair, and a cloud of smoke is released that transforms him into an old man. This epitomizes the ephemeral nature of happiness, the inevitability of change, and the result of curiosity.

In the tale of “Click-Clack Mountain”, the tanuki, a mischievous racoon dog, escapes captivity from old man and his wife after much effort and danger. The rabbit, whom the tanuki is in love with, plots for revenge since she has befriended the old man and his wife. She tricks the tanuki by setting his back on fire, deceives him to apply hot pepper paste on his burns and ultimately drowns him in a river using a mud boat. The story is a cautionary tale about betrayal and revenge, expressing the idea that evil acts will be met with fitting punishment. “The Sparrow Who Lost Her Tongue” follows the tale of a kind old man who befriends a sparrow. Furious at the sparrow for eating their rice paste, his greedy wife drives away the sparrow after cutting out its tongue.

The sad old man searches for the sparrow and is eventually led to a palace where the healed sparrow lives in the forest. He is given a small box as the sparrow's parting gift and returns home to find it filled with treasure. The greedy wife, desiring such treasures, goes to the forest in search of the sparrow which leads to her end. The story symbolizes the virtues of kindness and the dangers of greed.

In *The Setting Sun* (1947), Osamu Dazai expresses the hopelessness, confusion and dislocation felt by numerous Japanese individuals after World War II. The novel deals with the decline of aristocracy, the disintegration of traditional values and norms, and the psychological turmoil experienced by many in postwar Japan. Kazuko, a young, divorced daughter of a widowed aristocrat that has fallen into financial ruin, is forced to relocate from Tokyo to a rural village along with her ailing mother and her brother Naoji, a struggling addict, following the death of her father. The move from rich and opulent urban life to rural poverty shows the fall of the old Japanese noble class in the face of modernization and Westernization. Kazuko represents the typical new woman of postwar Japan, one who is independent yet trapped in her circumstances. Her upbringing causes her to struggle in order to adjust to the new realities of the defeated, occupied Japan. Throughout the novel, Kazuko reflects upon her sense of loss and purposelessness; this feeling is also shared by her brother, Naoji, who exemplifies the lost generation of Japanese youth after the war.

Naoji, a soldier, comes back from the war scarred and disillusioned. He turns to drugs and alcohol to cope with his existential crisis. His downward spiral reflects the broader societal collapse. His letters, scattered throughout the novel, as well as his suicide note reveal his chaotic inner world along with his rejection of old values. Kazuko's mother, depicted with dignity and grace even in the face of death, is a symbol for the old aristocratic order; her declining health and eventual death symbolize the passing of the old Japan and the end of the imperial era. Besides narrating a story of personal and familial decline, the novel is an exposé on the disruption of Japanese society in the face of modernization and influences from the West. Dazai uses the characters' struggles to showcase the existential angst throughout postwar Japan, a country that is faced with loss of cultural identity and uncertainty of its future.

No Longer Human (1948) is often regarded as an autobiographical work and Dazai's most celebrated novel. It offers deep insight into themes of alienation, existential despair and identity. The novel is a harrowing reflection of an individual's struggle to find his place in society, and it provides a deep critique on the postwar climate within Japan. Oba Yozo, a detached young man, narrates the story and as he feels deeply isolated from others, he feigns cheerfulness by wearing a "clown" mask to fit into society. The novel, split into three sections, chronicles different stages in Yozo's life from childhood to adulthood, depicting his increasing sense of detachment and inner conflict. From his earliest childhood, Yozo views himself as a misfit who finds difficulty in connecting with other people. He veils his unease and worry with clownish acts, deploying humour and deceit to deal with his sense of otherness. He feels even more isolated despite his attempts to fit in, perceiving himself as inhuman and incapable of true emotional connection.

As he grows older, Yozo grapples with his sense of worthlessness as his life spirals into self-destruction and dissolution through abuse of alcohol, drugs and prostitutes. His relationships with women usually end in complete disappointment due to his internal need for affection and dread of intimacy. Social norms are quite suffocating and incomprehensible to him, yet he is haunted by the distinct fear of being different from others. His inability in conforming to social expectations as well as his self-hatred lead him to repeated suicide attempts and an eventual confinement to a mental institution. Yozo feels inhuman, hopeless, and isolated because he cannot make his inner self align with the external world. The novel is a profound investigation of alienation and the fragility of identity. It also represents the existential crisis felt by an individual divorced from humanity, uncovering darker aspects found within human experience.

Confessions of a Mask (1949) by Yukio Mishima is a novel exploring issues surrounding identity, sexuality, and conflicts between outward appearances and inner realities. This psychologically complex narrative set in postwar Japan is reflective of Mishima's struggles with his identity. The narrator and protagonist of the novel is Kochan, a young man growing up in Japan both before and throughout World War II.

Since an early age, Kochan has the realization that he is different from his peers, specifically in his sexual desires, because he is attracted to men. He is drawn to images of male beauty and violence, which always fascinate as well as terrify him. Kochan's initial sexual awakening occurs at that moment when he becomes sexually captivated by a picture of Saint Sebastian, a Christian martyr who is depicted as a beautiful young man pierced through by arrows. This image comes to symbolize Kochan's latent desires and his deep fascination with suffering and death. Throughout the novel, Kochan struggles with the growing awareness of his homosexuality, which he perceives as unnatural and shameful. This, along with his sadomasochistic fantasies, his fascination with death and fear of societal rejection, compel him to wear a mask in order to disguise his true nature.

This mask allows him to hide behind the facade of normality by pretending to be attracted to a girl named Sonoko and adhering to traditional norms of masculinity. At the same time, the awareness of his deceit creates in him self-loathing and a deep internal conflict, increasingly alienating him from society and himself. His inability to reconcile his outward persona with his inner self intensifies his isolation and strengthens his feelings of despair and dissociation. Mishima uses Kochan's story to reveal broader themes regarding identity and the pressures of conformity. It explores the mental and emotional effects of repressing one's true nature; it is a commentary on the universal experience of hiding one's true self for conforming to society. Its portrayal of the tension between inner needs and social facades reflects the psychological and existential concerns that plagued human lives not just in Japan but worldwide.

The Temple of the Golden Pavilion (1956) is a fictional story based on a true incident that occurred in 1950 where a young monk with mental issues burned down the well-known Kinkaku-ji (Golden Pavilion) in Kyoto. The novel examines themes ranging from beauty and violence to the crippling nature of human desires and obsession. The narrator, a stuttering, physically unattractive young Zen acolyte named Mizoguchi becomes perpetually obsessed with the Golden Pavilion as it symbolizes transcendent beauty. He is filled with feelings of inadequacy and alienation due to his

stutter and difficult relationships with his parents and peers. He finds comfort in the beauty of the Golden Pavilion, which he views as an unattainable beauty that stands in stark contrast with his own perceived ugliness and worthlessness. Instead of bringing him peace, his obsession strengthens the tumultuous conflict within his inner self. His reverence of the temple soon intertwines with a growing sense of resentment and frustration. He truly feels trapped within the expectations of others and the temple's reputation as a lasting symbol for beauty.

Throughout the novel, Mizoguchi's interactions with other characters underscore his deepening internal conflicts. His interactions, such as those with Tsurukawa, a more idealistic fellow acolyte, and with Kashiwagi, a cynical and clubfooted student, reflect several different aspects of his struggle with his desires and perception of beauty. Tsurukawa represents an unattainable purity, while Kashiwagi's cynicism and justified selfishness influence Mizoguchi's descent into complete darkness, culminating in his decision to destroy the Golden Pavilion. He holds the belief that burning the temple can liberate him from its overwhelming power. His act of arson is a symbol for rejection of the oppressive ideal of beauty as well as an assertion of control over his own life. This novel concludes with Mizoguchi's realization that the destruction of the temple has not brought him any liberation, but rather leaves him with a state of existential despair. It is a profound study on the destructive elements of beauty and human nature. Mishima explores themes including obsession, conflict between idealism and reality, and the psychological breakdown from the domination of one's inner life by twisted ideals. The novel acts as a compelling meditation upon the nature of beauty, art, and also the human condition, reflecting Mishima's own preoccupations concerning aesthetics, destruction, and existentialism.

The Frolic of the Beasts (1961) takes inspiration from Noh play, the classical Japanese dance-drama. Set in a village in Japan after World War II, it is a psychological and erotic story that thoroughly examines the destructive consequences of obsession and moral obscurity. This novel explores the darker sides to human nature, like passion, guilt, and revenge, along with the conflicting tie between love and

violence. It tells the tale of a strange love triangle between Koji, a former university student, the charismatic but morally questionable Ippei, and Ippei's mysterious and attractive wife, Yuko, that drive them to a tragic ending. The narrative starts with Koji's release from prison, where he was imprisoned due to a violent crime he committed against Ippei that leaves him handicapped. After his release from jail, Koji is drawn to the coastal town where Ippei and Yuko now reside in and finds himself entangled in toxic dynamics between the couple once again. Ippei, shown as a cruel but magnetic man, continues to have a powerful influence over Koji. To a certain degree, Yuko, who seems to be a victim of her husband's cruelty, bears responsibility for the twisted relationship as she utilizes her beauty and vulnerability to manipulate the two men.

As the story progresses, boundaries of love and hate, loyalty and betrayal, become blurred. The tension arising between the characters escalates to a violent climax, mirroring the primal instincts driving human behaviour. Mishima digs into the psychology of each character, revealing their distinct inner conflicts. He portrays how each individual is trapped by his/her desires and past. Koji's story is one of self-discovery, as he grapples with the particular guilt coming from his past as well as the irresistible pull coming from his darker impulses. The novel's title on its own suggests of a world in which human beings are driven solely by instinctual desires akin to animals, and their capability for both love and brutality. Mishima uses this metaphor to explore the dual nature of human beings along with the thin line between civility and savagery. Throughout its rather dark and bleak narrative, the novel confronts the uncomfortable truths with regard to the nature of love, obsession, power and morality in a world where conventional boundaries happen to be blurred.

Situating Dazai and Mishima within Modern Japanese Literature:

Japanese literature has one of the richest and most diverse literary traditions in the world today. The history of Japanese literature can be traced back as far as the seventh or eighth century A.D (Keene 29), with written works produced by Japanese authors in Japanese or in Chinese classical language in its earliest beginnings when Japan had not yet develop a written language. It has evolved through various periods,

each marked by numerous literary forms and trends as well as distinct cultural, social, and political influences. Throughout most of its history, Japanese literature has been notably influenced by cultural contact with China, India and the West. The already highly developed Chinese writing system was adopted as early as the fifth century by the Japanese to write and read their own language whereas the native Japanese syllabary “Kana” was invented and adopted in the ninth century. Therefore, from the seventh to the nineteenth centuries, Japanese literature was written in two languages, Japanese and Chinese or at least the Japanese version of Chinese (Shuichi 1:6). Writing in literary Chinese had long been a sign of cultural accomplishment much like Latin was for Europe up until the middle of the eighteenth century after which there was a noticeable trend towards more ‘Japanese’ themes and tone that continued well into the nineteenth century (Shuichi 3:30). India also had an influence in Japanese culture and literature through the spread of Buddhism in the 6th and 7th century through the Korean kingdom of Baekje and China. Japan’s reopening of its ports to the West for trading and diplomacy in the nineteenth century ushered in an exposure of the country to Western culture, literature and philosophy through imported books which consequently influenced the development of modern Japanese literature.

The successive importation of Confucianism and Buddhism from its Asian neighbors and Christianity and Western philosophy from the West provided “not only a foreign stimulus to thought, but the techniques and general skills necessary for internal development” for Japanese literature (Shuichi 1:26). The history of Japanese literature is not only long, but displays a wide number of distinctive features in its pattern of development due to the fact that in Japan, one particular form and style being influential in one period is not succeeded or supplanted by a new form in the next period. “The new did not replace the old” but instead “was added to it” and because of this pattern of historical development “in the sense that the old is never lost, there is a considerable unity and continuity in Japanese literary history” (4). It is precisely due to this reason that with each new age, literary forms and aesthetic values become more diverse and multifaceted (5).

The Japanese people have “always disliked leaving the physical world behind them and ascending to the realms of metaphysics” which provides a reason as to why Japanese culture as a whole has maintained “a close contact with the realities of everyday life” (Shuichi 1:2). In Japanese literature and art, rather than dealing with abstract, other-worldly or intellectually satisfying concepts, more emphasis is laid on excelling at the aesthetic refinement of emotions, the ordinary and the concrete. The description of “everyday reality is favored over abstract or fanciful thought, precision of description over prosodic bravura” (Shuichi 3:32). Japanese literature of all periods, be it in the original language or in translation, has an appeal to modern readers and has in turn become more recognized internationally, with two Japanese Nobel laureates in literature, namely Kawabata Yasunari and Kenzaburo Oe. Modern readers can relate to the sentiments and expression of emotions which transcend cultural differences and historical distance. This is largely because Japanese literature is prevailingly subjective, tinged with an emotional rather than intellectual or moralistic tone, and its themes have a universal quality almost unaffected by time and relatable to all (Keene 22).

Modern Japanese Literature is generally divided by Japanese scholars into three or four periods which correspond to the reigns of the emperors Meiji (1868-1912), Taisho (1912-1926) and Showa (since 1926) and those who prefer four periods divide the Showa era into pre-1945 and post-1945 periods (Keene 13). The Meiji period was heralded in by the final demise of the Tokugawa shogunate (military government) in 1868 and the restoration of the Emperor to the supreme position where control of the country was returned to direct imperial rule. After a self-imposed isolation from the world for nearly 200 years, Japan entered a period of intense industrialization up until the late 1920s and of rapid modernization based on western models where western-style education was introduced and social, political and economic reforms aim at “civilization and enlightenment” (Shuichi 3:107-108). It was also a period where Japan began its imperialist expansion in Asia.

However, it cannot be ignored that there were pre-conditions for modernization during the preceding pre-Meiji Japan. Japan’s contact with Europe began with

Portuguese and Dutch ships in the 16th century that as a result, exposed the Japanese people to Christianity and to *Namban bunka*, the science and culture of Portugal and Spain, and *Rangaku*, the study of Dutch science and language introduced during the Tokugawa era (1600-1868) (Numata 235). Foreign influence became acute with the arrival of American Commodore Matthew Perry and his four ships to Japan in 1853 and the subsequent treaty for trade and commerce Japan signed with America under the threat of force, the United Kingdom, Russia and France during the 1850s (Jansen 8). The treaties signaled an end to Japan's centuries old policy of national isolation by opening the ports to foreign vessels that brought foreign presence and goods and determined the course of official westernization in the 1870s (Jansen 8). Debate over foreign policy, negotiated under duress, and mass outrage over perceived concession to the Western powers serve as catalysts for overthrowing the Tokugawa shogunate and the shifting of political power from the feudal military rulers to the Imperial Court, eventually leading to the Meiji Restoration. Thus, the adoption of Western culture during the Meiji period had been long "prepared by the continuous contacts" with "western civilization during the period of national isolation" (Numata 242).

Modern Japanese literature was marked by the emergence of new styles including romanticism, realism, Marxism, naturalism and more. The literary scholar Tsubouchi Shoyo, well read in European fiction and criticism, wrote a critical essay *Shosetsu Shinzui* or *The Essence of the Novel* (1885-1886) where he rejected didacticism as the main purpose of fiction and instead emphasized on its artistic values. *Ukigumo* or *Drifting Cloud* by Futabatei Shimei, a work written in the colloquial language considered to be the first modern Japanese novel, was also produced between 1887 and 1889 (Shuichi 3:116). These two writers are said to introduce realism in Japanese literature. Mori Ogai, one of the most notable writers of modern literature, introduced romanticism in Japan through an anthology of translated poems in 1889 before shifting to historical novels in his later years. His most critically acclaimed modern novels include *The Dancing Girl* (1890) and *The Wild Geese* (1911).

The publication of *The Broken Commandment* in 1906 by Shimazaki Toson and *The Quilt* by Tayama Katai in 1907 spurred the dominance of naturalism in

Japanese fiction up until the early 1900s. Naturalism, a movement initially inspired by the works of the nineteenth century novelist Emile Zola from France and other naturalists from Europe, was quickly adapted to fit a distinctively Japanese characteristic by focusing less on the techniques and more on realism in the author's confessions or in his/her detailed descriptions of human lives. Naturalism partly influenced the "I" novel or Watakushi-shosetsu, an autobiographical literature written in the colloquial that was developed to describe the world from the point of view of the author and depict his real mental states. Natsume Soseki, who is often compared with Mori Ogai, incorporated unusual protagonists such as a cat narrator in his humorous and satirical 1905 novel *I Am a Cat*. His other notable works include the 1906 novel *Botchan* (The Young Master) and *Kokoro* (The Heart) from 1914.

Writers who were opposed to naturalism, such as Kafu Nagai, Junichiro Tanizaki, Kotaro Takamura and others, turned to Neo-romanticism in the early 1910s. A literary magazine *Shirakaba* (White Birch) was founded in 1910 by Saneatsu Mushanokoji, Nagoya Shiga and others who turned away from Naturalism towards Humanism (Keene 160). Naoya Shiga followed an autobiographical style that depicted states of his mind and is sometimes classified as "I Novel" in this sense. Ryunosuke Akutagawa, another critically acclaimed writer, wrote short stories including *Rashomon* (1915) and initially reworked existing tales before turning eventually to writing about himself in a harrowing manner. Idolized by Osamu Dazai, he was highly praised by Natsume Soseki and is said to represent Neo-realism in the mid-1910s.

The proletarian literature gained prominence in the literary world in the late 1920s Japan and aimed at using literature as the means to bring about revolution and reform in the society. However, the governmental repression that began in 1928 eventually destroyed it and this was followed by the publication of "conversion" novels by writers compelled to renounce their communist ideals. Though only a few writings produced by the proletarian movement have literary significance, the concern for the lower sections of society who had formerly been neglected by Japanese writers gave these works their special characteristics (Keene 202). During the 1930s, literary

production was largely inhibited due to the aggressive wars waged by the Japanese militarists. Censorship became increasingly rigid especially during the war years (1941-1945). The writers were expected to promote propagandas or the war effort, and some were sent to the frontline to produce patriotic war stories that will boost the morale of the Japanese public.

War-time Japan is often regarded as the period that produced some of the finest literary works in the modern period as several authors best known for the beauty of their language and their tales of love and sensuality emerged. Among these is Kawabata Yasunari, Japan's first winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature and a master of psychological fiction. The Neosensualists school, made up of writers such as Kawabata Yasunari and Yokomitsu Riichi among others, advocated that the function of literature was to be artistic and not serve as a propaganda. While there were writers who engaged in the dangerous endeavor of opposing and denouncing the war through their writings, there were also patriotic works of the war years that glorified the war and promote propagandas or the war effort (Shuichi 3:261). Many writers even went through the bitter experience of fighting in the war as soldiers. Both Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima were also summoned to be soldiers by the military at which they failed the physical examination; they also claimed to face rejection for the publication of some of their works by the censorship board (Keene 1024, 1169).

Japan's defeat in World War II in 1945 followed by the Allied Occupation (1945-1952) had a profound impact on Japan and modern Japanese literature. The defeat incited an "abandonment of purpose" (Dower 104) that brought forth feelings of despair, disorientation and identity crisis as the people grappled with the trauma of war, the atomic bombings and the occupation by Allied forces. It is under these circumstances that the postwar literati, both the older generation and the new writers, started to publish their works immediately within two or three years after the defeat. Generally, these writers were "those who had been educated before or during the war years" (Oe 364); and since translated works from the West had appeared in Japan since the Meiji period, they had exposure to ideas from Western philosophical/religious traditions. With a keen sense of disillusionment, pessimism, confusion and angst, the

postwar writers reassessed the meaning of identity and what it means to be Japanese in a shattered world. As a result of their particular postwar milieu, this period witnessed the rise of existential themes as many writers like Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima, reflected on themes that appear existential or that intentionally take up existential ideas in their writings. Dazai and Mishima were already active and had started to produce literary works in the pre-war years; however, it was during the postwar years that they made critically acclaimed works that gained them both national and international recognition as among Japan's most influential authors. They raised new questions about “the meaning of subjectivity, nation, and nationalism and brought about modern definitions of family, gender, sex, and sexuality” (Orbaugh 23).

During the post-war period, connoisseurs of “burai” or decadence emerged as popular critics of the wartime cult and ideology of healthy and wholesome literature (Dower 26), whereby decadence was extolled as the only truthful and realistic way to be truly human (148). Influenced by the European decadent movement, the Japanese decadent writers contemplated on socio-economic issues in their own national milieus and addressed the anxieties and identity crisis stirred up by drastic social changes and the accompanying economic realities (Amano 11, 12). Osamu Dazai was the most popular of the “Buraiha” or the Japanese Decadents – a group of dissolute writers whose works reflect uselessness, decadence, existential despair, lack of purpose and hope, and a spirit of rebelliousness against traditional and social conventions. Yukio Mishima mostly featured useless, aimless individuals as his protagonists and all his works are permeated by decadence, hopelessness, existential crisis, and rebelliousness against established values, conventions and morality. It is for this reason that though Mishima was not identified as belonging to the Buraiha, his works can be regarded as reflecting the same sense of decadence widespread and befitting of the writers of his time. Most of his works are imbued with the sense of an ending – “the end of art, the end of eroticism, the end of culture, the end of the world” – and it conforms to a decadent aestheticism that holds that “beautiful things radiate their most intense beauty on the cusp of their destruction” (Rankin 11).

There are many notable writers in the post-war era with critically acclaimed works. These include, among many others, Shohei Ooka with novels like *A Wife in Musashino* (1950) and *Fires on the Plain* (1951) that predominantly deal with horrors of the Japanese war experience, and Fumiko Enchi who wrote *The Waiting Years* (1957) and *Masks* (1958) that deal with the plight, struggles and psychology of Japanese women in the post-war period. However, the works of Dazai and Mishima, both in Japanese and translated versions, deeply resonated with modern readers in and outside of Japan due to the universal issues they explore. Dazai and Mishima have gained massive international recognition, with their writings having been translated into various languages. They are most frequently studied in the context of world literature by scholars and critics for their universal themes and insights into humanity and existence. Their popularity outside Japan can be partly attributed to the availability of their major works in English translations, unlike most of their contemporaries whose translated works are few and wanting.

Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima continue to influence new generations of Japanese writers. Dazai's confessional writing style, which shares personal stories of distress and despair, has inspired various authors such as the much-celebrated Haruki Murakami, who regards Dazai as one of his most significant influences. Writers struggling with the complexities of modern Japan find inspiration in Mishima's blend of traditionalism and modernism, with themes like identity, beauty and cultural heritage. Additionally, the similar themes these two authors continually explored – alienation, identity, existence and conflict between tradition and modernity – are matters still pertinent for Japan in the 21st century as the country tackles with the challenges posed by globalization, technological changes and the ever-changing social norms. As identity, the meaning of life, tradition and modernity continue to be points of contention in Japan and the world, Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima's works resonate with truths about the difficulties involved in adapting to a world that is constantly evolving, thereby making them two of the most relevant and globally renowned 20th century Japanese writers till the present day.

Methodology:

This study utilizes a careful selection of interdisciplinary approaches with a focus given on existentialist and postcolonial critical assessments. Critical concepts and theories from Takie Sugiyama Lebra, Takeo Doi, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Homi Bhabha and others are pertinent to this study. Various aspects of Japanese religious and cultural belief systems are integrated to determine how these help shape postwar Japanese identity and worldview. The study will look at modern Japanese identity, culture and existence in five chapters, exploring the common and divergent aspects between Dazai and Mishima's works and the ideas developed in existential narratives.

The first chapter, as has been discussed, includes an introduction of the study, biographical sketch of the two writers and a brief analysis of the primary texts. It details the significance of the study and introduces Dazai and Mishima's works in the postwar context as well the literary trends throughout different periods to situate them within modern Japanese literature. The second chapter examines Japan's defeat and the American Occupation, tracing how rapid modernization, Western influence, and cultural disruption shaped the postwar landscape. It shows how Dazai and Mishima portray the disorientation and value collapse produced by the East-West encounter, forming the backdrop for later crisis of identity. The third chapter analyzes how identity is negotiated and contested in the postwar space, focusing on characters who struggle with alienation, unbelonging, and the tension between Western individualism and Japanese conformity. It argues that both authors depict fractured selves trying to navigate a society in transition.

The fourth chapter explores existential concerns such as the search for meaning, the performance of existence, and the allure of death and destruction. It highlights how Dazai and Mishima challenge conventional moral frameworks and portray alienation as a defining condition of postwar existence. The concluding chapter summarizes the focal points explored in the preceding chapters and outlines how the chapters have defended the purpose of this study, which is to examine identity and existential crisis in Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima. It reaffirms their continuing relevance and their enduring significance in modern Japanese literature.

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CHAPTER TWO

The East-West Encounter

Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima are two notable writers of the postwar era whose works reflect the intersection of Eastern and Western ideologies as well as the existential crisis and cultural tensions of their time. Japan's World War II surrender in 1945 and the subsequent Allied Occupation greatly impacted Japan and modern Japanese literature. For the Americans, the war lasted for three years and eight months while the Japanese had been "geared for war for fifteen years" and in time, "what had begun as the indoctrination of young men for death in battle became expanded into a frantic and fanatical campaign to socialize the entire population for a final suicidal fight" defending the sacred homeland (Dower 87). Hence, for most Japanese, the defeat also meant liberation as Japan's surrender and the American occupation broke the tension that liberated them from imminent death. The introduction of democracy, capitalism and foreign cultural products from the West strikingly altered Japanese society and culture (Jansen 8). While these changes encouraged modernization and economic growth, postwar Japan was also characterized by a teeming sense of disillusionment and disorientation that led to an interrogation of Japanese traditional values, cultural authenticity and one's place in society. These societal and cultural changes provide the backdrop for Dazai and Mishima from which their differing and often contrasting perspectives emerged. Their perspectives serve as a unique lens for understanding the social, cultural and philosophical crisis rampant in postwar Japan.

Dazai's works often express a resigned acceptance of personal as well as cultural disintegration under Western influence indicative of the disorientation and confusion experienced by many Japanese in the postwar era. In his defiant call to reclaim or redefine Japanese identity through reviving customary values and aesthetics such as bushido ideals (the code for the samurai warrior), Mishima's works reflect his own personal desire targeted at a return to Japan's cultural and spiritual roots. This chapter examines the East-West encounter in their works not as straightforward Westernization, but as a process of cultural negotiation characterized by ambivalence, selective adaptation, and psychological tension. It analyzes how both writers

rearticulate tradition and modernity under the conditions of American occupation, drawing on postcolonial concepts of mimicry, internalization, and representational power to show how Western cultural forms are simultaneously adopted, resisted, and unsettled in their narratives. These are done to offer a deeper understanding of the broader cultural discourse on modernity and tradition, and the challenges and complexities of cultural encounter in a rapidly changing world.

Postcolonial Negotiation and Cultural Encounter:

Rather than viewing Japan's postwar transformation as a simple process of Westernization or modernization, this chapter approaches the East-West encounter as a negotiated cultural relationship shaped by ambivalence and selective adaptation. Postcolonial theorists emphasize that cultural influence does not move in a single direction and instead, it produces spaces in which traditions are reinterpreted, values are reconfigured, and new hybrid forms of cultural expression emerge.

Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry provides a productive starting point. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha describes mimicry as the colonized subject's imitation of the cultural norms, behaviours, or aesthetics of the dominant power in a manner that is "almost the same, but not quite" (128). Mimicry is neither complete assimilation nor resistance but a strategy of negotiation. It is a "camouflage" that produces resemblance without full continuity and "a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which appropriates the Other as it visualizes power" (122). It allows the colonized subject to imitate and resemble the colonizer's cultural authority while retaining forms of difference that render the imitation and resemblance fragmented, ironic or destabilizing. In the postwar Japanese context, the adoption of Western literature, fashion, intellectual movements, political language, and everyday habits does not signify submission, but a complex accommodation and negotiated adaptation shaped by desire, anxiety, and disillusionment.

Mimicry characterizes the aristocracy and intellectual class as those who perform refinement or modernity as cultural signs after the authority sustaining these signs has dissolved. Bhabha further argues that cultural forms, when repeated in new

historical conditions, “will not return as the same” (232). Tradition, therefore, appears in postwar Japan not as seamless continuity but as repetition marked by loss, where inherited forms persist without the structures that once gave them meaning. Therefore, the postwar Japanese man can be characterized not as one who abandons Japanese tradition, but as one negotiating between traditional values and the newly imposed values of the democratic postwar society. This negotiation is often uneven and unstable, producing the existential anxiety and moral as well as psychological exhaustion depicted in Dazai and Mishima’s works.

Frantz Fanon’s reflections on the psychological effects of colonial dominance further contributes to the East-West encounter. He argues that the colonized subject internalizes the cultural values of the dominant power in an attempt to achieve recognition or legitimacy. This attempt produces a profound inner split as the subject learns to wear a culturally imposed self-image. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), he describes this as “situational neurosis” (42) and in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), he identifies the state as “psycho-affective injuries” experienced by those left “without an anchor, without a horizon” (218). This framework illuminates the emotional instability and self-fracture visible in postwar figures in the selected narratives. Fanon helps in the understanding of tensions in postwar Japan between the desire to embody Western modernity and the sense of loss, guilt, or inauthenticity that accompanies such aspirations after moving away from inherited cultural foundations. The postwar Japanese subject therefore exists in a space of ambivalence: compelled to imitate Western modernity as the marker of progress, yet haunted by the disintegration of pre-war ethical structures and communal identities.

Edward Said further contextualizes the East-West encounter in *Orientalism* (1978) by showing how the West constructs and represents the East as its cultural opposite. Said demonstrates that the West constructs the “Orient” as its irrational, emotional, traditional and cultural opposite in order to secure its own identity as rational, modern, and progressive (40). In the case of Japan, this dynamic did not simply vanish after the mid-twentieth century. The postwar moment marks a situation in which Japan itself became subject to an external representational gaze under

American occupation in which Western norms define the terms of cultural legitimacy and Japan was reimagined as a nation to be reformed, modernized and democratized. Said's framework allows us to see that postwar Japanese subjects were not only adapting to new ways of living, but also being seen, judged, and measured through an external gaze that encourages Japan to perform Western modernity while simultaneously being evaluated through it. Thus, Japan's claims to cultural authenticity in this era must be understood as emerging within a representational field already shaped by the West (21).

Raymond Williams's formulation of the residual and emergent from his essay "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent" (1977) provides a crucial bridge between postcolonial negotiation and postwar cultural transformation in Japan. Williams defines the residual as "values and practices formed in an earlier cultural moment, but still active in the cultural process" (122), while the emergent refers to "new structures of feeling" that correspond to newly ascendant social formations (123). In the postwar Japanese context, these categories illuminate how traditional cultural forms such as aristocratic decorum, bushido ethics, and Shinto ritual sensibility retain emotional force yet no longer function as the dominant system of cultural legitimacy. Under the American Occupation, Western democratic and capitalist frameworks acquire the status of the emergent not through organic development, but through the imposition of representational authority, the very process Said argues defines the cultural hierarchy of colonizer and colonized. Williams therefore helps clarify the terrain on which Japanese cultural continuity becomes unstable by showing how tradition survives as a residual formation that is structurally subordinated to emergent Western cultural values, thereby producing the crisis of meaning that Dazai and Mishima render so sharply in their works.

These postcolonial frameworks suggest that postwar Japan cannot be understood through binaries such as Westernization versus tradition or modernity versus authenticity. Instead, the East-West encounter is best read as a dynamic process of cultural negotiation, where Western forms are adopted, reinterpreted, and internalized ambivalently without fully displacing earlier cultural frameworks.

Postwar “Westernization” should be read less as a natural cultural evolution and more as a historically situated relationship of unequal symbolic power, in which the Japanese subject encounters the West as both an aspiration and a pressure. Seen through this theoretical lens, the literary works of Dazai and Mishima can be examined not as passive reflections of social change, but as deliberate sites of negotiation in which the meaning of cultural inheritance is reshaped at a time when notions of value, authority, and modernity were themselves in the process of being reimagined.

Impact of World War II and the American Occupation:

The mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century was a decisive period of transition for Japan (Huffman). The country underwent noteworthy transformations that impacted its political, economic, social, cultural and literary landscape as traditional Japanese values were confronted with Western ideologies. The encounter between the East and the West was spearheaded by the modernization and Westernization of the country after the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and further expedited by the Allied Occupation (1945-1952) following Japan’s defeat in World War II. This historic encounter gave rise to complex questions regarding personal and cultural identity, authenticity, modernity and the meaning of life for many Japanese scholars and intellectuals.

The emperor’s announcement of surrender in August 15, 1945 stupefied as well as brought relief to the people. However, this sense of relief was short-lived as the populace succumbed to exhaustion and despair; this state of psychic collapse soon became popularly associated with *kyodatsu*, a clinical term previously used to describe physical or emotional prostration in individual patients. The defeat incited an “abandonment of purpose” (Dower 104) that brought forth feelings of shame, dishonour, despair, disorientation and identity crisis. Besides poverty and homelessness, the media reported a rise in alcoholism, drug addiction, lawlessness and violent as well as non-violent crimes. All these became problematic for the country as it could impede post-war reconstruction and undermine the idealistic endeavor to become a democratic nation of culture and modernity. The *kyodatsu* condition was widely used as “a way of characterizing the “distracted” and “dejected” condition of

the people as a whole” (89) and it was believed that this despondency posed the greatest of all possible dangers to the postwar Japan.

Although Japan was transformed from a militaristic to a democratic state under the American Occupation, the power upholding this democracy was nonetheless a military regime and hence, Japan had no sovereignty and autonomy of its own. The “hierarchies of race and privilege” between “the white victors and the vanquished Orientals were apparent” as the American forces ruled “their new domain as neo-colonial overlords, beyond challenge or criticism, as inviolate as the emperor and his officials had ever been.” (Dower 27, 210) . The pre-war and war era censorships were replaced in the post-war years by censorships from the ruling forces where subjects such as criticism of the Allied forces and their policies, and praise of values that are deemed militaristic or ultra-nationalistic, were placed off-limits (Rubin 72). Rapes, wrongdoings and assaults by American servicemen could only be circulated in articles and magazines after 1952 (Tanaka 116). Nonetheless, the publishing industry was one of the first commercial sectors that recovered impressively in defeated Japan. Translations of foreign-language works ranging from French, German, Russian, British, Americans, Chinese, and Italian authors started to be published (Schaller 21).

Within weeks of surrender, a spirit of optimism could be seen emerging in publishing, radio, popular music, and film. Despite the *kyodatsu* condition still looming, “brightness”, “newness” and the “liberating prospects of the new Japan” were emphasized as an antidote to all that was dark and despairing (Dower 172). Slogans such as “Construct a Nation of Peace” and “Construct a Nation of Culture” were utilized for the creation of a nation resting on democratic, antimilitaristic principles in the early postwar period. Schoolchildren throughout the country, including the young crown prince Akihito, wrote and rewrote these slogans as part of their calligraphy lessons. It was in this context that there emerged popular support for the general reformist policy of cleansing politics and society of feudalistic and militaristic vestiges (Suzuki 172-173). Until the end of the occupation, democratization was promoted through education. As a result, the Ministry of Education, which had been a vigilant watchdog of emperor-system ultranationalism,

was transformed into one of the country's most systematic and zealous proponents of peace and democracy (Nazaki 2). The goal of the new system was to contribute to constructing a democratic, peaceful nation of culture. Beginning in 1947, adult education programs were introduced that were explicitly designed to help grownups learn the consciousness, habits, and lifestyles of a democratic people.

The promulgation of American habits and customs, from bread making to the Western-style dressmaking boom, are manifestations of the horizontal westernization that reached into every corner of society in postwar Japan (Dower 169). Under the American Occupation, drastic measures such as the dismantling of Japanese military force and the drafting of a new constitution were implemented to transform Japan into a democratic state. The authoritarian controls of the imperial state were relaxed, and the structures defining family, gender roles, culture and society underwent major changes. Reform of the civil code eliminated the legal foundations of the traditional patriarchal family system to promote more freedom and equality and strengthened women's positions in critical areas such as divorce, inheritance and the right to vote (244). Sovereignty established by constitutional reform guaranteed a more extensive range of human rights, and set antimilitarist ideals at the very centre of the national charter.

After the defeat, the Japanese military leadership was charged with committing crimes against peace and violations of war conventions while the emperor, under whose name the war was fought, was exonerated (Hashimoto 2). The emperor, who had been revered and made the symbolic parent of the nation since the Meiji period (1868–1912) had to publicly deny his divinity and acknowledge his ordinary human status (Orbaugh 49). To Westerners, particularly Christians, the notion of “emperor worship” was blasphemous as it “seemed perilously close to equating him with Christ, the Son of God” and had to be eliminated (Dower 309). However, the occupation authorities resituated the emperor as “the center of their new democracy” and he remained “his country's preeminent emblem of patriarchal authority and the incarnation of a putative racial purity as well as cultural homogeneity” (278). Since redefining the imperial throne as the centrepiece of the new democracy, a striking

relationship between court circles and the upper echelons of the occupation staff was cultivated. The imperial household, quickly understanding the Americans' love of aristocratic pomp and pageantry, regularly invited high American officials to participate in the court's refined pastimes. While the media in the United States were enthusing over the "Americanization" of Japan, the Japanese were quietly and skilfully Japanizing at home the Americans as a part of the challenge to conquer the conqueror (300-301).

Cultural Shifts and Tensions:

Japan's surrender and the foreign occupation opened the possibility for the Japanese people to create a new life free from the dictates of the imperial state. In a shattered and war-torn country, the Japanese had no choice but to try and create a world "of broad and bright morality and culture" (Hashimoto 21). Hence, extensive efforts were given towards reconstructing Japan as a peace-loving, modern nation of culture that encouraged personal freedom. A new "space suddenly existed in society where people behaved differently, thought differently, encountered circumstances that differed from any they had previously experienced"; it was a "rare moment of flux, freedom, and openness" when new norms of behaviour and authority were in "the process of forming" and creation of "a private life free from the dictates of the state" became possible (Dower 121). There was an acute awareness among the people for the desire to reinvent their lives and refashion the meaning of Japan in a way that encouraged more individual freedom. Yet this newly opened space was not ideologically neutral. The forms of freedom and modernity that emerged were shaped under the symbolic and administrative authority of the American Occupation, which served as the reference point for how a "peace-loving" and "civilized" nation was expected to appear. The reconstruction of Japan therefore took place not only through internal reform, but also through negotiation with the Western gaze, which defined the standards of legitimate culture, governance, and public life.

To many writers and academics, Japan's defeat and the American occupation evoked a feeling of liberation and hope for the future fused with self-reproach and a deep regret for the past for having failed to resist the power of the militaristic state.

Politics and ideology therefore became “thoroughly entangled with remorse and self-criticism”; the guilt and responsibility felt individually as well as collectively by many people made possible the “spontaneous embrace of demilitarization and democratization” (Dower 234- 235). For both intellectual and psychological reasons, Marxism was embraced by the repentant community of intellectuals in the early post-surrender scene. This was the ideological atmosphere in which the rebirth of serious publishing took place, and the cosmopolitanism of the “community of remorse” was reflected in the breadth of foreign writings that publishers rushed to make available such as translated works by Tolstoy, Chekov, Dostoevsky, Goethe, Balzac, Kant, Spinoza, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Lenin, and a host of others (238). The turn to Western ideologies in this moment can therefore be understood not merely as intellectual openness, but as a form of cultural negotiation carried out under the symbolic authority of the Occupation. These ideas were taken up as public markers of reconstruction and modernity, signifying participation in a globally recognized cultural and philosophical sphere. The embrace of Western thought thus reflects a moment in which earlier moral frameworks had collapsed and new forms of meaning were sought, but always in partial response to the standards set by the occupying power.

The most flamboyant manifestation of a new space in postwar Japan was found on the margins of respectable society as distinctive subcultures arise symbolizing the disintegration of the old order and the emergence of a new spirit. The marginal groups that mesmerized and gained popularity came from three overlapping subcultures: “the world of the *panpan* prostitute” – symbols of liberation of repressed sensuality who openly embraced the American conquerors and Japanese men alike, “the black market, with its formidable energy and seductively maverick code of behavior,” as a response to shortages and the unavailability of goods and supplies through official channels, and the “*kasutori* culture” that promoted self-indulgence in the cheap, low quality *kasutori* liquor as a means to cope with the harsh postwar realities and introduced “pulp literature and commercialized sex” (Dower 122). These came to exemplify “not merely the confusion and despair of the postwar era, but also the vital, visceral, even carnal transcending of it (123). The *panpan* openly sold themselves to the conquerors

while others, especially those considered respectable and privileged elites, consorted with the Americans but did it figuratively. These subcultural spaces reveal how cultural negotiation became embedded in the everyday: individuals created forms of life that neither fully preserved traditional structures nor fully aligned with Western models.

Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima often allude to these subcultures outside the margins of respectable society through the portrayal of characters in their novels. Excessive drinking, prostitution, ideological experimentation, and escapist consumption appear throughout their works not merely as moral decline, but as strategies for coping with a social world stripped of certainty. These behaviours reflect the emotional pressures of living between unsettled cultural frameworks, where meaning is sought moment by moment rather than supplied by shared beliefs. In Dazai's *No Longer Human*, the protagonist Oba Yozo is introduced to "the mysteries of drink, cigarettes, prostitutes, pawnshops and left-wing thought" (58) by his classmate. With the progression of the story, he becomes an alcoholic who works to earn money solely for his drink and even pawns his partner Shizuko's belongings in the black market for alcohol. His statements such as "My fondest wish was to drink myself into a sound stupor" (73) and "I felt I wanted to drink till I drowned in it" (85) depict the extent of his alcoholism. After habitually drinking from morning to night, he ends up coughing blood yet he still states, "I may have alcoholic poisoning. I still want to drink" (159). He frequently indulges himself with prostitutes and uses them as an escape and to "seek a mere night of repose" (64). He considers alcohol, tobacco and prostitutes as excellent means of escapism and states, "I came even to feel that if I had to sell every last possession to obtain these means of escape, it would be well worth it (63)".

In *The Setting Sun* by Osamu Dazai, drinking is a common social activity that emphasizes the postwar malaise. The characters often turn to alcohol to cope with the bleakness of the reality they live in. The protagonist Kazuko, amazed at the cheap price of *sake* – a Japanese liquor made of fermented rice, suggests that they should go drinking together sometime to her brother Naoji and his mentor Mr. Uehara (77).

Naoji, formerly an opium addict, switches to alcohol and becomes an alcoholic who “spends most of his time at the local drinking place” (81) and once every few days, he takes whatever money his family has from selling their belongings in the black market and goes off to Tokyo to drink. Mr. Uehara, when asked if the liquor tastes good, replies, “It stinks” (145) and yet he drinks every day from morning to night. After coughing blood from excessive alcohol consumption, Naoji states, “I drink out of desperation. Life is too dreary to endure” (150) and claims to be in need of “the momentary peace that the vertigo of drink and drugs could afford” (157) to escape his reality.

In *Otogizoshi: The Fairy Tale Book of Dazai Osamu*, the story of “The Stolen Wen” is centered around an old man called Ojii-san who loves drinking sake. The narrator comments that although there’s nothing problematic about his family situation, he feels lonely and depressed due to which he cannot help but drink. He wishes that his uptight and serious wife and son “need to drink and loosen up a little” (9). When he stumbles upon Oni, a group of ogres, having a drinking party in the forest, it is his “liquid courage” (15) from the sake that makes him feel a sense of fellowship with these Oni and urges him to spring forth into the center of the circle to fearlessly sing and perform a traditional dance for them.

In *Confessions of a Mask* by Yukio Mishima, there is an incident where the protagonist Kochan visits a brothel with his friend from the university, who suggests that they should first “go somewhere and have something to drink. It’s a little too much for a beginner if he’s sober” (149). Kochan, who decides on not having a single drink, finds himself unable to be attracted or aroused by the prostitute. Though he does not indulge excessively in alcohol, he confesses that he has “learned to smoke and drink” (78) and to divert himself from his inner turmoil and despair, he frequently attends “the gatherings that took place at the house of an old friend” (152) where they would drink, dance and play silly games till dawn. His partaking in these activities is more about societal participation than personal indulgence, and it highlights how drinking together was the social norm of the time.

In *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Mishima's protagonist, the young Zen acolyte Mizoguchi has his first encounter with a prostitute towards the beginning of the story when a drunk American soldier brought with him a girl whom Mizoguchi can immediately tell from a glance is "a prostitute who catered to foreign soldiers" (70). He himself sneaks out from the temple and spends the money for his education given to him by the Superior twice in an establishment called Otaki where he drinks *sake* and has an illicit affair with a prostitute working there (213, 209). Mizoguchi also witnessed the surreptitious expedition of his mentor and Superior of the temple, Father Dosen, as he is having an affair with a geisha from "the Gion district" (150). Father Zenkai, the head of another temple, drinks "*sake*, which the deacon had sensibly brought him" (230) and the Superior also drinks *sake* with Father Zenkai (233).

There is also an instance where Mizoguchi's friend Kashiwagi's young lady opens her lunch package that contains imported alcohol and food items, which "at the time could only be bought on the black market" (112). As the narrator states, Kyoto is supposedly "the center of black-market activities in the Osaka-Kyoto-Kobe area" during this time (112). Since the Superior of the Golden Temple strictly forbids the use of black-market rice in the temple, the only rice that the acolytes would eat in their bowls of gruel was "what had been contributed by parishioners, or such small quantities as the deacon had bought on the black market", which he always pretended was "part of the contribution to the temple" (63). Mizoguchi's father, whose lunch box while travelling on a train contains white rice balls, feels ashamed of opening it in front of the other people in the carriage. He makes an announcement to everyone who can hear him that "it's not black-market rice" but instead "comes from the good hearts of [his] parishioners. [He] can eat it with joy and gratitude" (22).

The above narratives reference the common black market activities and contrasting views held by people, and provide context to the postwar years' socio-economic environment. As Mizoguchi states in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, "It was 1947 and unless one could afford to buy food on the black market, it was impossible to eat properly" (87). Postwar Japan's economic chaos led people to seek survival and the novel references the black market as a means for that survival.

Likewise, the prevalence of prostitution as well as alcohol intoxication illustrate the rise of subcultures and illicit social spaces that emerged in response to postwar dislocation – not as signs of moral collapse, but as adaptive responses to living under an imposed cultural and economic order. These subcultures register the psychological exhaustion that arises when cultural forms change more rapidly than emotional meaning can stabilize. Dissipation here is not decadence but a coping practice, an attempt to endure the dissonance between the modernity one must perform and the values that no longer provide grounding. What emerges is not liberation but emotional fatigue: the cost of living within a cultural landscape where inherited values have lost their coherence, while the new ones are yet to be established.

Pleasure, intoxication, and excess thus appear not as mere self-indulgence, but as attempts to create temporary relief from the burden of sustaining cultural forms that one cannot yet inhabit meaningfully. Seen in this light, the black markets, bar districts, brothels and drifting social spaces depicted in Dazai and Mishima signify not simply moral dissolution, but makeshift zones of survival. They represent the emotional labour required to live within a landscape where values and meanings are unsettled. These subcultural environments are the spaces where cultural negotiation becomes most visible not because they offer freedom, but because they expose the effort required to endure the transition between cultural orders. As Bhabha notes, the “time-lag” of cultural change disrupts any straightforward sense of continuity, producing conditions in which cultural forms must be performed before they can be meaningfully lived (296). These sites thus operate as “in-between” spaces where cultural meaning is actively negotiated under pressure, rather than preserved or fully replaced (2).

Western Influences in Dazai and Mishima:

The influence of the American conquerors and Western culture as a whole, particularly immediately after the war, is clearly depicted by Dazai and Mishima in their texts. Western literature, art, cuisine, fashions, and ideologies permeate everyday spaces and intimate relationships. Characters in their works move freely among references to Goethe, Van Gogh, Modigliani, Renoir, Wilde, Proust, Andersen, Dante, and Dostoevsky, showing the depth of Western cultural presence. Such references

illustrate a form of mimicry in which Western cultural forms are adopted as signs of refinement, education, or modernity, while their emotional or philosophical grounding remains unstable. This selective adoption is therefore “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 128), revealing the unevenness of cultural absorption in the postwar period. This process exemplifies what Bhabha identifies as mimicry, that is, a partial imitation of the dominant culture that produces resemblance without full assimilation.

In *The Location of Culture* by Homi Bhabha, mimicry refers to the colonized subject’s imitation of the colonizer’s culture, language, and behaviour, but in a way that is partial, ambivalent, subversive and “almost the same, but not quite” (128). This produces a double bind as mimicry is both a strategy of control and a site of resistance. Bhabha states, “Mimicry is the sign of a double articulation. A complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (122). The Western elements in the novels signal not the replacement of Japanese culture, but the ambivalent layering and coexistence of tradition alongside newly imported values. The characters do not internalize these ideologies as stable belief systems; rather, they deploy them as performative displays of cultural sophistication oriented toward the Western gaze. Their gestures function as outward imitations of Western sophistication that remain fragile and uncertain, exposing the gap between adopting new cultural signs and feeling at home within them. The resulting disorientation highlights the difficulty of reconciling inherited cultural memory with new Western ideals.

In *No Longer Human* by Osamu Dazai, because of his comic façade, Yozo is dubbed the “Harold Lloyd of Northeast Japan”, an American movie comedian who was popular at the time in Japan (50). He owns “a volume of Modigliani reproductions” in his bookshelf and is shown the self-portrait of Van Gogh by his friend Takeichi. As children, Yozo states that their “first introduction to an appreciation of Western painting” most often began with works such as “the paintings of Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne and Renoir” since “the French Impressionist School was very popular in Japan” (53). There is a reference made by Yozo to the gate of Inferno from Dante’s *Divine Comedy* when talking about the front door of a house

(108) and when he reflects on the idea of crime and punishment as opposing forces, he explicitly refers to *Crime and Punishment* by the Russian existential writer Fyodor Dostoevsky (147), claiming that he has begun to understand the chaos of Dostoevsky's mind.

In Dazai's *The Setting Sun*, Naoji calls his school friend Iwashima a "damned fool" because he wore "a tuxedo to his cousin's wedding" (4). There is a Tokyo Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Tokyo (113) and Kazuko's new house in the countryside has "a foreign-style room with a big bed" located upstairs (22). For walking as well as working in the fields, instead of the traditional shoes for Japanese women, Kazuko feels more comfortable wearing the sneakers issued by the Army during the war when she was conscripted to do coolie labour (36). There are mentions of Renoir (56), Goethe (63), and DH Lawrence (83) by the characters in the novel. Kazuko had a childhood friend who loves wearing a red beret, who once quoted a line about farewell from Byron's poem, and whose face she described as "reputed to look like the Mona Lisa's" (113). She even claims that she is "what Nietzsche described as 'a woman who wants to give birth to a child'" (86). She had an English lady as a teacher as a child, and in one scene recalls the story of a French novel she had read long ago. Her family owns a volume of Marie "Laurencin's paintings" in their library (14). While she reads Rosa Luxemburg's *Introduction to Economics* from her brother's collection along with the Selected Works of Lenin and Kautsky's *Social Revolution*, her mother prefers sweet romances and her "chosen reading matter is Hugo, Dumas père et fils, Musset, and Daudet" (111).

In *Confessions of a Mask* by Yukio Mishima, Kochan reads about "the death of a beautiful knight in a verse by Oscar Wilde" (10). He took German lessons as a child (80) and has discussions about Marcel Proust (151), the character of Gilles de Rais who was bodyguard to Joan of Arc from the novel *Là-Bas* by Huysmans, his favourite picture book about Joan of Arc called *The Maid of Orleans* (10), Andersen's "The Nightingale" and his fairy tale "Rose-Elf", Cleopatra, the Roman emperor Heliogabalus (15) and a reproduction of Guido Reni's painting "St. Sebastian" (27). There are also mentions of Western-style candies (106), Scotch-plaid skirts (110),

Western-style dance hall (166), imported coloured postcards and notepapers decorated with a Disney cartoon of Red Riding Hood and the Wolf (114).

In Mishima's *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Mizoguchi states that the American soldiers used to make fun of the robes worn by the temple acolytes. He says, "Sometimes they would offer us money so that we would let them wear our robes; thus attired, they would have photographs taken of themselves as souvenirs" (67). Mizoguchi serves as a guide for an American soldier who visits the temple before the normal opening-hour as he can speak a little English (69). There are mentions of the Western nursery-rhyme "Mother Goose" (71), American cigarettes called Chesterfields (73), the Kotoku Church of the Tenrikyo (103) and Laertes' advice in *Hamlet* (166). Mizoguchi's friend has a lover who lives in a Spanish-style house (101) and her lunch package contains imported biscuits and "a bottle of Suntory whisky, which at the time could only be bought on the black market, since the supply was all officially allotted to the Occupation forces" (112). The Superior of the Golden Pavilion, Father Dozen, is seen wearing a felt hat, an elegant overcoat and a scarf – all Western clothes – as he walks with a geisha wearing a rust-vermilion coat (150). West Maizuru is described in the novel as a place that has become a foreign harbour. "English language street signs flourished menacingly at the intersections and American troops were walking about in great numbers", the road is built especially wide for military purposes and the small American war vessel lay tied to the shore. The "a sense of peace" and an "exaggerated policy of hygiene" (175) have made the whole town seem like a sort of hospital.

In Mishima's *The Frolic of the Beasts*, Ippei owns a Western ceramics shop in Ginza, smokes English cigarette (33) and wears Italian-made ties and English socks (123). He had graduated with a degree in German literature (27) and has produced translations and commentaries on the works of authors like Hofmannsthal and Stefan George (28). Kimi owns a ukulele, inscribed with English lettering (4) and sings a Hawaiian song she had picked up in the women's dormitory at the Hamamatsu factory (86). Yuko uses butter and milk in applying herself to "the creation of mock French cuisine" when cooking (110), drinks a Coca-cola bottle (127), and during a picnic at

the waterfall, wears a foreign “Java calico blouse and yellow slacks” with “a pair of flat-heeled Moroccan leather walking shoes” (64). There is a bar in town with blue-painted panel walls called Storm Petrel; the sign, in English, displays “Storm Pertel” instead of “Storm Petrel” because the painter had mistaken the spelling (80).

The characters’ adoption of Western clothing, objects, artistic tastes, and conversational styles can be read through Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry, where the colonized subject imitates the cultural codes of the dominant power in a way that is “almost the same, but not quite” (128). In these narratives, Western influence operates at the level of style and public performance, influencing how one dresses, what one quotes, how one appears cultured. Yet the imitation is partial and ambivalent: these characters copy Western forms without fully internalizing the worldview or ethical foundation that accompanies them. The result is a hybrid cultural space, in which Western markers function as signs of modernity to be displayed, circulated, and performed, rather than absorbed as stable identity. Thus, mimicry here is not a sign of Westernization, but of a negotiated, surface-level accommodation that leaves tradition and emotional orientation still unsettled beneath.

All these Western elements in the novels illustrate that Western influence in postwar Japan was not undergoing straightforward Westernization, but entering a condition of cultural negotiation marked by ambivalence and uneven absorption. From literature, art, and philosophy to fashion, music, and cuisine, the characters in their novels navigate a world where Japanese tradition, culture and identity are continuously challenged and reshaped by foreign elements. The tension between inherited cultural forms and newly imported values produces states of cultural ambiguity and emotional unsettlement, rather than stable synthesis. Dazai and Mishima depict a Japan navigating the layered coexistence of imperial residue and occupation-era modernity, where cultural meanings are continually renegotiated rather than simply replaced. These Western cultural elements function as visible markers of modernity rather than signs of full assimilation. The characters adopt Western styles in a manner that is partial, selective, and ambivalent, indicating a form of mimicry that displays modernity on the surface while leaving underlying cultural foundations unsettled.

As Japan became more exposed to Western literature, philosophy and art in the postwar era, Japanese intellectuals and artistic community “eagerly embraced” new ideas from Western philosophy and ideology, “particularly those that dealt with themes of individual freedom, alienation, and the rejection of traditional hierarchies” (Dower 134). Hence there was a flourishing of Japanese intellectual discourse centering on the modernist, nihilist, and existentialist ideas that were already influential in the West. Western thought provided them with a framework for understanding and navigating their new reality, contributing to the widespread embrace of these philosophical movements. The collapse of earlier moral frameworks created a condition in which new ones were sought, and Western ideologies became one of the available languages through which individuals attempted to reorient their lives. This particular environment of cultural and intellectual shift and tension shaped the works of Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima. Despite their different perspectives, they were deeply engaged with themes of cultural identity, modernity and the impact of Westernisation on Japanese society.

There are multiple allusions to Christian ideology and the Christian God in *No Longer Human* and *The Setting Sun* by Osamu Dazai. In *No Longer Human*, though there is no direct admittance to Yozo being a converted Christian, he himself talks about his “Christian leanings” (9). He pleads to God in a silent prayer and even considers kneeling down, “God....if you listen to the prayers of people like myself, grant me happiness once, only once in my whole lifetime will be enough! Hear my prayer!” (89). His friend Horiki states, “There's something about you that smells a little of a Christian priest” (31), which he finds offensive. In order to win over his classmate Takeichi, Yozo forces himself to put on “the gentle beguiling smile of the false Christian” (23).

Apart from the Christian influence upon Japanese, it can also be seen that Marxism gains popularity among the educated masses in *No Longer Human*. The protagonist Yozo not only takes part, but is “the chosen leader of all the Marxist student action groups in the schools of central Tokyo” (45). He busies himself with “maintaining liaison” and even carries a little knife with him for use “in the event of

an armed uprising” (46). However, Yozo confesses that he involves himself with Marxists not because they are “linked by any common affection derived from Marx”, but because he is attracted to “its odor of irrationality” and he is pleased by the people in Marxist groups (53). He claims that there are “Marxists of every variety” and people like Horiki call themselves such “out of an empty modernity” (58). He states, “I am sure that if the true believers in Marxism had discovered what Horiki and I were really-interested in, they would have been furious with us, and driven us out immediately as vile traitors” (58).

In *The Setting Sun*, Kazuko constantly refers to the Christian God and the Bible. She is grateful to God from the bottom of her heart at her good fortune in “having a mother so full of tenderness” (18). She talks about Jesus’ teachings to his twelve disciples as he sends them to expose the hypocrisies of the scribes and Pharisees and even cites a passage from Matthew Chapter 10 from the Bible. She considers her family’s move from Tokyo to the countryside as “a short period of respite vouchsafed by God to my mother and myself” (33). She constantly associates her plight and her suffering to passages in the Bible. She wonders if she will be punished by God for falling in love with a married man, stating, “If because of love I were to swear to obey without fail these teachings of Jesus, to the very letter, I wonder if He would condemn me” (79). After burning the eggs of a mother snake in their garden, Kazuko prepares a regular burial by burying the eggs and she kneels down to pray over them.

There is a scene where the drinkers at the bar have discussions about the parables of liquor and wine found in the Bible. Mr. Uehara brings their conversations to a halt and urges them to continue drinking, shouting, “That’s enough, enough. Ye who are frightened by virtue are trying to use Jesus as an excuse – Let’s drink!” (112). In another statement, Kazuko exclaims that there is no reason for God to punish her for her affair and she gains the courage to write a letter to her lover from the words of Jesus, “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (81). She claims to be a woman “who could destroy her body and soul in Gehenna”, a Greek word translated as hell in the New Testament of The Bible, for “the sake of a love, for the sake of a passion she could not understand” (81). Though Kazuko constantly invokes the Christian God and

Christian teachings, one cannot help but wonder whether she does so out of pure faith or if she tries to rid herself of guilt or unease by justifying and validating her non-conforming actions using the Bible.

In *The Setting Sun*, Kazuko's brother Naoji criticizes the idea put forth by many thinkers of the age that all men are alike. He believes that Marxism, though it proclaims "the superiority of the workers", does not say that "they are all the same" (49). Similarly, while "Democracy proclaims the dignity of the individual", it does not say that individuals are all the same. He believes that only "the lout" will assert that all human beings are the same and "the so-called 'anxiety of the age' – men frightened by one another, every known principle violated, effort mocked, happiness denied, beauty defiled, honor dragged down" originates from this expression (61). Kazuko believes that she must start a revolution just as "Rosa gave tragically her undivided love to Marxism" (90). This, along with her reading of Rosa Luxemburg's book, indicates that Kazuko has an intellectual engagement, or an awareness in the least, with Marxist ideology.

In *Confessions of a Mask* by Yukio Mishima, the protagonist Kochan is obsessed with a picture of St. Sebastian, an early Christian saint believed to have been martyred during the persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor Diocletian. There are multiple passages in the novel of Kochan discussing the life of St. Sebastian, with even a prose poem of St. Sebastian composed by him. However, his obsession stems not from religious beliefs but from sexual desires. Sonoko comforts Kochan as they part ways in the midst of war to not worry because she always prays for him. She states, "You won't be killed. You won't be even slightly hurt. Every night I pray to the Lord Jesus for you, and my prayers are always answered" (57). Kochan comments that it is probably because Sonoko is a devout Christian that she is able to have a peace of mind. This novel also contains an epigraph of a passage from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky that captures a philosophical and theological reflection on the topic of beauty and its paradoxical, often contradictory, nature. It seems to evoke a very existential question about the nature of man and his desires – whether they can be reconciled or whether they are doomed to remain in conflict forever.

Hence, Mishima and Dazai are not simply well-versed, but deeply inspired and influenced by Western art, literature, political thought and philosophy. Western ideologies such as Christianity, Marxism, and Existential philosophy resonate with them as they seek to navigate the intellectual and cultural void left by the collapse of imperial and traditional ideologies in the postwar era. With traditional values discredited and cultural meaning destabilized, these Western philosophies provide new frameworks for understanding and re-examining the plight of those who survive the war and defeat. Though Buddhism and Shintoism remain the dominant religions of Japan and Christianity is often viewed as a Western or foreign religion, in the decades before World War II, the bureaucracy “relied extensively on the expertise of prominent Japanese Christian reformers, who served as conduits for information on the latest Western programs in the areas of social work, education, and moral uplift” (Garon 351). Japanese Christian women strove to bring sexual mores into conformity with the norms prevailing in contemporary American and British society (359), which of course does not denounce prostitution in a new Japanese era. After Japan’s defeat, the occupation authorities promoted Christianity as a civilizing force for democracy and moral reconstruction. The forms of Western thought taken up in this period were not neutral: they gained authority because they aligned with the cultural terms of legitimacy promoted by the Occupation, which positioned Western frameworks as the measure of progress, rationality, and moral reconstruction.

Christianity symbolizing redemption and moral righteousness comes to affect characters like Dazai’s Yozo and Kazuko, who invoke biblical teachings to rationalize their postwar existence. It functions less as an ethical framework and more as a symbolic language the characters use to frame suffering in recognizable, socially acceptable forms introduced through the West. Marxist thought appears not as internal conviction but as a performed ideological view, taken up to display modern intellectual belonging rather than to provide genuine moral grounding. Dazai’s *No Longer Human* and *The Setting Sun* highlight the complexity within Japan's changing ideological landscape by showing how an embrace of such Western ideals is frequently fragmented, as it is unable to adequately console or satisfy the deeper self. Meanwhile, Existentialist thought aligns quite deeply with a generation traumatized and

disillusioned by war and foreign occupation, and this finds powerful expression in the works of Mishima and Dazai. Western ideologies do not replace older beliefs and instead mingle with Japan's unique historical and cultural sensibilities. These ideals function as intellectual performances of modernity rather than firmly held belief systems, signalling an attempt to appear aligned with global cultural discourses rather than providing a stable philosophical foundation.

The turn to Christianity, Marxism, and European existentialism in Dazai and Mishima functions at a representational level. As Edward Said argues in *Orientalism*, the West functions as an interpretive authority that defines the terms through which other cultures are recognized as modern, rational, or legitimate. In this context, Christianity, Marxism, and Existentialism operate as performative markers of cultural modernity under the Western gaze, which evaluates Japan's cultural progress according to Western intellectual standards. The characters cite Western philosophy not necessarily because these ideas resolve their dilemmas, but because they offer a public language of legitimacy, a way of demonstrating that they inhabit the same intellectual horizon as the West. The uptake of these ideologies is therefore less about conviction and more about the cultural imperative to demonstrate modernity according to externally defined criteria. The display of Western philosophical fluency becomes another form of mimicry – not of costume or lifestyle, but of intellectual stance that produces a resemblance that asserts cultural legitimacy while leaving emotional and ethical grounding unresolved.

Cultural Authenticity as Postwar Negotiation:

Cultural authenticity refers to genuine cultural expressions, traditions and customs that are perceived as truly reflecting the historical, social, and traditional values of a specific culture (MacCannell 16). The postwar discourse of cultural authenticity should not be understood as an attempt to restore an untouched Japanese essence, but as a response to the pressures of cultural negotiation. If mimicry marks the partial and ambivalent adoption of Western forms, the appeal to tradition represents an effort to re-establish continuity and coherence where meaning has become unstable. As Fanon argues in *The Wretched of the Earth*, inherited cultural values retain

emotional and ethical resonance even after structural collapse, because they offer forms of meaning that Western ideological frameworks could not supply (217). Said's argument reminds us that the language of "authentic Japanese culture" is not a purely self-contained inheritance, but a cultural identity articulated within Western representational frameworks. Japan becomes culturally distinct because the West has historically required the East to serve as its contrasting counterpart (Said 40). Thus, cultural authenticity in this period is not return but a strategic re-anchoring, a negotiation between what is remembered, what is imposed, and what must be lived.

Tradition in modern Japan is not a continuous inheritance but a selective reconstruction. What appears as timeless cultural essence is in fact a historically produced narrative mobilized whenever cultural identity requires stabilization. The idea of a monolithic, "pure" Japanese culture relates to "perception and belief" and is largely "a cultural construction" as Harumi Befu observes, to create a sense of unity amid Westernization by those "who are motivated to promote a certain cultural conception of Japan" in the postwar era (93). Historian Carol Gluck likewise notes, "The very process of modernization that enriched Japan's technological and economic base also created a conflictual field of cultural meaning" (Gluck 13). In the postwar moment, this reconstruction functioned to counterbalance Western cultural dominance rather than a recovery of a stable past. The appeal to cultural authenticity after 1945 should therefore be understood not as the preservation of historical continuity but as a rhetorical strategy used to assert cultural coherence in a moment when Western authority threatened to define meaning (Said 21).

In Japan, the concept of cultural authenticity is strongly connected to the sacred notion of the *Kokutai*, meaning national essence, and *Nihonjinron* – the uniqueness of Japanese culture. *Kokutai* embodies the belief that Japan's foundation is rooted in a divine origin from the sun goddess Amaterasu where the emperor serves as the symbolic heart of the nation (Dower 290). The collective belief in *Nihonjinron* promotes the view that "Japan and the Japanese people are uniquely distinct from other cultures, and this exclusivity becomes a source of national pride" (Sugimoto 124). At the core of this perceived cultural authenticity is a synthesis of centuries-old systems

that have influenced Japanese societal norms and personal conduct, such as bushido (the Samurai warrior code of conduct), the indigenous Shinto beliefs, Zen Buddhism, and other traditional customs stressing on harmony, respect for nature and social hierarchy. Since the pre-war years, Japanese identity had been characterized as “a people possessed of a unique and indomitable Yamato spirit”, belonging to a “great country” and a “great empire”, and a “leading race destined to overthrow Western imperialism” in “the purest and most noble” fight and bring about a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" (Dower 104). This notion of uniqueness gained popularity after the Occupation began because the very claim to “Japanese difference” was articulated in response to a Western presence that set the standards for modernity and legitimacy. Thus, cultural uniqueness becomes meaningful only within a relational structure defined by the West.

Value systems such as Confucian ethics, Shinto spirituality, Bushido ethics, and Zen aesthetics are not simply inherited but mobilized in the postwar period as symbolic resources, invoked to restore coherence and legitimacy at a moment when Western ideologies threatened to dominate the cultural sphere. For ages, Japanese traditional values have rested on collectivism, social harmony, duty and respect for authority, birthing a culture that focuses on communal harmony over individual desires. The concept of wa or harmony has been nurtured over centuries by Confucian principles as well as morality, and it forms a distinct feature of Japanese cultural identity. This concept is deeply rooted in Confucianism, and it stresses the significance of preserving peaceful relationships in addition to the reduction of conflict within society (Zhang 4). Individual passions are subordinate to the well-being of the group for maintaining harmony. Confucian ethics stressed the importance of social structures, relationships, and hierarchies in society and family (Yum 246). Japanese social systems are structured around harmony, resulting in practices that emphasize total consensus and overall cooperation. In Japan, just as in other Confucian societies, personal desires are mediated by the needs of the community. The individual is expected to subordinate himself to the greater good for the good of society (Hirota 107).

Collectivism is thus vital for shaping Japanese identity, where individual expression is typically secondary to the overall welfare as well as cohesion of the group. The concept of hierarchical relationships is at the very crux of Confucianism that stresses the importance of filial piety, duty, loyalty, also respect for authority (Yum 247). In Japanese society, such principles have customarily shaped the structure within the family, education and governance. The concept of ko or filial piety where one's parents, elders and ancestors must be given the utmost respect is integral to Japanese society (Benedict 107). It extends to not just the Japanese family but also to other societal structures such as those between employer and employee or senior and junior, where the relationship is based off of a deep sense of duty and loyalty.

Japanese society is deeply rooted in hierarchies, as respect for authority is deemed a necessary virtue. This is especially clear in customary family structures. From childhood, honouring and obeying one's parents are taught and loyalty and respect toward authority give full rise to the concept of giri, meaning duty under obligation. Giri binds diverse people to fulfil certain social roles beyond expectations even at the cost of personal sacrifice. Respect for hierarchy and social roles persists even in the face of defeat and radical change. The deep sense of obligation in Japanese relations with authority figures remains a powerful force, even as the old orders crumble (Dower 61, 278). The continuation of these values highlights the lasting impact of Confucian ethics on Japanese identity throughout periods of transition. Though presented as ancient and natural, these values were re-emphasized in the postwar moment as stabilizing anchors in a society undergoing rapid ideological reorganization. As Fanon explains, the turn toward inherited cultural frameworks offers the native "secure anchorage" (217) and rehabilitates him in regard to himself and in regard to others (210), functioning as a source of dignity and coherence when new ideological forms have not yet taken root.

Shintoism, the indigenous belief system, is entwined deeply within the fabric of Japanese cultural identity. Shinto, meaning way of the gods, includes a firm belief in the existence of spirits or deities called kami in all aspects of nature. From time immemorial, the Japanese people have believed in and worshipped kami and this

native faith is said to be as old and “indigenous as the people that brought the Japanese nation into existence” (Ono 21). It stresses ritual purity, veneration of ancestors, and the sacredness of nature, building a spiritual link between people and their land. This becomes rather clear in Japanese aesthetics such as architecture, garden design, and tea ceremonies, which strive to harmonize human activity in relation to the natural world. Unlike other organized religions, Shintoism lacks any formalized doctrine, sacred scriptures, or a founder/absolute deity; more than just a religious faith, it is an amalgam of attitudes, ideas, and ways of doing things (Shields 3).

Within his book *Emperor of Japan* (2002), Donald Keene explores the role of Shinto in shaping the core aspect of Japan’s cultural identity as well as national unity, particularly in the reverence for the emperor who was historically considered to have divine origins from the sun goddess Amaterasu. He notes that Shinto provides a spiritual foundation for Japanese unity, and while the emperor was regarded as a political figure, he was also the living embodiment of the nation’s divine ancestry (Keene 22). Yet, the prominence of Shinto in postwar cultural discourse reflects not a return to premodern spirituality, but a need to assert cultural memory at a moment when Western religious concepts, particularly Christianity, had begun to circulate as signs of moral progress and civilization.

In *No Longer Human*, Dazai’s protagonist Yozo makes a Shinto reference when he voices his experience of an overwhelming fear in one particular scene. He explains it as “a fierce ancestral dread” that is perhaps akin to “encountering in the sacred grove of a Shinto shrine the white-clothed body of the god” (89). Yukio Mishima also makes a handful of Shinto references in the selected novels. In *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Mizoguchi’s father and the Superior of the temple lament about how “the Army and the officials were only giving consideration to the Shinto shrines and were looking down on the Buddhist temples” (27). *The Frolic of the Beasts* also mentions a Shinto shrine “dedicated to the worship of an early Kamakura-period sacred mirror known as the Shoochiku Hijaku Kyo” (80) and a red “Shinto shrine gate” (16) located on a mountaintop. Koji, Yuko and Ippei undertake a journey to the waterfall where a small Shinto shrine, which Yuko refers to as “a pretty

dull, small shrine”, stands at the front and they offer a fresh lily as an offering. Inside the shrine, a candle flickers and “several strings of paper cranes that had all but lost their colour” (63) sway slightly.

Bushido – “the way of the warrior” – is another constituent of traditional Japanese identity that emphasizes honour, loyalty, courage and self-discipline. Its roots can be traced back to earlier influences such as Confucianism, Buddhism and Shintoism, which collectively emphasised loyalty, duty and a strong sense of morality (Inazo 23, 68). The bushido values of self-sacrifice and firm commitment find reflection in *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai* (1716). Within its pages, Yamamoto Tsunetomo states, “The way of the samurai is found in death. When it comes to either/or, there is only the quick choice of death. It is not particularly difficult” (176). A traditional code of conduct in feudal Japan for the samurai or warrior class, it has extensively shaped Japanese culture as well as identity, particularly in its emphasis on loyalty and honour until death and the collective over the individual. Though the samurai class was abolished in the late 19th century, Bushido became weaponized due to the Japanese military’s aim to promote loyalty to the nation and also the emperor, especially during a militaristic period leading up to World War II. It has played a massive role for shaping Japan’s cultural identity, most notably in its cultural pride and sense of ethical responsibility. It has evolved beyond its samurai roots to foster a culture of conformity and social harmony that continues to exist to this day, often at the expense of personal desires and individual expression. Bushido’s ethical and philosophical aspects continue to affect contemporary Japanese culture through social roles and work ethic. In this form, Bushido functions less as a lived ethical code and more as a symbolic ideal or aesthetic marker of Japaneseness through which cultural continuity can be *performed*. Its invocation in the postwar era is therefore strategic, selective and often aestheticized rather than embodied.

In *Otogizoshi: The Fairy Tale Book of Dazai Osamu*, Dazai points out that in his reinterpretation of the folktales, some of the characters fail to “embody the time-honoured spirit of the samurai” (4). In the story “The Stolen Wen”, the old man Oji-san is compared to “a samurai scurrying to the front” (19) as he sets out for the forest

under the moonlight. Dazai provides a commentary on “Click-Clack Mountain”, a story where the rabbit deceives the tanuki and cunningly takes a revenge on him. Claiming that the rabbit’s revenge is too extreme, he questions, “Wouldn’t an older child, already educated in the ethics of Bushido and the square fight, consider the rabbit’s methods “dirty,” to say the least?” (53). In *Confessions of a Mask* by Yukio Mishima, the protagonist Kochan’s picture book contains violent and gory images of men amongst which there are “pictures of young samurai cutting open their bellies” (28). Mishima himself had a samurai ancestry from his maternal grandmother’s side of the family, and his chosen manner of suicide, that is, seppuku, is a samurai’s way of dying.

Buddhism, which originated from India and was imported to Japan from Korea in the 6th century, has been a major religious and cultural force shaping Japanese culture, identity and spirituality for over a millennium. Japanese Buddhism teaches compassion and ethical living, meditation, detachment and the interdependence and interconnectedness as well as the impermanence of all things are deeply resonated in the Japanese worldview. It plays a meaningful role in forming Japan’s ethical and moral framework formation, notably through its emphasis on mindfulness, self-discipline, and compassion. Zen Buddhism became integral to bushido with its teachings. It merged religious principles with the Samurai warrior ethos like self-control, meditation, and the acceptance of death. The merging of Buddhism with values of honour and discipline greatly cemented the religion’s key role in the shaping of Japan’s national identity, influencing therefore not merely how people really live, but also how they view life, art and death. Zen Buddhism similarly becomes part of a curated repertoire of cultural authenticity, often mobilized in literary and aesthetic forms to mark a Japanese sensibility distinct from Western rationalism, even as such representations are shaped by the West’s fascination with Zen simplicity.

Yukio Mishima reflects in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*: “The Zen concept that beauty lies in quiet contemplation, in the acceptance of death, has shaped the spirit of Japan’s warrior and artist alike” (12). The protagonist of the novel itself is Mizoguchi, a young Zen Buddhist acolyte who resides in the Golden Pavilion, a well-

known Buddhist temple. In *The Frolic of the Beasts* by Mishima, Yuko has a reserved burial plot for her grave when she dies “with her posthumous Buddhist name painted in bright vermilion” (12). The Buddhist priest of the village also chants prayers for a dead woman where he talks of “attachment to the Burning House (a Buddhist metaphor for the secular world) and the Eight Great Hells” through which a person must “endure unending torment by demons” (136).

The postwar period reveals the extent to which cultural authenticity was not inherited but actively reconstructed. The encounter with democracy, capitalism, and American cultural influence destabilized earlier moral structures and rendered tradition newly available as a strategic site of meaning. Riffed with conflict and confusion from the nation seeking to come to terms with its pre-war imperial identity and Western democratic and individualistic values, the resulting tension is crucial to the discussion of Japanese cultural authenticity during this period, particularly visible in the field of art, literature, and philosophy. Japanese society experienced tumultuous institutional renovation that touched people’s lives directly. Old laws were abrogated and traditional structures of authority that had provided the basis for Japanese cultural and moral framework were undermined. Thus, cultural authenticity emerges in this period not as continuity, but as a negotiated and rhetorical stance formed at the intersection of Western authority and the lingering emotional pull of older ethical frameworks.

Cultural Continuity in Crisis:

The postwar encounter introduced Western forms into Japan while also disrupting the structures that once sustained cultural continuity, producing a condition in which inherited values could no longer organize meaning. Under the Occupation, Western democratic and capitalist models became the new standards of cultural legitimacy, displacing older symbolic orders rather than merely coexisting with them. Raymond Williams, in his essay “Dominant, Residual, and Emergent”, describes such moments as the tension between the residual (values formed in an earlier cultural moment) and the emergent (new structures of meaning). The aristocratic ethos persisted as internalized memory while losing its social and ideological authority. The

crisis in postwar Japan is therefore not the erosion of tradition itself but its dislocation from the systems that once legitimized it. It is precisely this crisis that Dazai and Mishima expose without resolving, showing culture itself as a site of ongoing negotiation between the remnants of the past and the pressures of the present.

Osamu Dazai explores the disintegration of Japan's aristocratic class and the militarists in *The Setting Sun*. The aristocratic class does not merely decline: it is symbolically displaced as the cultural center of Japan by Western democratic and capitalist norms endorsed by the Occupation. The aristocracy loses meaning not on its own, but through the reestablishment of cultural value under foreign authority. This loss is not simply economic or psychological. It is a reordering of cultural legitimacy, where Western modernity becomes the new index of value and the aristocracy becomes a residual form. This signals the condition argued by Raymond Williams where residual cultural structures "effectively formed in the past" persist emotionally as an "element of the present" but no longer function as organizing values within the dominant system (122). In this sense, Kazuko's family does not merely decline as they continue in form but are hollowed in function, sustained by memory rather than social authority. Bhabha's concept of mimicry further clarifies this condition as the aristocracy survives only as performance, a "camouflage" that is "not a harmonization or repression of difference but a form of resemblance that differs" (128). It is repeated as a gesture of continuity even when its social grounding has dissolved. The aristocratic body remains, but the authority that once animated it has gone. Kazuko performs refinement not because it holds cultural power, but because its performance provides the last structure of meaning in a world where values are destabilized.

After World War II, aristocracy, once central to Japanese cultural authenticity and pride, faced a collapse and the aristocratic class was rendered irrelevant in a new, democratized Japan. Kazuko states, "I know that the aristocracy is now not what it once was, but if it must perish in any case, I would like to see it go down as elegantly as possible" (36). The decline of Kazuko's family in *The Setting Sun* reflects not merely personal misfortune but a structural displacement of cultural authority. What

had once functioned as a dominant culture becomes, in Raymond Williams's terms, a residual structure that is emotionally powerful, yet no longer capable of organizing meaning within the new postwar order. Kazuko and her family continue to perform the signs of aristocratic refinement, but the social world that once recognized and legitimized those signs has disappeared. Their survival becomes a matter not of material adaptation but of navigating a cultural space in which the values that once defined them have lost their legitimacy.

Naoji and his mother are crippled with their inability to adjust as their nobility is no longer a source of pride and they experience the collapse of the symbolic world that sustained their identity. Wondering with despair if they are to blame, Naoji asks, "Is it our fault that we were born aristocrats? Merely because we were born in such a family, we are condemned to spend our whole lives in humiliation, apologies, and abasement, like so many Jews" (158). His sense of guilt is not psychological self-hatred but the effect of a shift in cultural authority, in which their status becomes morally illegible with the disintegration of old order and hierarchical structures once central to Japan's cultural authenticity and its sense of uniqueness. The struggle to reconcile their privileged upbringing with a society that no longer values aristocratic forms of refinement reflects the crisis of continuity at the heart of the postwar encounter.

During the pre-war and war years, Japanese soldiers were celebrated as heroes who embodied self-sacrifice and loyalty to both the emperor and the nation. The state promoted great loyalty towards the emperor, and dying for Japan was viewed as the ultimate patriotism and devotion for the emperor. However, after Japan was defeated and the wartime atrocities came to light, the narrative shifted from glorification of Japanese soldiers for their ultimate loyalty and sacrifice to labelling them as anti-heroes and enemies of the state. This reveals the collective guilt and shame as well as the disillusionment felt by the people. Their militarism and patriotism which were once a source of cultural pride and national identity are now perceived as misguided ideologies that brought destruction upon Japan (Dower 98). Kazuko's brother Naoji is a former Japanese soldier who fought for the country in the South Pacific during World

War II. He returns from the war as an opium addict and struggles to adapt in a modern society that no longer values his military contributions. Disillusioned by the futility of the war, he states, “Japan’s war is an act of desperation. To die by being sucked into an act of desperation....no thanks. I had rather die by my own hand” (Dazai 66).

Naoji embodies the postwar sense of guilt and disillusionment as he is consumed by shame and self-loathing after returning from the war. When the ideological ground that once formed one’s identity collapses, the subject experiences a division of the self, caught between values that have lost meaning and new values that cannot yet be internalized. This corresponds to what Fanon describes as “situational neurosis” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 42) or “psycho-affective injuries” for “individuals without an anchor, without a horizon” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 218) who come to experience the self as fractured and estranged from its own emotional ground. Naoji’s addiction is not a moral weakness but the symptom of this fractured symbolic world. He lives in the gap between a past that no longer grants coherence and a present in which no stable framework has emerged. His despair registers the psychic cost of cultural displacement where continuity has been severed and meaning has not re-rooted itself.

Dazai’s reinterpretation of Japanese folktales in *Otogizoshi: The Fairy Tale Book of Dazai Osamu* through a modern and often cynical lens mirrors the crisis of cultural continuity that emerges when inherited narratives no longer align with postwar realities. In *The Fairy Tale Book*, the storyteller exclaims the difficulty of confirming the accuracy of his sources as he huddles in a bomb shelter with his family, with the setting indicating that tradition itself now survives under threat. In his retellings of classic Japanese folktales, the mood of reverence for Japanese tradition is frequently undermined by Dazai as he notes that some of the characters fail to embody the spirit of the bushido or the samurai, and he undercuts his professed stance of “deference for the sanctity of the Japanese historical record” (27) with his own comments on “wartime conditions” (xi) or the bleak and existential elements that “play little or no part in the originals” (xiii). Dazai’s undermining of the traditional morals of these tales reflects the dissonance between Japan’s cultural past and its present reality and the

folktales become a site where residual values confront emergent cultural realities, thereby exposing the instability of tradition in the postwar moment.

Joel Cohn, in his Introduction to Dazai's *The Fairy Tale Book*, notes that the stock figures of the original tales are given "a context and a distinctive personality" which have "little or no relation to the traditional story line", endowing them with "a degree of psychological complexity and ambiguity that owes more to the techniques of modern fiction than to the simplistic good or evil characterizations of conventional folk tales" (xiv). This shift demonstrates that tradition, rather than being preserved intact, is already a text open to revision, fragmentation, and irony. Dazai's revisions reveal how "tradition" is itself a text that can be dismantled and rewritten, meaning that cultural authenticity is not recovered, but actively reconstructed. Here, Bhabha's statement that traditional cultural norms, "through repetition, also become different" (128) and "the repetition that will not return as the same" (232) becomes valid because tradition is repeated, but without the seamless continuity that once gave it authority. This is cultural memory in crisis, not cultural continuity. In this sense, Dazai's revisions depict a condition in which cultural meanings are shaped in response to an external gaze, where such meanings are "not "truth" but representations" (21) created by the West, so that what appears as "authentic" tradition is already mediated by the frameworks of Western cultural dominance.

This crisis becomes evident in the narratives themselves. In "Click Clack Mountain", the plight of the outsider is such that he is not taken seriously and misunderstood by everyone; romantic and familial ties become emotional burdens instead of sources of solace or fulfilment in "The Sparrow Who Lost Her Tongue"; the premonition that things will likely go wrong when people are left with their own choices permeates "Urashima-san", and in "The Stolen Wen", Dazai concludes that "although not a single instance of wrongdoing occurs in the story, people end up unhappy" (22). The moral worlds that once sustained communal meaning no longer function. The retelling of "The Sparrow Who Lost Her Tongue" provides Dazai's outlook regarding the fictitious nature of human beings that finds a recurrence in most of his works: "The people in this world are all liars.... All they do is lie. And the worst

part of it is that they don't even realize they're doing it" (107). This is a signal to the collapse of the shared ethical universe that traditional tales once affirmed. The modernization of these folktales with existential and sometimes even nihilistic undertones reveals tradition not as lost, but as unanchored and forced to circulate without the cultural structures that once secured its meaning. The postwar folktale becomes a site where the break in cultural continuity is exposed, where the past cannot simply be restored, because the frameworks that once stabilized it have dissolved in the wake of Western ideological dominance.

Yukio Mishima was deeply concerned with the preservation of Japan's spiritual and historical essence and the erosion of traditional Japanese values. Mishima positions tradition as a desired point of orientation, yet his work simultaneously reveals that this orientation is already shaped by the conditions of modernity. Tradition, in this sense, becomes an aesthetic reference point rather than a preserved cultural continuity that must be staged in order to appear meaningful. His advocacy for a return to Japan's traditional and spiritual roots, such as bushido or the Samurai code of conduct, and reverence for the emperor, is exemplified by his failed coup d'état and his suicide by seppuku, the Samurai ritual suicide, in 1970. Yet Mishima's traditionalism is not restorative but aestheticized and performative. This corresponds to what Bhabha describe as a repetition with a difference and without full continuity (128). Tradition turns into something to be displayed, stylized, and dramatized and becomes a gesture toward origins that are no longer accessible or socially operative.

He was the founder and leader of a private militia called the Tatenokai or Shield Society in Japan that was dedicated to preventing the destruction of traditional Japanese traditional culture and values by foreign ideologies and protecting the veneration of the emperor. During the Tatenokai's coup d'état, his written statement is a complaint on how Japan had forsaken its fundamental principles and had sold its soul for money. All that awaits was "spiritual emptiness" because "the people had forsaken their own history and traditions" with his final question being, "Where has the spirit of the samurai gone to?" (Rankin 171). He berated "the soldiers for their passive acceptance of a constitution that denied their existence", and

beseached them to “join him in a revolt to overturn the constitution” (171). However, while being contemptuous of Japan’s increasingly Westernized and consumerist culture industry, Mishima also took every opportunity offered to him by the industry. His “traditionalism” and his “worship of cultural purity” were continually contradicted by his cosmopolitanism and exhibitionism (2), making his relationship to tradition one of simultaneous longing and theatrical display rather than restoration. As a result, his persona was undeniably an intermingling of tradition and modernity.

Closely associated with the imperial family and the samurai warrior class, the aristocratic class were considered to be custodians of Japan’s cultural and aesthetic heritage, with tea ceremonies, poetry, calligraphy and other arts seen as uniquely Japanese (Keene 25). Tea ceremonies are constantly featured in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* by Yukio Mishima. The protagonist Mizoguchi speaks of “the Yukatei teahouse” (93) and “the Tenju Hermitage” that has a large room “frequently used for tea-dedications and rented for tea ceremonies”, where he witness a woman holding a teacup in her hands and kneeling directly in front of a man to whom she offers “the teacup according to etiquette” (46). He also mentions that after the American troops arrive in Japan after the war, the old customs and traditions begin to “flourish about the Golden Temple” as “the custom of tea-dedication [is] revived” and many “women visitors now [come] to the temple in colourful clothes that they had stored away during the war years” (63). However, this revival is exhibitionary rather than organic as it is tradition as spectacle, staged within a new cultural space where meaning must be performed rather than lived. The temple stands as preserved monument to cultural memory rather than a lived and functioning site of ethical practice.

As an acolyte of the Golden Pavilion temple, Mishima’s protagonist Mizoguchi from *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* is supposed to be obedient and diligent in his duties and trainings. He is meant to embody Zen discipline and remain untainted by worldly pleasures, but his existence occurs in a world where the symbolic authority of the temple has already weakened. As a future Zen Buddhist priest, his current role is to devote himself to taking care of the temple where he will most likely spend the rest

of his life. Though he is a devoted trainee in the beginning, his indulgence in worldly pleasures and his fatalistic obsession with beauty eventually lead him astray. He chooses the path of no return as he destroys the temple by burning it down. Mizoguchi's mentor after his father's death is Father Dosen, the Superior of the Golden Pavilion. As a well-respected Superior revered by everyone in the temple, it shocks Mizoguchi when he encounters his Superior, fully clad in Western clothing rather than the typical robes worn by Buddhist priests, having an affair with a geisha. He states, "Our Superior possessed a dark spiritual life of which we knew nothing and that, compared with this life, the little evils and sins and negligences that I had so assiduously attempted were trivial beyond words" (222-223). Mizoguchi and Father Dosen's indulgences in pleasures of the flesh reveal how their roles as Buddhist priest and acolyte do not necessarily deter them from pursuing material and carnal pleasures. Mizoguchi's disillusionment does not arise from personal corruption alone, but from the recognition that the institutions meant to transmit cultural continuity no longer have the power to shape subjectivity. This is not merely moral decline; it is the dislocation of tradition from the structures that once sustained it.

The Golden Pavilion temple symbolizes traditional Japanese aesthetics and cultural heritage as well as the imagined permanence of cultural authenticity in postwar Japan. Its destruction reveals that authenticity itself is a fiction held in place through cultural authority. Mizoguchi burns the temple not because tradition has vanished, but because the power sustaining tradition has shifted; the temple can no longer function as a cultural anchor in a Western-dominated symbolic order. Tradition has become what Raymond Williams calls a "residual" form that is still emotionally powerful, yet no longer structurally operative within the emergent Western-dominated social order. He is tormented by the temple not being destroyed during the war because for him, it signals the indestructible and eternal beauty of the Golden Pavilion. He states, "The eternity which told me that the Golden Temple was to remain there forever. The eternity that descended from heaven, sticking to our cheeks, our hands, our stomachs and finally burying us. How cursed a thing it was!" (60). The temple, a symbol of an unchanging, immovable cultural purity, becomes oppressive because of the very thing

it symbolizes as it functions as an image of continuity at the very moment continuity has collapsed.

Mizoguchi makes a list of the temples that have burnt down in the history of Japan. His statement that these temples had been burned down because the world is an uneasy place underscores his recognition that cultural forms are not eternal but contingent. He asks, “What reason was there that the Golden Temple should not be burned down now?” (194). The Pavilion’s stillness, where “nothing flowed” and “nothing changed” (60), is incongruent with the postwar Japan where everything is impermanent and in a state of flux. Its purity has become a theatrical display rather than a lived ethical framework. In Bhabha’s terms, tradition in the postwar moment is not the seamless continuation of the past but a performative repetition in the present, a repetition that attempts to restore coherence where historical grounding has weakened. He writes that “the scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture” and that it is in the “repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative” that national meaning is produced (208), revealing that continuity itself is constructed in the act of repetition.

Mizoguchi believes burning down the Golden Temple will have great educational value for it will teach people that the mere fact of the Golden Temple’s five hundred and fifty years of existence “confers no guaranty” upon its continued existence in the future, that “the self-evident axiom which our survival has predicated on the temple can collapse from one day to another” (183). The destruction is not an act against tradition, but against the illusion of unbroken continuity. Since he lives in a world where old moralities and traditions no longer hold meaning, he tries to release the Golden Pavilion from its eventual fate of changing its essence. It must be destroyed because it remains only as a display of cultural memory. The fact that Mizoguchi is changed from within does not merely mark personal corruption; it registers the psychological effects of a cultural order displaced by Western symbolic authority. The burning of the Pavilion is therefore not simply nihilism but the violent recognition that tradition has become image, and image cannot sustain the self.

Mishima provides a glimpse of an old Japanese tradition that have been discontinued in the novel *The Frolic of the Beasts*. The unnamed narrator of the novel is a researcher who works on a thesis titled the “Study of Celebration and Reciters” (149). He comes across the story of the protagonist Koji, Yuko and Ippei during his stay in Iro Village for his research. It is also in this village that he encounters a priest who complains to him that the boat event, a local festival “held annually on November 3” until several decades ago, had since died out and the boatman’s song, “which had been preserved by the village shrine”, is in danger of dying out (152). The priest’s lament that “with each passing day the young people of the village were increasingly turning their backs on the customs and traditions of the past” (151), highlights the festival not as a living practice but as a cultural remainder. In Raymond Williams’s terms, the festival becomes a residual form that is emotionally charged yet no longer socially operative within the emergent postwar cultural order. The loss of the village festival does not signal the disappearance of meaning, but the displacement of cultural authority into urban, Western-legible systems of value. The past remains, but as a relic to observed, archived, or mourned rather than lived.

Postwar Japanese culture therefore appears not as continuous tradition but as a field in which cultural forms survive as signs after their structures of meaning have collapsed. Dazai and Mishima do not present tradition as lost or Westernization as triumphant; instead, they depict a crisis of cultural continuity in which inherited forms persist only as fragments, gestures, or stylistic references. This corresponds to what Bhabha describes as the repetition of cultural forms or a performance of continuity that reveals its own fracture. Japan’s encounter with forces from Westernization and modernization exposes cultural authenticity as historically unstable rather than inherent, revealing the fragmentation of the very values that once anchored national identity and tradition. Cultural forms that once functioned as ethical frameworks now function as symbolic markers, used to compensate for their own erosion.

The selected authors, along with the characters inside their narratives, happen to find themselves entangled in contradictions, thus simultaneously rejecting and also embracing features of modernity and tradition. The postwar era therefore reveals not

simply a struggle to preserve cultural authenticity, but a struggle to negotiate the shattered continuity of cultural memory. It remains subjected to reinvention, and ultimately hollow in the face of an ever-changing world. While figures like Dazai and Mishima grapple with these tensions with no cultural grounding through literature, their works reveal not simply the survival of tradition, but its transformation into image, citation, and performance. Their narratives do not objectify that postwar Japan is entirely swamped under the West. Rather, their narratives expose the underlying fractures and unresolved tensions generated by the East-West encounter. They serve as emblems of Japan's broader struggles in which forms of cultural inheritance continue to exist without the structures that once gave them coherence.

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CHAPTER THREE

Negotiating Identity in Postwar Japan

This chapter explores the formation of identity in the postwar Japanese context, where long-standing cultural frameworks of the self were disrupted by the collapse of the imperial order and the rapid influx of Western values. Traditional Japanese identity has often been understood as relational and context-dependent, structured through the shifting balance of *tatemae* (public façade) and *honne* (inner feeling). The characters in Dazai and Mishima's works reveal the difficulty of sustaining this balance in a transformed social world. Their narrators and protagonists do not simply perform different selves in response to different contexts; rather, they experience an acute awareness of the gap between these selves – a gap that becomes a source of psychic tension and existential unease. The crisis of selfhood depicted in these narratives is therefore not merely psychological or individual, but rooted in broader cultural and historical forces. In a postwar milieu where older ethical and communal forms of belonging have lost meaning and newer ideals of autonomy and individual self-expression remain unstable, identity emerges as fragmented, contingent, and continuously negotiated. It is this condition of living between incompatible models of selfhood that this chapter examines.

This ushered in an identity crisis for many Japanese who were torn between their national identity and the growing emphasis on individual autonomy. A sense of loss and alienation sprang forth as a consequence for disrupting the cultural continuity of Japan and the need to adapt to new social frameworks (Hashimoto 12). The negotiation of identity in postwar Japan was fraught with tension between preserving its cultural authenticity and embracing the values of a modernized world, thereby resulting in a nation continuously redefining itself in the shadow of its past (Keene 1997). The works of Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima from this period reflect this tension with particular clarity. Their protagonists do not merely struggle to choose between tradition and modernity; they inhabit the space where both remain operative, yet neither is sufficient to secure a stable sense of self. The result is an identity

experienced as fractured and unresolved, mirroring the broader national effort to reconcile a historical past with a radically changed present.

Formation of the Japanese Self:

Identity refers to the multifaceted ways individuals understand themselves and their place in the world, encompassing personal experiences, cultural backgrounds and social roles. According to the Jamaican-British sociologist Stuart Hall, “Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact... we should think of identity as a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (68). Identity explores how individuals shape their sense of self through internal and external influences and how they negotiate their place within society and culture, often highlighting the fluidity and complexity of human identity formation. The concept of identity in Japan is fairly different from the West in the sense that the Japanese self does not adhere to the idea of a bounded, impermeable, unified identity and acknowledges the self as adaptive, permeable and relational. The concept of selfhood in Western thought has revolved around the idea of a fixed, autonomous and unified self that prioritizes individuality, authenticity and rationality (Sartre 21). The Western self, deeply individualistic and aware of itself, is located at the centre through which the universe is perceived and a sovereign possessing a sense of personal control and coherence is established.

Western thought has always laid emphasis on the mind, consciousness or logic and one’s mastery over it for the formation of selfhood or personal identity. The 17th century French thinker Rene Descartes asserts the self as a distinct, thinking entity through his philosophical statement, “Cogito, ergo sum” or “I think, therefore I am” (73) in his 1637 seminal work *Discourse on the Method*; John Locke, the Enlightenment thinker whose *An Essay On Human Understanding* (1698) posits that the continuity of an individual’s “consciousness” of his/her “present thoughts and actions” is central to maintaining a unified, “personal self” (303). In tracing the Western notion of a unified self in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989), the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor argues that reason and morality make possible “self-mastery, which consists in reason ruling over desires, a

self-control which contrasts to being dominated by one's appetites and passions" (124). The Western "autonomous individual imagines the incredible, that he lives within an inviolate protected region (the extended boundaries of the self) where he is 'free to choose'" (Shweder and Bourne 192).

The Japanese self, on the other hand, is constructed by omote (surface self) that is presented to the soto (outside) where "what is thought to be good is displayed" and ura (hidden self) that is kept closed up in uchi (inside) where "what we fear may be judged negatively is shut away" (Doi 29), with a complex interchange between the two. This concept of 'self' in Japan and its interaction with society is put forth by the Japanese academic and psychoanalyst Takeo Doi in his book, *The Anatomy of Self* (1986). According to Doi, omote and ura "are not split" and "do not exist separately but, cojoined, form a single existence", suggesting "unity" and "a quality of two-sidedness" (29). Unlike Western perceptions of a fixed, singular self which emphasizes individuality and authenticity, the Japanese self is relational, adjusting and shifting between these two modes based on situational contexts. Delving into the psychological mechanisms that enable this adaptability, he describes tatemae as the public facade and honne as true feelings that reflect the tension between societal expectations and individual desires.

Takie Sugiyama Lebra, a Japanese anthropologist and professor, similarly examines in her book, *The Japanese Self in Cultural Logic* (2004), the concept of self in Japanese culture. She believes that Japan's cultural identity and selfhood are shaped more by fluidity and contextuality rather than the strict binaries of Western thought such as right versus wrong or self versus other where the self is at the very center and appears to be in symmetric opposition to everything else. Acknowledging the shifting nature of identity in Japanese society, she emphasizes the interdependence between self and other and the division of the Japanese self into the social self that is defined by social roles/obligations and surface level interactions and the inner self that is developed through introspection and often hidden or revealed through silence, giri (duty), body language and emotions. The boundary between the two, "far from fixed

or impenetrable”, involves constant shifting and is therefore “in a sense semi-transparent” (88).

The Japanese concept of the self is not an isolated, individualistic entity but a fluid, relational identity that navigates relationships without fixed binaries and is constantly reshaped by interactions with other people, thereby showcasing its interdependent nature. Similar to Takeo Doi’s argument, Lebra states that the social self or “omote confronts that world by presenting a carefully packaged version of self (display)” while the inner self or “uchi wraps the self up protectively and makes it more or less inaccessible to the world (concealment)” and hence, interactions are more intimate and informal “with the theatrical mask removed” (67). The self presented in the omote (social self) action “assumes the greatest significance in keeping society in order” (43) where an individual’s behavior is “characterized by linguistic, spatial, and bodily “wrapping” of self – that is, presentation of an acceptable and appropriate package to the outside world” (65).

Lebra notes that not everybody is successful in separating their private self and public façade, with the consequence being an “involuntary unwrapping of self” of an individual or “the uncontrolled leakage of their undesirable selves in front of others” (66) and the counter-action being “a further attempt at self-wrapping” that often exacerbates the mental anguish of the said individual. Takeo Doi also similarly posits that the individual is not always consciously aware of the distinction between public façade and true feelings, sometimes going so far as to deny the existence of his *honne* or true feelings, which can lead him/her to lose control of it and as a result, “*honne* can run rampant in ways that are extremely grotesque” (39). This shows how a balance between the dual structure is crucial in maintaining a person’s psychological balance. Lebra stresses on the necessity for a sense of order within the outside zone to control “multiple selves within a single self” as the absence of discipline or breakdown of boundary can result in psychological imbalance and alienation (103). As one’s inner zone is the locus of one’s self-identity, the inner zone can be regarded as “the sacred innermost space” (148) containing one’s truths and secrets. The Japanese consciousness to grasp the dual nature of things is considered crucial to the point that

“a person is not considered to be an adult until he or she has grasped this distinction” (Doi 33).

This idea aligns with the Japanese concept of the Eightfold Fence that originates from one of the first recorded poems in Japan from the 8th century. Included in the *Kokiji: An Account of Ancient Matters*, the poem talks of Susanoo-no-Mikoto, the male deity who founded Japan, who built a palace surrounded by eight layers of clouds for his wife Kushinadahime (27). Used as a metaphor for a strong and layered barrier to describe a relationship or a strong bond, the Eightfold Fence also signifies a coping mechanism that allows the Japanese to compartmentalize their personal and social selves, enabling them to act appropriately and maintain composure even in the midst of challenges. This is vividly echoed in the novel *Shogun* (1975) by James Clavell, whose recent television series adaptation in 2024 won multiple awards, including the Primetime Emmy Awards and the Golden Globe Awards. In *Shogun*, the female character Mariko confesses to Anjin-san that to create their own privacy, the Japanese have been trained ever since childhood “to disappear within [themselves], to grow impenetrable walls behind which [they] live. If [they] couldn’t, [they’d] all certainly go mad and kill each other and [themselves]” (720). Claiming that they have “a limitless maze to hide in” within their inner world which enables them to be a million miles away even in the midst of socializing, Mariko explains that this practice is for centering oneself to be reminded of “the transience of life, to help you gain wa, harmony.... which is the most sought-after quality in all Japanese life, all art, all” (720).

The Surface Self and the Inner Self:

Osamu Dazai features in the selected texts characters dominated by their *honne* (true feelings) that renders them incapable of performing their societal roles and obligations. The farcical and inauthentic feeling they experience while enacting their public façade highlights the irreconcilable rift between the surface self and the inner self. In *No Longer Human*, the protagonist Oba Yozo is a forlorn character whose *honne* transmogrifies him into a passive, hollow figure. Since he cannot achieve reconciliation between his surface self and his inner self, he becomes an outcast who

cannot function as a normal human being in the postwar Japanese society. His inner self lacks an understanding of his fellow human beings and feels disconnected from them. He neither knows how to “speak or act like a human being” (28), nor understands the sensation of “hunger” (22) and “what makes human beings tick” (24) because he perceives himself to be a non-human who is “disqualified as a human being” (167). He harbours a grim, nihilistic perception of life where he views the world “as place of bottomless horror” (133). To conceal his real, hidden self and uphold his identity as a normal person, he makes multiple efforts by masking to maintain his public façade through his performative clown persona during childhood, his Marxist liaison to seem modern, and his womanizing as well as his dissolute personas after entering adulthood.

Yozo’s efforts are always in vain because his performances to fit into society are gruelling and torturous as they signal to him a sense of dishonesty. This is exemplified by his statement:

I deceived them. I was aware that everybody in the apartment house was friendly to me, but.... how much I feared them all, and how I was cursed by the unhappy peculiarity that the more I feared people the more I was liked, and the more I was liked the more I feared them. (117)

The guilty feeling he experiences whenever he enacts his social roles indicates the lack of reconciliation between his public persona and his inner feelings. He states, “When they tied me up as a criminal I actually felt relieved—a calm, relaxed feeling” (92), suggesting that the awareness of his deceptive and hypocritical public persona causes him to suffer. Committing crimes, destroying himself through alcohol and drugs, and living a life of degeneracy seems to be his only way of bridging the gap between his surface self and his inner self.

In *The Setting Sun* by Osamu Dazai, Kazuko and her family, former aristocrats born into the nobility and currently facing financial ruin, try to navigate life in Japan in the wake of World War II. Denouncing old moralities and claiming that her “present life is unendurable” (80), Kazuko chooses to prioritize love over convention and becomes the mistress of a married man named Mr. Uehara, and an unmarried single

mother. In her letters to him, she repeatedly begs him to accept her as a mistress and impregnate her so she can raise the child on her own. Completely abandoning traditional femininity, she chooses love over societal roles or obligations and muses:

But I am happy. I have become pregnant, as I had hoped.... I cannot possibly think of it in terms of a "hideous mistake" or anything of the sort.... The only thing in my mind was to succeed in the adventure of my wholehearted love. Now that my desire has been fulfilled, there is in my heart the stillness of a marsh in a forest. I think I have won. (172)

This signifies that Kazuko is a character driven by *honne* (true feelings) as she renounces her social image to live life on her own terms. She is willing to be at odds with the world in pursue of her desires as she declares, "A bastard and its mother. We will live in perpetual struggle with the old morality, like the sun" (174). Her wilful defiance in not maintaining her public persona symbolizes Kazuko's stance that there can never be harmony between the life she chooses and the society she dwells in. Her decision to assert her freedom can be perceived as a new awareness informed by a changing society under non-Japanese influences.

Kazuko's brother, Naoji, from *The Setting Sun* is a character whose *honne* (true feelings) causes him to self-destruct and wallow in self-pity. Being born and raised as an aristocrat and a former Japanese soldier during World War II, he seeks freedom from the shadows of his past life through drug abuse, alcoholism, nihilism and reckless behaviour. To escape his noble upbringing and fit into society, he rejects family values and obligations and puts on the mask of a self-indulgent, "coarse" and "brutal" man who is a "friend of the people" (154). However, behind his degenerate and coarse persona lies great suffering because he is aware of the falseness and farcicality of his acts. His statement, "I had to forget my family. I had to oppose my father's blood. I had to reject my mother's gentleness. I had to be cold to my sister" (154), suggests the arduous lengths he must take to enact his public persona. The last sentence of his suicide letter reads, "I am, after all, an aristocrat" (169), suggesting that an aristocrat by birth does not compromise even before all oddities. This in other words explains that despite his efforts to fit in with the commonfolk, his aristocratic background still

remains a major part of his inner self and he can never rid himself of it even after the aristocracy's fall from grace in the postwar era. His eventual suicide is further proof of the lack of reconciliation between his surface self and his inner self.

In *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* by Yukio Mishima, the protagonist Mizoguchi is a character whose honne (true feelings) urges him to completely abandon his public persona and leads to a path of destruction. Though he puts on the mask of a cheerful young man, his inner self is filled with an intense self-loathing because he suffers from stuttering and his weak physical constitution makes him feel "a trifle uglier than the others" (32). His sufferings and sense of alienation all stem from his stuttering. When he goes on a date with a girl, he is in doubt as to why she associates with him as he says, "I could not understand.... what impulse drove her to this desire for contamination" (117). Since his inner self is filled with self-hate and negative self-perceptions, the all-consuming obsession he develops with the Golden Temple is the only thing he clings to outside of himself. As a Zen acolyte, he has training as well as obligations both in the temple and his educational institution he has to carry out. However, as his obsession with the Golden Temple grows, he indulges in various forms of mischief and wrong doings, and burns the temple towards the end of the novel in a twisted pursuit to become one with the beauty of the temple. Being completely controlled by his honne, he abandons his public persona as a priest-in-training by destroying the temple he has sworn to protect. All his efforts are expended towards bringing himself closer to the temple's unattainable beauty and perfection. His statement, "I must burn the Golden Temple after all. Only then could a new life begin that was made specially to order for myself" (186), highlights how his honne extends towards something external to validate itself, further proving the inability of his inner self to form a clear identity.

Apart from Mizoguchi, most of Mishima's characters are individuals who constantly work towards brandishing and mastering their tatemae (public façade) because they cannot accept their inner, hidden selves. Their honne (true feelings) prompts them to steadfastly enact their societal roles and moral obligations so as not to be caught. Feelings of inauthenticity and deception arise while they enact their

tatemaie (public façade) and they are aware of the gap between the surface self and the inner self. However, Mishima's characters choose to be dominated by their public façades which indicates that there can never be a harmonious shift between the dual selves. In Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), the protagonist Kochan suffers from "the sense of being different" (54) from other boys his age because he struggles with his hidden homosexuality and his inability to conform to traditional masculinity. Being weak, sickly and solitary ever since childhood, and his homosexual desires and fascination with violence and death all lead him to wear a carefully maintained persona.

He pretends to be a fun-loving, active boy, and as he becomes a young adult, he forces himself into relationships with women even though his attraction is solely towards men. He cannot accept his true feelings because his homosexuality gives him a "sense of uneasiness" and "uncertainty" (70). He confesses, "What I was now disgusted with was my true self, was clearly a part of my true life" (67). His self-disgust drives him to put on a masquerade and play his "part on the stage without once ever revealing" his true self (68). Repressing his true feelings and forcing himself into heterosexual relationships become his moral obligation for fear of societal rejection. He is aware of "the emptiness of the gulf" (67) that separates him from others due to his performative masculinity and inherent perversity. However, till the end he wilfully entraps himself, outwardly rejecting his *honne* and never once letting go of his public persona. The irreconcilable split he discerns between his surface self and inner self leads him to accept the suffering that will ensue while living in the postwar Japanese society. This postwar society has affected the characters to an extent when they confront the self, as they become more conscious of their self-divide.

In *The Frolic of the Beasts* by Yukio Mishima, the protagonist, Koji, is initially depicted as a passive, free-spirited youth with no strong family ties. After getting involved in a love triangle between Yuko and her husband Ippei, he is filled with love for Yuko and even after committing a crime against Ippei, he has to remind himself of his repentance so as not to pursue Yuko. However, he suppresses his *honne* (true feelings) and prioritizes his public persona after accepting the impossibility of their

situation. Koji and Yuko's existence revolve around the physically and mentally impaired Ippei as they take up responsibility for him. Towards the end of the novel, Koji admits to having the notion that his life and actions are dictated by Ippei as he states, "A lot of things have happened. But, in the end, I feel like I've behaved and lived exactly the way he wanted me to. And that will probably carry on this way from now on as well" (146). They grant Ippei's wish to die by killing him, and as a result, Koji is given the death penalty and Yūko is sentenced to life imprisonment. Koji's return to Yuko and Ippei in the Kusakado greenhouse to resume a life of servitude after being released from prison, his fatalistic devotion and his eventual death encapsulate his prioritizing of *tatema*e (public façade) and *giri* (duty) over his inner feelings and desires. The statement regarding Koji that "whenever his desire arose, it inevitably revived his crime" towards Ippei (87) serves as evidence for the impossibility of bridging the gap between his surface self and his inner self.

Ippei, Yuko's husband and Koji's former mentor, from *The Frolic of the Beasts* is initially portrayed as a character fuelled by his *hon*ne. Formerly a wealthy, middle-aged man who is worldly, self-indulgent, intellectually sophisticated and morally corrupt with numerous love affairs outside of his marriage, he pursues his inner desires and emotions without caring for the repercussions. However, after Koji's physical assault leaves him physically and mentally impaired, he morphs into a character whose *tatema*e (public facade) is the only side of him visible to the world. Ippei's spirit or inner self is portrayed to be struggling behind "an invisible and impregnable wall" (59) with no exit, where "his hands and feet were bound and his intellect gagged" (60). "Unable to communicate freely his desires" (57), his intercourse with people is reduced to only a few words and he answers "everything with the same warm, helpless smile" (61). He has no choice but to wear this agreeable façade that always smiles and appears to be not cognizant of what happens around him.

Koji perceives something sinister and uncanny in Ippei's smile. He feels that Ippei's clueless façade is a way for him to exert control over him and Yuko, and that he is secretly aware of what he is doing to them. He states to Ippei:

Our household has begun to revolve around the hollow cavern that lies inside you....and not only that, but you arranged Yuko and me around the periphery in a manner that suits you and took it into your head to create for yourself an entirely new family of the kind that wouldn't have occurred to anyone else. (141)

One can mark his use of images of cavern (innermost self) and periphery (public façade) in non-negotiable contrast. Koji's suspicions regarding Ippei's mental impediment can be regarded as his inability to accept the reality that he has rendered him disabled, and that he is the cause of Ippei's transformation. However, instances in the text where Ippei has "an unmistakable smile on his face" (77) when Koji slaps Yuko on the face after an argument, or where he requests to sleep in the guestroom beside Koji's room instead of their bedroom immediately after Yuko tries to share a bed with Koji, raise the question of whether Ippei is mindlessly reacting to his surroundings in his limited capacity, or if he secretly has an awareness of his actions and has mastered this public façade to torture Koji and Yuko. Therefore, it becomes impossible to determine in this study whether Ippei is a character whose inner self is trapped and his whole being is driven by his surface self, or if he is putting on a façade to disguise his wicked private self that is driven solely by his *honne* (true feelings).

Psychoanalytic Split Subject and Crisis of Masculinity:

While the *tatemae-honne* duality explains the cultural negotiation between surface and interiority, the division within the self in these texts is not only social but fundamentally psychic. As the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan argues, the subject is not a coherent, self-transparent consciousness but a being divided between the ego and the unconscious. The subject is "nothing but this very split" where its two parts are "radically separated", sharing no common ground (Fink 45). This split reveals that identity is constituted in language and thus always alienated. Lacan describes this as "the alienation by which the internal splitting of existence and facticity is inscribed in the subject, along with the complete ambivalence of the position he identifies" (285). To be a subject, therefore, is to live one's own being as split or divided, existing simultaneously as actor and object of one's acts. Bruce Fink, in his study of Lacan in

The Lacanian Subject (1995), further clarifies that “the splitting of the I into ego and unconscious brings into being a surface, with two sides: one exposed and one hidden” (45). This mirrors Japan’s *tatemae/honne* duality, suggesting that this psychic division is both cultural and structural.

Lacan distinguishes the ego, that is, the surface of imaginary identifications, from the unconscious subject that speaks through slips and symptoms. The ego, “a crystallization of ideal images” (Fink 36), arises from the gaze of the Other and is therefore “by its very nature a distortion, an error, a repository of misunderstanding” (37). This fiction of wholeness explains why Dazai’s Yozo in *No Longer Human* fails to maintain a coherent self. His confession, “I was unable to believe that I was a human being” (21), and his self-definition as “a clown” (42), reveal an ego sustained by performance. Yozo fears “Takeichi would see through it” (44), exposing the terror of being seen beyond the mask. As Lacan suggests, the subject’s division is dramatized at the moment “the mask unmasks the face it represents only by splitting in two” (633), the instant when the unconscious truth breaks through the social surface it sustains and the moment when the imaginary coherence of self collapses. This psychic fracture extends to Naoji in *The Setting Sun*, whose shame and self-loathing embody Lacan’s notion of the splitting subject. His admission, “I am ashamed of having been born into nobility” (154), and his resigned confession, “I am, after all, an aristocrat” (169), capture the impossibility of escaping the signifiers that shape his being. Like the Lacanian subject, Naoji is bound to an image imposed by the symbolic order and his rebellion against aristocratic identity only reaffirms its hold.

Lacan’s concept of *objet petit a* further explains this psychic tension. It refers to the unattainable object of desire that is the cause of desire itself, representing a fantasy that is sought but can never be fully obtained and always out of reach. Desire, Lacan writes, “is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference which results from the subtraction of the first from the second – the very phenomenon of their splitting” (580). The subject’s desire revolves around lack or absence, not fulfilment: “Man’s desire is the desire of the Other” (690). As Fink explains, *objet petit a* is “the remainder produced when that hypothetical unity breaks

down,” the “last trace” of a wholeness that never existed (59). In Mishima’s *Confessions of a Mask*, Kochan’s erotic fascination with St. Sebastian embodies this logic as the beautiful, wounded body becomes the unattainable object that organizes his fragmented desire. His later confession that his kiss with Sonoko brings “not the slightest sensation of pleasure” (131) underscores how desire’s true object never satisfies and reflects the absence that drives desire.

A similar dynamic governs Mizoguchi in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, whose attachment to the temple is “entirely rooted in [his] own ugliness” (36), turning beauty into a structure of lack. The temple serves as *objet petit a*: an unattainable ideal that both sustains and torments him. When Mizoguchi confesses, “It was so beautiful it made me want to destroy it” (20), he enacts the Lacanian paradox of desire’s self-destruction, that is, the drive to obliterate the object that reveals one’s incompleteness or lack. For Lacan, fantasy allows the subject to “sustain him or herself in being, as a being of desire” (Fink 61), though “the sense of being that is provided by fantasy is ‘false being’” (xii). Mizoguchi’s act of arson destroys the illusion of wholeness that the fantasy maintains, collapsing the gap between the desiring subject and the unattainable object.

If Lacan exposes the psychic fractures of subjectivity, Connell reveals how these internal divisions are intensified within shifting social hierarchies. Masculinity, as R.W. Connell argues, cannot be understood as a fixed essence or biological given but as a relational and historically situated practice. “Rather than attempting to define masculinity as an object (a natural character type, a behavioural average, a norm), we need to focus on the processes and relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives” (71). Masculinity is thus “simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture” (71). Within this relational structure, Connell identifies “hegemonic masculinity” as the configuration of practice that “embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy” and “guarantees... the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). This hegemony, however, is always provisional:

“When conditions for the defence of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded” (78).

The postwar collapse of Japan’s militarized masculine ideal, as depicted in Dazai and Mishima, exemplifies what Connell calls “crisis tendencies... in the modern gender order” where there are attempts to “restore a dominant masculinity” (84). Dazai’s *The Setting Sun* presents Naoji, an ex-soldier and fallen aristocrat, whose degeneracy and self-destruction portray the erosion of the patriarchal code that once secured male authority. His admission, “I had to forget my family... I had to be cold to my sister” (Dazai 154), reveals his futile attempt to reject class privilege he inherited while still being haunted by its legacy. His final confession, “I am, after all, an aristocrat” (169), highlights the contradiction Connell outlines in which masculinity clings to a vanished order while being unable to adapt to the new one. Similarly, in Mishima’s *Confessions of a Mask*, Kochan’s internalization of hegemonic masculinity leaves him trapped in performance. His “icy-cold sense of duty” (168) and forced heterosexuality exemplify masculinity as a coercive norm where his identity is sustained by repression rather than strength. Mishima’s *The Frolic of the Beasts* extends this crisis to the social realm as Koji, bound by giri (duty) and dependency, confesses that he has “behaved and lived exactly the way [Ippei] wanted” (146). He is an embodiment of the subordination of individual will within the remnants of patriarchal control.

Across these narratives, Dazai and Mishima’s male protagonists manifest Connell’s concept of masculinity as a “configuration of practice within a system of gender relations” (84) under transformation. Their violence, alienation, and self-destruction are not merely personal failures but historical symptoms of a shifting gender regime. In postwar Japan, where militarized hierarchy gave way to democratic uncertainty, hegemonic masculinity was stripped of its legitimizing structures. The men who once derived identity from service and discipline now enact the collapse of those ideals in their own bodies through addiction, repression, or self-annihilation. In this sense, Dazai and Mishima’s male characters are not deviations from masculinity

but witnesses to its instability at a time when the remnants of a patriarchal order struggles to redefine itself amid the ruins of modernity.

Judith Butler's theorization of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990) dismantles the assumption that masculinity or femininity reflects a natural or prediscursive identity. For Butler, "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (33). Gender is not something one is but something one does; it is a stylized repetition of acts that produces the illusion of stability through reiteration. As she writes, "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (179). These repetitive gestures, postures, and speech patterns create what Butler calls "the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (179). The apparent coherence of masculinity is therefore an effect of repetition rather than an expression of inner truth. "Acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core" (173), Butler observes, exposing how behaviour constructs what it seems to reveal. Because gender is performative rather than innate, there is a possibility of a failure to repeat the acts. This failure exposes the contingency of the norm and reveals that "the inner truth of gender is a fabrication... inscribed on the surface of bodies" (174). Rather than being fixed, masculinity, then, is a disciplinary performance that must continually reiterate itself to maintain authority, "with clearly punitive consequences" for those who fail to "do their gender right" (178). Its coherence depends less on authenticity than on collective belief in the illusion of a stable inner reality.

This performative structure of masculinity is vividly depicted in Dazai and Mishima's male characters. In Dazai's *No Longer Human*, Yozo's clown persona, his exaggerated humour and "false cheerfulness" (42), enacts the repeated gestures of conformity that sustain his social existence, even as they hollow it out. His admission, "I was unable to believe that I was a human being" (21), exposes the failure of repetition to produce coherence, illustrating Butler's claim that gender and identity persist only through the anxiety of their own instability. Similarly, in *Confessions of a Mask*, Kochan's heterosexual courtship of Sonoko performed as "moral obligation"

(105) is a calculated repetition of heteronormative acts that sustain the illusion of normalcy. His kiss that evokes “not the slightest sensation of pleasure” (131) reveals the collapse of performance into emptiness, the moment Butler describes as the “failure to repeat” (192). Even Mizoguchi’s obsession with beauty in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* and his reverence for the temple’s perfection (36) may be read as a form of gendered performance where the aesthetic ideal becomes a disciplinary image of order and purity that he must imitate until he destroys it. Across these texts, masculinity appears not as inner truth but as a stylized compulsion, performed under the gaze of social expectation and haunted by the constant threat of exposure.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theorization of shame in *Touching Feeling* (2002) extends Butler’s performativity by grounding it in affect. She contends that shame is not the negation of identity but its generative force: “Shame floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication” (36). Rather than dissolving the self, shame both exposes and constitutes it as she notes, “in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity” (36). Sedgwick redefines shame as performative, stating, “Transformational shame is performance. I mean theatrical performance” (38). It “mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion, between absorption and theatricality” (38), locating identity in the tension between concealment and exposure. For Sedgwick, “shame interests [her] politically, because it generates and legitimates the place of identity – the question of identity – at the origin of the impulse to the performative” (64). In this sense, the repetition of gender norms that Butler identifies is charged, for Sedgwick, with affective intensity due to the anxious desire to veil or repair the exposure that shame brings.

Sedgwick’s affective lens clarifies our reading of Dazai and Mishima’s protagonists whose performances of masculinity are sustained by the visibility of their shame. Yozo’s terror that “Takeichi would see through it” in *No Longer Human* (Dazai 44) embodies the very structure Sedgwick identifies, that is, shame as the effect of being seen and the exposure that forms the self. In Mishima’s *Confessions of a Mask*, Kochan’s arousal at the image of St. Sebastian, pierced and displayed, indicates what

Sedgwick calls “the theatrical performance” (38) of shame where desire intertwined with spectacle and pain. His insistence that he “must love her” (105) transforms shame into a disciplinary ritual, while his failure to feel pleasure renders masculinity an anxious performance that never achieves closure. In *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Mizoguchi’s awareness of his “own ugliness” (36) turns his obsession into an affective drama of exposure. His act of burning the temple is a desperate attempt to erase the gaze that shames him. Across these moments, for Dazai and Mishima’s male subjects, masculinity is not just performed, it is suffered and their identity is experienced not as resolution but as fragmentation and shame. They embody Sedgwick’s insight that for certain people, including queer ones, “shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity” (64).

The masculine subject, therefore, is not founded on mastery but on a continual negotiation between performance and failure, concealment and exposure. In Dazai and Mishima’s postwar worlds, gender is performed as crisis and a fragile theatrical act through which men cling to coherence amid the ruins of symbolic order. Lacan’s notion of the split subject underlies this instability, revealing that the fragmentation of masculinity is not merely social or historical but inscribed in the very structure of desire and selfhood. Connell exposes its social construction and collapse within shifting gender hierarchies, while Butler and Sedgwick uncover the psychic and performative labour required to sustain its fragile coherence. Dazai and Mishima’s male protagonists embody this precarious condition where masculinity has neither an essence nor stable role. They are men caught between ideological disintegration and emotional exposure, performing masculinity in the absence of the structures that once legitimized it. Their cycles of shame, repetition, and self-destruction mark the very crisis of identity they strive to conceal, rendering masculinity not as mastery but as performance and endurance in the face of fragmentation.

Western Individualism and Japanese Conformity:

Having established that the postwar subject is marked by psychic and gendered instability, it becomes necessary to consider how this instability is further shaped by cultural models of selfhood that mediate the relationship between the individual and

society. As put forth by Takeo Doi and Takie Sugiyama Lebra in their works, presenting oneself differently depending on the situational context does not imply lack of a coherent self. One must be equipped with “a central command key” within “the inner core of self” that instructs him/her to shape-shift and respond appropriately without causing a rift in his identity (Lebra 178). This surmises that the Japanese self is “not devoid of center, unity, interior, and depth”; it instead “integrates what Westerners might say cannot be integrated, or at least not easily: exteriority and interiority, surface and depth, decentering and centering” (178). The English words public and private seem to signify realms that are strictly distinguished and can never overlap. Hence, Western theories of split identity due to division between the outer/public self and inner/private self is often described as an internal struggle within that causes tension and alienation and perceived as a conflict that requires integration or resolution. Anthropologist Katherine Ewing contends that “in all cultures people can be observed to protect multiple, inconsistent self-representations that are context-dependent and may shift rapidly” (251).

In contrast to this, the division of the Japanese self into dual or multiple selves is not perceived as inherently negative or debilitating for an individual as long as he/she has an awareness and can maintain balance between them. The Japanese view of identity as relational and context-dependent seems to suggest that shifting of the self from one zone to another indicates not a split or fractured identity, but flexibility and unity. As *tatemae* (public façade) appears in *omote* (surface self) and *honne* (true feelings) is concealed in *ura* (hidden self), *honne* exists only because “there is *tatemae*, and *honne* manipulates *tatemae* from behind. In this way, *tatemae* and *honne* are in a mutually defining and mutually constituting relationship. Without one, the other cannot exist” (Doi 37). Split or fragmented identities occur when “*tatemae* and *honne* are in such violent conflict” and balance between the surface self and inner self cannot be maintained that the individual’s identity is “in danger of being torn apart” (87).

Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima feature in their works characters who exemplify split or fragmented identities. The mere fact of the characters possessing different selves does not constitute a split or fragmentation. Instead, their fragmented

identity can be attributed to the irreconcilable rift between their inner self and surface self, and the lack of a harmonious, effortless glide between *tatemae* and *honne* forces “personalities to split” since they are “no longer able to coexist” (Doi 95). Japan saw as a social phenomenon the “privileging of *honne* and its opposite, depreciation of *tatemae*” (76) after the end of the World War II. This directly correlates to a renewed engagement with Western individualism in the postwar era that emphasizes self-determination and personal autonomy over everything else.

This period witnessed the resurgence of popularity for the late novelist Natsume Soseki (1867-1916). The Soseki boom reflected not just a nostalgia for a period before the war and defeat, but an appetite for individualism among the people. Soseki is mentioned in Dazai’s novel *No Longer Human*, with the protagonist Yozo owning a copy of his novel *I am a Cat* (51). In his famous lecture in 1914, Soseki had already addressed the need to maintain a spirit of individualism separate from the state. In his world, love always was placed higher than “the demands of society, even when this meant social ostracism, personal torment, or self-destruction”; this was consistent with “the concern for private worlds that now preoccupied so many Japanese” facing intellectual and psychological crises after the war (Dower 189). It was a reflection of “the latest stage in an ongoing dilemma” regarding how to “define and assert one’s identity and individuality” in an age of traumatic and irresistible “modernization” and “westernization” (190). Soseki frequently argued for the amalgamation of Eastern thought with thoughts from the West. He contended in his essay “My Individualism” that rather than rejecting or accepting Western ideas, there is a need for reconciliation of traditional Japanese values with modern individualism, reflecting the nuanced perception many Japanese intellectuals have towards the East-West encounter (Rubin 25).

Influenced by the principles of group harmony, loyalty, and respect for authority, conformity in Japanese culture is often linked to the *tatemae* (public façade) a person is expected to maintain in social settings through adherence to societal norms and expectations, and a person’s *honne* (true feelings) that are mostly suppressed for the sake of maintaining *wa* (harmony), a concept dominant in Japanese culture. In

Japan, “conformity is not simply a social expectation, but a moral obligation. The failure to conform is seen as disruptive, not just to the immediate group but to the wider society” (Doi 38). The educational system, social interactions and work culture are areas where loyalty to family, society, and the nation is emphasized and collective goals triumphed over personal desires. The delicate balance between a person’s public façade and his true feelings exposes “the inherent tension between individual desires and societal expectations, where the former is often sacrificed for the sake of the latter” (Sugimoto 43). In analyzing Japanese society, anthropologist Ruth Benedict states that conforming to societal expectations and obligations, known as *giri* or duty, forms the backbone of Japanese social behaviour. A man owes *giri* to every person who has extended him the least service or has done him the smallest favour (Benedict 137). This highlights the expectations on individuals to conform to societal expectations as a personal obligation and also as part of the social fabric.

These long-standing values were confronted and threatened by the introduction of Western individualism through modernization and particularly through the American occupation. The Western emphasis on individual autonomy, self-actualization, and individual rights greatly contradicted Japan’s collectivist and group-oriented traditional values. The critic John W. Dower notes that the American occupation enabled “a vigorous reform agenda that encouraged individual freedoms”, posing tension between Japan's desire for modernization and its struggle to conform to traditional practices (112). While individualism ushered in new opportunities for individual growth and self-realization, it also placed many Japanese in a predicament as they had to balance conformity with individual autonomy.

The clash between individualism and conformity in postwar Japan is thoroughly reflected through Osamu Dazai’s protagonist in *No Longer Human*, Oba Yozo. Yozo claims that ever since childhood, he has the awareness of being innately different. He claims to be a “social outcast” (67) from the moment he was born, with a deficiency in “the faculty to love others” (107), and has “a mortal dread of human beings” (26), a category from which he excludes himself. He states, “I can't even guess myself what it must be to live the life of a human being” (21) because he has “ceased

utterly to be a human being” (167). He attempts to free himself from the shackles of social conformity, yet he also fails in achieving self-actualization and instead becomes a figure who is rendered hollow by his entrapment between societal expectations and an inability to assert his individuality. His attempt at individualism and the resulting failure thereof lead to self-destruction and self-loathing that deepens his sense of despair. However, rather than developing his individuality since he claims to be different, he moulds himself to fit into society by wearing the mask of a clown and performing exaggerated humour to gain social acceptance. In time, his clowning has become such a part of him that it is “no longer such a strain to trick others” (42). He is conscious of his farcicality (60) and inauthenticity and yet, he does not have the courage to show his true nature.

Towards the middle of the novel, Yozo comes to believe in the individualistic nature of society. Yozo states, “They speak of duty to one's country and such like things, but the object of their efforts is invariably the individual, and, even once the individual's needs have been met, again the individual comes in” (125). This belief gives him courage to act more in accordance with his own inclinations wherein he becomes more “self-willed” and “stingy”, and less “timid” and “nice” (120). He applies his autonomy to carry out acts of debauchery and dissipation, rejecting responsibility and over-indulging himself in alcohol, drugs, nihilism and illicit affairs with women. But this assertion of individuality by doing whatever he desires is observed to such an extreme that he mistakes self-destruction for freedom and self-expression. He believes that his unhappiness and sufferings all stem from his “own vices”, and hence he has no plan to stave off his “descent” to self-destruction (158).

As Yozo gains consciousness after yet another failed suicide attempt, the first words he murmurs as he weeps profusely are “I'm going home” (154), a place whose meaning he himself is uncertain of. This indicates that as he breaks away from familial ties and societal bonds, there is a part of him that remains haunted by the concept of home and family even in the midst of his non-conformity. His attempts at freedom from conformity in a society that inherently rested on traditional group harmony and collective identity do not liberate him – they only cause him to self-destruct and

intensify his sense of alienation and existential despair. Yozo represents an individual who rejects traditional norms but is unable to replace them with a meaningful substitute, thereby becoming a passive, isolated figure battling with inner conflict and controlled by external forces.

In *The Setting Sun*, Dazai's characters grapple with individualism in different ways with the collapse of traditional Japanese values in the wake of World War II, but often with destructive or tragic consequences. The novel explores how people define themselves outside of traditional social structures in postwar Japan where aristocratic values have crumbled and the modern, individualistic mindset emerges, particularly through the experiences of Kazuko and Naoji. Kazuko epitomizes the tension between conforming to familial and societal expectations and embracing the personal freedom introduced by Western individualism. Kazuko's defying of societal expectations through her decision to prioritize love and become a mistress to a married man, her pregnancy out of wedlock, and her plans to raise the child on her own are clear illustrations of the disposing of traditional morality centred on the collective and the embracing of new non-conformist way of life. Claiming that her "present life is unendurable", she rejects traditional femininity and goes against the usual "Etiquette for Young Women" (80). She states:

The older and wiser heads of the world have always described revolution and love to us as the two most foolish and loathsome of human activities.... Revolution and love are in fact the best, most pleasurable things in the world.... This I want to believe implicitly: Man was born for love and revolution. (101-102)

After the decline of her aristocratic family and relocating to the countryside, Kazuko and her mother continue their solitary existence "like children playing house" (35) where they "prepare meals, knit on the porch, read in the Chinese room, drink tea" (26) instead of working diligently to earn money. Their monthly allowance is covered by Kazuko's uncle and through the selling of their expensive clothes and belongings. She wants to become independent and self-reliant, and yet she lacks a clear path forward. In her letters to Mr. Uehara, she requests not only to be impregnated by

him, but also asks for money that is enough for raising the child (86). Her aristocratic past as well as her financial dependence on men such as her uncle Wada and Mr. Uehara make her struggle with self-sufficiency. While breaking free from social and conventional norms, Kazuko remains bounded to her familial ties and her responsibilities, particularly towards her ailing mother till the end. Her attempts at individualism leave her in social and emotional limbo where she constantly oscillates between conformity and defiance.

Kazuko's brother, Naoji, resembles Yozo from *No Longer Human* because he too represents a failed attempt at individualism that borders on self-destruction. A former Japanese soldier during World War II, he seeks personal freedom through drug abuse, alcoholism, nihilism and reckless behaviour. He rejects traditional values and family duties, embracing self-indulgence and dissipation as his way of life. When asked about his sick mother, he replies, "It'd be best for her if she died soon. People like Mama are not meant to go on living in such a world as this. She was too pathetic even for me to look at her" (58). Whatever little money his sister and mother make from selling their belongings, he squanders it all without hesitation on alcohol. He has to neglect his familial ties because he states, "I thought that otherwise I would not be able to secure an admission ticket for the rooms of the people" (154).

Being born and raised as an aristocrat, he wants to become "coarse" and "brutal", to qualify himself as a "friend of the people" (154). He takes liquor and drugs, riots and throws himself into "wild diversions out of the simple desire to escape" from his shadow of being an aristocrat (154). He cannot stand "the intolerable gentility of the upper-class" and the "distinguished gentlemen" and "eminent citizens" will be revolted by his "atrocious manners" (155). However, he has never "derived the least joy out of amusements" (158) which indicates that though he has abandoned the refined world of aristocrats and nobilities, he does not fully belong with the common folk. His pretence at coarseness to fit into society is partially unreal, as only about "forty percent is genuine" (155). He claims that behind his degenerate and self-indulgent lifestyle lies great suffering that eventually drives him to suicide, and this

highlights how his attempt to assert his individuality leads him down the path of self-destruction and annihilation instead of liberation and self-actualization.

The internal struggles of Yukio Mishima's characters embody the conflict between conforming to societal norms and embracing individualism and autonomy, as shaped by Western influence which he believed were eroding Japan's cultural and spiritual essence. In *Confessions of a Mask* by Yukio Mishima, individualism is both a source of inner torment and a necessary act of survival. Mishima explores the tension between personal authenticity and conformity through Kochan, as he creates a carefully maintained persona to navigate the expectations of postwar Japanese society. Ever since childhood, the protagonist, Kochan, is tormented by "the emptiness of the gulf" that separates him from other boys his age (67). He believes he has an "incapacity for accepting love" (14) because he struggles with his hidden homosexual fantasies and his inability to adhere to traditional masculinity. When visiting his cousin's home, he is unable to enjoy his freedom because he is required to "act like a boy" due to which he begins his "reluctant masquerade" (19). He states, "It was precisely what people regarded as my true self which was a masquerade" (20). "The corrosion of an educational system that aimed at producing soldiers" (35) has reached his school and this further cements his sense of alienation because he has always been a weak and sickly child unable to take part in physical activities. His homosexual desires and fascination with beauty, violence and death are incompatible with the rigid norms of masculinity and heteronormativity in Japan.

Kochan's realization of his differences alienates him from his peers and urges him to construct a mask to navigate society, concealing his true nature beneath a socially acceptable facade because he fears societal rejection. He states, "I studied many novels minutely, investigating how boys my age felt about life, how they spoke to themselves" (72). He enacts a performative masculinity that allows him to pass as normal and repress his freedom and self-expression. Fantasizing about muscular men and the homoerotic imagery of St. Sebastian, he refers to his act of sexually pleasuring himself as a "bad habit" (29) since he has never once pictured a woman while indulging in it and this overwhelms him with a sense of guilt, shame and self-loathe. Repressing

his individual desires, he forces himself into a heterosexual relationship with Sonoko and attempts to fall in love with her. This illustrates his battle between genuine self-awareness and societal pressures. He states, "Right or wrong, by fair means or foul, I told myself, you simply must love her. This feeling became, as it were, a moral obligation for me, lying even heavier in the bottom of my heart than did my sense of sin" (105).

He harbours the hope that being intimate with Sonoko will assure him of his normality and be "reborn as a different person, as a whole man, just as though suddenly released from the spell of some evil spirit" (128). However, he is filled with despair when they kiss as he claims, "There is not the slightest sensation of pleasure. Two seconds. It is just the same. Three seconds.... I understood everything" (131). His attempt to have a sexual relationship with a prostitute also fails utterly, filling him with a sense of failure and depression. There is a need in him to prove his potency to ease his mind and yet he laments, "And yet nowhere could I discover a clue to the realization of my inherent perversity. There was no opportunity here for satisfying my abnormal desires, not even in their mildest form" (153). His attraction to the tragic, eroticized images of young men ultimately reveals his inability to fit into the expected mould of a heterosexual man and fills him with intense feelings of shame and self-hate. His failure to reconcile his individuality with societal norms highlights the restrictive nature of Japanese postwar society, where personal desires often clash with duty and expectations.

By the end of the novel, Kochan chooses conformity and accepts his false self, giving up on personal freedom and remaining trapped by his mask as he regains "a hold on [his] icy-cold sense of duty" (168). This contradiction between self and society prevents him from embracing true individualism, where there is a tension between private desire and public persona. His individuality therefore manifests as a source of shame, alienation and despair. His inner conflict is not about asserting his identity but about hiding it – making individualism a burden and an isolating force rather than an aspiration. His experience with individualism is not one of self-actualization and liberation but one of alienation, deception, and self-repression.

His fear of being truly seen indicates that he never fully embraces individualism. These types of unreconciling traits and repressed minds show that in the postwar Japanese identity formation, individuals suffered split and divide due to either sexual repression or inner-outer disharmony. To both these types, social façade becomes a grace to negotiate life.

In *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* by Yukio Mishima, individualism is a destructive force and an existential burden. Filled with an intense self-loathing, the protagonist, Mizoguchi, oscillates between a desire for personal significance and an inability to carve out a meaningful identity. His self-hatred leads him to alienation and a rejection of societal norms, but instead of achieving liberation or self-actualization, he chooses destruction as his only act of individualism. Similar to Yozo from *No Longer Human* and Kochan from *Confessions of a Mask*, Mizoguchi puts on the act of a cheerful young boy. He states, “It was only at such times – only when I put on a deliberate performance – that there was anything boyish about me” (23). He perceives himself as ugly and different from others due to the fact that he is a stutterer. His sufferings and isolation all stem from his stuttering because his words never emerge on time when he speaks as he states, “My stuttering, I need hardly say, placed an obstacle between me and the outside world” (4). He labels his habit of masturbation while sleeping as “a pollution” (65) and describes his association with a girl as her “desire for contamination” (117).

His feelings of inferiority and insignificance lead to a deep resentment toward those who effortlessly fit into society. However, his isolation from others also lead him to feel like “a secretly chosen being” (5) who is awaited by a mission that is yet to be revealed. As he claims that his “inner world became richer than anyone else’s” (5), he comes to believe that “those things which could be seen by others were not ordained” for him and being misunderstood by others becomes his “only real source of pride” (8). He is burdened with “a special individuality or sense of individual mission” which deprives him of “the feelings of life’s extensivity and solidarity” and becomes “the source of that sense of solitude” (122) which pursue him indefinitely. He develops an obsession with the Golden Temple, seeing it as a symbol of unattainable perfection

because of the utter lack of beauty in his life, that consumes every part of his life. He states, “My attachment to the temple was entirely rooted in my own ugliness” (36). For him, the existence of the beauty of the Golden Temple means that his “own existence was a thing estranged from beauty” (20) and this realization torments him. At least, he has the grace of self-scrutiny and self-criticism, the burden of which does not liberate him from oppressive self-awareness.

He relishes the thought of the temple getting destroyed by the constant air raids during World War II for it indicates that he and the temple live in the same world where nothing is eternal. However, the temple remains standing even after the declaration of Japan’s defeat in 15 August, 1945, which causes him to lose his purpose in living. He laments, “Now my vision that the Golden Temple and I were living in the same world has broken down. Now I shall return to my previous condition.... A condition in which I exist on one side and beauty on the other” (60). Instead of asserting his own individual meaning, he worships external beauty which end up making him feel even more inadequate. Mizoguchi’s failure to define himself as an individual leads him to see beauty as an oppressive force rather than a personal inspiration. His lack of personal agency leads him to his ultimate act – burning the temple.

Mizoguchi believes that burning the temple will give him significance and the freedom to assert himself. He feels that his inner world and the outer world will finally merge together and co-exist peacefully with this act. His statement, “It was certainly in order that I might live that I was planning to set fire to the Golden Temple” (208), proves that in a twisted form of individualism, he thinks that destroying the temple will prove his existence and free him from its entrapping beauty and perfection. He indulges in various forms of mischief and wrongdoings to arouse his Superior’s anger, and completely neglects his studies at the university. While briefly running away from the temple, a fortune reading in a local shrine tells him not to travel, particularly in a north-western direction to avoid bad luck, and he decides to make his journey to the north-west. His behaviour indicates that he has been indulging in the path of slow and minor acts of self-destruction leading to the days and weeks before his final act of

setting fire to the temple. His destruction is not an act of creation but an expression of his failure to assert his individuality because it proves that he cannot exist as an individual without something external to define him. His rejection of societal norms does not lead to true liberation, but ultimate alienation and emptiness. His effort to assert himself through destruction did not grant him self-actualization but rather merely confirmed his nihilism and inability to exist as an individual.

In *The Frolic of the Beasts* by Yukio Mishima, individualism is portrayed as a paradoxical and often unattainable ideal, showing characters trapped between personal desires and external constraints. The characters' heedless pursuit of pleasure is placed at odds with the moral and social constraints of traditional Japan throughout the story. The protagonist, Koji, caught in a love triangle between Yuko and her husband, symbolizes the cultural conflict between giri (duty) and desire. Koji's passivity, his continued entanglement with Yuko and Ippei even after his release from prison, and his death shows that he never achieves self-actualization or liberation. He struggles with personal autonomy, often caught between his own desires and the influence of others as he becomes entangled in a web of violence, servitude, guilt, and fatalistic devotion.

His violent attack of Ippei stems not from personal conviction, but from a lack of clear personal philosophy. When he and Yuko confront Ippei with his mistress, Koji attempts to exert his agency and his own free will to make sense of the senseless situation they are thrown into by assaulting Ippei on the head with a black wrench. He states, "At the time, I could no longer endure that putrid world; a world bereft of logic. It was necessary that I impart some logic into that world of pigs' entrails. And so you see, I imparted the cold, hard, black logic of iron. Namely, the logic of the wrench" (51). However, he negates his claim of imparting logic into a meaningless world as he later attributes the cause of his crime to an external force completely outside his will. Recalling "the natural smoothness of his actions" at that time, he states that he takes part in "a flowing series of spontaneous movements and, with no impediments, freely crossed the boundary of no return" (50) without any emotion, objective, or motive. He believes that the wrench was not simply dropped where he found it, but rather it

manifests itself suddenly into the world as a material phenomenon and conjectures that “such objects probably came from the stars” (39) and the most implacable will or desire gets fulfilled. However, this fulfilment is not believed to be self-redemptive. He states:

If we assume that not our will, but the will of “something” exists, then it would come as no surprise to find that “something” manifesting itself as some form of material phenomenon.... at the most critical moment it takes on shape and manifests itself as a tangible material object. (39)

He is filled with love for Yuko and yet he accepts the impossibility of their situation because of Ippei. Like a resounding incantation, he keeps telling himself, “I have repented. I am a different person now” (15). The sense of remorse revives itself vividly and fills his heart with “the docility of an ex-convict” (121). Koji and Yuko’s existence revolve around the physically and mentally impaired Ippei. Believing that their strange relationship is because of Ippei’s machinations, he says, “We can’t even kiss each other without thinking of that incident; memories of the crime taint its taste and turn it to ash” (139). He accuses Ippei of being the force responsible for bringing together Yuko and him and yet also driving them apart as they can never be together as long as Ippei lives.

Yuko’s autonomy is complicated by her continued involvement with both Koji and Ippei. She manipulates events and after the attack on Ippei, takes on a caretaker role, managing his estate and reconstructing her life. She asserts herself in practical ways, yet her choices are shaped by obligation and unresolved emotions rather than true self-determination. She remains trapped in her emotional dependence and her self-destructive cycle of devotion to Ippei. Testifying how her existence remains bounded to Ippei, the narrator states, “She felt that, if he appeared, in front of him she would be able to do anything. The thought that even the things she hadn’t been able to do without Ippei could be realized at this moment liberated her from a long-continued suffering” (121). This indicates that similar to Koji, she lacks true agency and fails to establish her individuality till the end.

Towards the end of the novel, Koji admits to having the notion that his life and actions are dictated by Ippei. He states, “A lot of things have happened. But, in the end, I feel like I’ve behaved and lived exactly the way he wanted me to. And that will probably carry on this way from now on as well” (146). Agreeing with him, Yuko invites him to “come along” because “there’s no going back now after all of this” (147). When Koji objects to being used to torment Ippei, Yuko mockingly replies, “What are you saying, after all this time? When you’ve been used from the very beginning” (77). Koji can only lament his bad fortune at running into Yuko because he accepts it as “his fate” (90). He feels gratitude towards Kimi for sleeping with him because “for a short while at least, he had escaped from his preordained destiny” (100), that is, his entanglement with Yuko. Their sentiments illustrate their lack of agency and autonomy as individuals, with no personal will or freedom to make their own decisions, as well as their acceptance of this as their lot.

They grant Ippei’s wish to die by killing him, and as a result, Koji is given the death penalty and Yūko is sentenced to life imprisonment. Even in death, they implore the village priest to arrange for “their graves to be erected side by side” (157). For Koji, the strange love triangle between the three of them makes him feel that they are “three fish caught in a net of sin” (6). Try as they might to escape societal rules and discard traditional morality, Koji and Yuko can never liberate themselves from their sense of duty and responsibility towards Ippei, Mishima’s description of the three characters as being “brought together in an instant by this delicate spider’s thread that was barely visible in the failing light” (147) alludes to an external force determining an individual’s fate. This signals the characters’ lack freedom and agency for self-determination and their failure to attain true individualism.

These novels explore how autonomy is compromised by fate, societal roles, and psychological entanglements. Dazai and Mishima suggests that personal autonomy is an illusion, with characters bound by fate, social roles, and psychological dependencies. Unlike Western notions of self-made individualism, the novels reflect a more fatalistic view where personal desires are in constant clash with external forces and acts of rebellion or crime do not necessarily equate to self-definition.

Individualism is portrayed not as a means of liberation but as a struggle against the inevitable entanglements of life, leaving characters perpetually trapped between self-will and destiny. This exposes the remnants of traditional Japanese values, such as loyalty and self-sacrifice, despite the widespread adoption of Western thought and ideals in Japan.

Fragmented Identity in the Postwar Milieu:

The clash between individualism and conformity in Dazai and Mishima's texts is a testament of the clash between modernity and tradition in postwar Japan. It also serves as reflection of a deeper crisis regarding selfhood and identity formation in the Japanese context. The notion posited by Takeo Doi and Takie Sugiyama Lebra of the surface self and the hidden self forming the Japanese identity by contextually shifting back and forth and co-existing in a state of harmony and balance is found to be lacking in the selected texts. Dazai and Mishima's characters, while being conscious of the division between their inner self and surface self, are tormented by this very division, causing them to experience alienation and inner conflict. As they straggle along with them different selves that are disharmonious and at odds with one another, their cognizance of the irreconcilable gap between their split selves causes their identity to be split apart or fragmented.

There are several instances in the selected narratives where the "involuntary unwrapping" (Lebra 66) or exposure of an individual's undesirable self/selves in front of others is witnessed. For instance, in Dazai's *No Longer Human*, Oba Yozo's act of clowning gives him the reputation of a mischievous joker during his school days. During one particular physical training period when he purposefully falls down to make his classmates laugh, a boy named Takechi catches his act and murmurs to him that he did it on purpose. This fills him with anxiety and dread because whatever he does, "Takechi would see through it" (44) and he is afraid of Takechi exposing his hypocritical mask to everyone. In *The Setting Sun* by Dazai, Naoji states in a letter he leaves behind to his sister Kazuko before committing suicide that he has never derived pleasure from his dissipated lifestyle. He lets the "coarse" and "brutal" (154) façade he puts on slip, and confesses that his reason for living the way he does is because of

the desire to escape the shadow of his aristocrat identity and fit into the postwar society.

Dazai and Mishima feature characters possessing an acute consciousness of the distinction between their inner and surface selves. In Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask*, the protagonist Kochan conceals his homosexual tendencies by putting on his carefully crafted heterosexual mask and having relationships with women despite his attraction to men. However, in a scene where he and his former girlfriend Sonoko are at a dance hall, he sees a young man in his early 20s "with coarse but regular and swarthy features" standing in front of him half-naked (167). Fixing his gaze at him, Kochan's mask slips momentarily as he is "beset by sexual desire" so intense that he forgets Sonoko standing right beside him. Mishima's *The Temple of the Golden* also features an incident where Mizoguchi accidentally witness the slipping of Father Dosen's persona as the Superior of the Golden Pavilion temple when he catches him red-handed with a geisha and he is wearing Western clothing instead of his priestly attires (150). In *The Frolic of the Beasts*, Mishima's character Yuko has mostly remained stoic and expressionless to her husband Ippei's antics and infidelities. However, when she and Koji catch him in the act of cheating, she slumps to her knees, covers her face and utters a "a bitter, coarse, primitive cry" (48), thereby completely abandoning her indifference and letting her stoic façade slip momentarily.

The involuntary exposure of what should be concealed is often met with "a further attempt at self-wrapping" (Lebra 66) or concealment of the parts they wish to hide. There are some characters that choose conformity by maintaining their *tatemaie* (public façade) and the prioritizing of their surface self is sometimes taken to extreme lengths where they attempt to conceal the inner self. Then there are other characters whose insistence on *honne* (true feelings) and the prioritization of their inner self drive them to completely abandon their public façade as well as their societal roles and obligations. However, in both cases, their identity is extremely complex because there is always a shift between their different selves depending on the context. As they glide consciously, reluctantly or even unconsciously, between one form of being to another, at times subscribing to or juggling with them multiple selves and affiliations, the

characters as portrayed by Dazai and Mishima are subjects that experience “the conflict of “the divided self”, the old self and the new” as an inhabitant of “two worlds, in neither of which he ever quite belonged” (Park 892). Their identity forms itself in the gap between their shifting selves and boundaries, where it experiences fragmentation as it is no longer just one thing or the other but a fusion of the two.

Read through Homi Bhabha, the identities on display here inhabit what he calls a “third space” or an interstitial zone where meaning and subjectivity are produced through negotiation rather than recovered from any originary essence. This reframes *tatema/honne* not as a simple duplicity to be resolved, but as a hybrid practice in which the self is continually remade between social legibility and inassimilable desire (Bhabha 112). Kochan’s careful heterosexual courtship is mimicry, “an almost the same but not quite” (128) performance that upholds the social script even as the gap between his actions and his desire reveals how fragile that script is. Likewise, Yozo’s clowning is a socially acceptable mask that nevertheless unsettles the very norm it imitates by showing how much labour is required to look human. In *The Frolic of the Beasts*, Koji’s posture of dutiful obedience (“I feel like I’ve behaved exactly the way he wanted me to” 146) is similarly ambivalent: it reproduces *giri* as a visible order while simultaneously revealing the exhaustion of masculine agency that order presumes. In *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Mizoguchi’s fixation on the temple (“My attachment...was entirely rooted in my own ugliness” 36) dramatizes how hybrid subjectivity is also structured around lack. Desire organizes the self around what it cannot possess, forming an interior “borderline existence” that is neither old nor new, neither pure tradition nor pure modernity (Bhabha 19).

Hybridity here is temporal as much as cultural. It is a time-lag in which subjects occupy asynchronous moral and aesthetic worlds where aristocratic residue and imperial masculinity still bind Naoji and Koji even as postwar individualism and modernity press upon them; a Zen aesthetic continues to anchor Mizoguchi’s imagination while a democratized, reconstructed Japan demands a different psychic orientation. What emerges then is not a passage from tradition to modernity but an ongoing liminality, a dwelling in-between where identity is produced through

ambivalence and negotiation rather than resolved into unity. The fragmented identities of these characters thus represent not failure, but the lived reality of postwar hybridity where subjects belong fully to neither world, yet are shaped by both. Identity in postwar Japan, as these texts reveal, is not a matter of choosing between tradition and modernity, but of inhabiting the unsettled space where the two overlap, collide, and continually remake the self.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Existence and the Search for Meaning

There is a pervasive sense of alienation, existential crisis, and the endless search for meaning in the characters of Dazai and Mishima. This chapter shifts the focus from fractured identity as a psychological and cultural condition in the previous chapter to the broader question of existence itself. The characters' experience of the world places them in a permanent state of angst and despair. These, along with loss, disillusionment, and confrontation with collapsing moral structures, are examined not as crises of selfhood but as manifestations of the deeper question of how to exist in a disorienting, rapidly changing world. As postwar Japan was reconstructed into a cultured, democratic society, there was an attempt to "sanitize culture" by repressing its "dangerous and subversive elements" (Rankin 123). However, Dazai and Mishima subversively bring to the forefront the dark, immoral, and undesirable parts of human nature by featuring protagonists "outside proper society" (Dower 61). Such figures are read in this chapter as existential subjects confronting absurdity, freedom and impermanence rather than as marginal identities seeking social belonging.

Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima are among the postwar writers whose works resonate with existential concerns. These writers had their own socio-cultural contexts shaping their worldviews, but Japan's encounter with World War II and its aftermath intensified a shared crisis that "closely resonate[d] with the existential problems of the modern man" (Slaymaker 4). As stated by Kimura Yoshinaga:

During the war years "to live" simply meant finding enough food to get by. If one did not find sufficient food, it meant death. Now when peace finally returned it was no longer sufficient to simply get by. One was constantly drawn to find the meaning of existence, to find why one was living. (27)

Since structural political changes inevitably triggered transformations in cultural life, the questions regarding existence and meaning became central to writers of the time. This chapter incorporates both Western existentialism and Japanese sensibilities to argue that Dazai and Mishima depict existence as an ongoing confrontation with

nothingness, death, and the burden of freedom. In doing so, it departs from identity-based discussions and turns toward the fundamental philosophical crisis at the heart of postwar Japanese literature: the struggle to affirm life in a world from which transcendent meaning has vanished.

Existentialism and Japanese Sensibilities:

Existentialism as a critical thought and philosophy is believed to have come in Japan during the 1940s through a translation of the existentialist texts of Jean-Paul Sartre. It exerted immense influence on “the intellectual and artistic communities of postwar Japan” because it presented “a paradigm that helped make sense of the war and the postwar experience” (Slaymaker 14). Before the introduction of Existentialism as philosophical framework, there was a presence of “existentialist-style thought from the end of Meiji period” (1868–1912) through “the early years of the Taisho period” (1912–1926), and the names of key figures in Existentialism, such as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and others “quickly became familiar to Japanese intellectuals” (Kuno and Tsurumi 184). This earlier intellectual openness provided fertile ground for the reception of existentialism after the war, when questions about life’s purpose and human freedom became newly urgent.

The enthusiastic embrace of existentialist sensibilities from the West can be partly observed as due to its affinity with some elements of Zen Buddhism and traditional Japanese aesthetics. The academic Kotoh Tetsuaki, acknowledging that “life and death is the ultimate concern” (202) for philosophy and religion, compares the existentialist philosophy of Heidegger with Buddhist views of impermanence and nothingness. Such comparisons reveal that existentialism was not merely imported into Japan but assimilated into pre-existing cultural frameworks concerned with emptiness, transience, and the limits of the self.

The writer Kazuo Morimoto devotes an entire book to a comparison of the Japanese Zen Buddhist monk and philosopher Dogen and Jean Paul Sartre, examining their philosophy of existence and nothingness and “linking similarities in the conception of time and the individual self” (Slaymaker 17). The publications of the

Kyoto School of philosophy, the Japanese philosophical movement of the 20th century, give “the impression that the school, which had earlier been associated with idealism, became a centre of existentialism after the war” (Elwood 303). Nishida Kitaro (1870-1945), the central figure of the Kyoto School, shares a certain similarity with Sartre in their theory of the self in that they both “highlight the absolute nothingness of the self and the existential anguish experienced in the encounter with this absolute nothingness and freedom” (305). These resonances made existentialist philosophy culturally legible in Japan because it reflected long-standing intellectual traditions rather than contradicting them.

In *The Heart of Buddhism: In Search of the Timeless Buddhism* (1983), philosopher Takeuchi Yoshinori delivers an existential interpretation of abstruse Buddhist texts and doctrines by taking “what at first seems distant and irrelevant” and transforming it into “an object of existential immediacy” (Kasulis 135). Similarly, the Buddhist notion of *mujo* (impermanence) in which all things are transient and ever-changing has profoundly influence Japanese aesthetics and literature. D.T. Suzuki, a key figure in Zen Buddhism who had first visited America in 1897 and delivered a series of lecture there in the early 20th century, states, “The Japanese mind is always alive to the sense of evanescence, to the impermanence of things... This sense of nothingness is at the very foundation of all that is beautiful in Japanese culture” (15). This sense of impermanence became central to Japanese notions of beauty and life where the fleeting nature of existence and the quiet acceptance of changes are honoured. This cultural orientation toward ephemerality harmonizes with existentialist views that emphasize contingency and the absence of fixed essences. The Buddhist idea of impermanence and Shinto’s reverence for nature contributed to the crystallization and reconsolidation of distinctively Japanese cultural concepts such as *mono no aware* (the awareness of impermanence) and *wabi-sabi* (the beauty of imperfection).

The concept of *mono no aware*, meaning the pathos of things, is a Japanese aesthetic and emotional concept that reflects an awareness of the impermanence of life and the celebration and appreciation of the transient nature of beauty and life’s fleeting

moments. It is often expressed through seasonal changes, the life cycle of flowers, and human emotions like love and loss in literature and art. In his analysis of *The Tale of Genji* from the eleventh century, literary critic Motoori Norinaga defined *mono no aware* as an emotion stirred by the awareness of life's impermanence. He states, "Aware is the feeling of sadness for the ephemeral nature of things, and that is why one must appreciate every moment deeply" (85). *Wabi-sabi* is another concept that celebrates imperfection and impermanence, and urges one to find beauty in simplicity and modesty. Leonard Koren writes, "Wabi-sabi is the beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. It is a beauty of things modest and humble. It is a beauty of things unconventional" (7), the incomplete, flawed, or the natural cycle of life. Because these three notions acknowledge "three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect" (Powell 43), they offer a distinctly Japanese lens through which the existential condition of contingency, impermanence and fragility may be understood.

The selected texts of Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima explore issues surrounding the complex nature of existence characteristic of the postwar period. They highlight the shifting norms of a world traumatically thrown into a state of confusion and rapid Westernization and yet a world haunted by its traditional past. Dazai and Mishima portray differing approaches to the postwar existential concerns, with some characters passively succumbing to despair and anxiety through alcohol, drugs or women, while some live in direct opposition to social and moral conventions and aim at self-creation. These can be interpreted either as an attempt to ward off, even just momentarily, the existential concerns looming over them, or an attempt to relearn how to navigate their lives in the absence of familiar structures of authority and morality. In their quest for the meaning of their life and existence, the characters in the stories are confronted with the tragic elements in human existence that birthed feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, despair and a sense of estrangement not only from society but from the world itself. Their engagement with these existential ethos reveals the individual's ever-increasing failure to find himself "at home" in the very fact of existence in the postwar landscape.

Existentialism is philosophical movement that gained widespread traction in Europe particularly during the 19th and 20th centuries. It is a study of human existence, that is, the “uniquely self-conscious and self-determining character of a human life as it is lived, enjoyed, and suffered in the first person” perspective in a meaningless and absurd universe (Michelman 1). It includes a “lived awareness of time and a relationship to death”, “the freedom to act and to interpret the world” according to one’s choice, and “a fundamental concern” over one’s responsibility in living authentically or inauthentically (2). Existentialist philosophers give precedence to “freedom, decision, and responsibility”, as these matters “constitute the core of personal being” and it is through freedom and “responsible decisions” that man distinguishes himself and “becomes authentically himself” (Macquarrie 4). Recurring existentialist themes includes “finitude, guilt, alienation, despair, death” as a result of “man’s freedom and his quest for authentic personal being meet with resistance and sometimes with frustration” (4).

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), the French philosopher and writer, is one of the leading thinkers at the forefront of this philosophical thought. Sartre asserts in *Existentialism is Humanism* (1946) the salient notion that “existence precedes essence” (1946:22), suggesting that human beings lack predetermined nature or essence because “man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself” (22). Sartre claims that man is “nothing other than his own project” whose “destiny lies within himself” because his existence is for realizing himself; he is therefore “the sum of his actions” and “the only thing that allows him to live is action” (37, 40). He states that man is “condemned to be free” because though “he did not create himself” and he is free, once he is “cast into the world, he is responsible for everything that he does” and with this comes the burden of responsibility (29). He emphasizes the necessity of authenticity as it relates to living truthfully in accordance with one’s values and choices without conforming to pre-determined roles and social expectations.

In contrast to authenticity, the concept of bad faith indicates living inauthentically by deceiving oneself and avoiding responsibility. In *Being and*

Nothingness (1943), Sartre speaks of bad faith as an act to escape oneself and “put oneself out of reach” by denying the qualities one possesses and attempting to constitute oneself as being what one is not (65, 67). “To flee what it cannot flee, to flee what it is” reveals “an inner disintegration in the heart of being” which bad faith “wishes to be” (70). Due to its absolute freedom, “Consciousness is afraid of its own spontaneity because it feels itself to be beyond freedom” (120), meaning that an individual feels anguish or the Sartrean ‘nausea’ before the recognition that nothing ensures our following of any of our usual patterns of conduct. There is nothing in “our own pasts or discernible personality” that prevents consciousness from “wavering back and forth” and creating a completely “new choice of its way of being” (xii, 120). This anguish becomes central to understanding Dazai and Mishima’s protagonists, who repeatedly confront the terror of freedom in a destabilized world.

Anxiety, also “rendered as “dread,” as “anguish” (a translation of the French term *angoisse*), or left in the original German as *Angst*”, is a concept central to existentialist philosophy (Michelman 36). Sartre states, “In anxiety I apprehend myself at once as totally free and as not being able to derive the meaning of the world except as coming from myself” (1943:40). This suggests that anxiety is not merely a reflection of an individual’s psychological state, but “a reckoning of the self” with its freedom to choose self-creation and “its radical responsibility for that choice” (Michelman 36). Another concept crucial to existentialism is the experience of absurdity or meaninglessness that posits belief in the lack of “intrinsic meaning or purpose” to make sense of “the world, myself, and the universe as a whole” and give directions to human life (28). The existentialist ethos of alienation, anxiety, and absurdity embodied by the forlorn, heroic individual confronting a meaningless world is captured in seminal existential novels such as Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* (1864) and *Crime and Punishment* (1866), Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926), Sartre’s *Nausea* (1938), and *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947) by Albert Camus. Dazai and Mishima position their protagonists in similar confrontations not only with society but with the unyielding indifference of existence itself.

In his discussion on the topic of absurdity in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), the French existentialist Albert Camus (1913-1960) states, “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (12). He reasons that the function of philosophy is to ascertain whether life is worth living given its absurdity. Defining man’s experience of the world as alien or inhuman, he notes, “A stone is foreign and irreducible to us. . . . At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman . . . that denseness and that strangeness of the world is the absurd” (14). The peeling away of illusions by which the world has been comprehended, like divine providence or universal truth/reason, reveals the world as existing without transcendental meaning or purpose. Confrontation with absurdity can cause despair, but at the same time, human “grandeur”, “dignity” and “implacable nobility” emerge in man’s “dogged revolt against his condition” and his struggle and perseverance to act in a world rife with absurdity and indifference (Camus 82, 104, 115). This Camusian impulse toward revolt becomes crucial for interpreting Mishima’s emphasis on defiance and self-assertive acts, and it illuminates Dazai’s tragic portrayals of those who cannot sustain revolt and instead slip into self-erasure.

Masks of Existence: Performance and Bad Faith:

A recurring theme in Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima’s works is the depiction of existence as a performance – not just a social adaptation, but an existential strategy through which characters attempt to withstand anxiety, freedom, and absurdity. This performance, enacted endlessly and sometimes despairingly, is deeply intertwined with deception because whether as a means of survival, self-delusion, or manipulation, it involves pretence and the feigning of something essentially untrue. Seen through Sartre, such performances are instances of bad faith whereby consciousness evades the anguish of freedom by taking refuge in fixed roles or identities. Sartre argues that bad faith attempts “to flee what it cannot flee, to flee what it is” by denying the qualities one possesses and attempting to constitute oneself as being what one is not (67, 70).

The characters' existence as an ongoing performance and deception becomes central as they construct facades and false selves to either conform, deceive or assert authority over their realities, thereby reflecting the complexities of life in postwar Japan. Dazai's protagonists construct performative masks for themselves due to alienation and dread but become burdened by the weight of their inauthentic disguises. Their performances torment them because they expose the gap that Sartre precisely identifies as bad faith, that is, between consciousness and the roles it adopts. For Mishima, performance is a deliberate act of self-creation and his characters wield deception as a vehicle to manoeuvre life rather than be squashed by it. Their contrasting approach nonetheless exposes the tension between reality and illusion, and the repercussions of a life performed rather than lived.

There are instances in the selected texts where individuals effortlessly and unconsciously engage themselves in performance and deception. In *No Longer Human* by Osamu Dazai, during Yozo's childhood, his father attends a political meeting with his closest friends where he delivers an opening remark. While his father's friends enthusiastically applaud, Yozo overhears them scathingly complaining about his father's remark on their way home. As these men stop by Yozo's house, he hears them tell his father "what a great success the meeting had been" with "expressions of genuine delight on their faces" (37). The servants, who bitterly complain about how boring political meetings are, tell Yozo's mother that the meeting is truly interesting. These examples illustrate not psychological hypocrisy but the everyday bad faith by which individuals stabilize themselves through roles detached from authentic conviction. Yozo has a friend from college named Horiki whom he describes as a "genuine city good-for-nothing" (60). Both indulge themselves in alcohol and women, and lead disoriented lives that are "entirely removed from the activities of the human beings of the world" (60). However, the difference between them is that while Yozo suffers from his falseness and inauthenticity, Horiki operates without "being conscious of his farcicality" or "without giving any recognition to the misery of that farcicality" (60). He embodies a seamless bad faith that Sartre associates with those who never reflect upon their freedom and therefore never confront the anguish it entails.

Naoji from Dazai's *The Setting Sun* has a similar acquaintance – a painter who he feels is “nothing but a clever businessman with a great capacity for drink and debauchery” (166). While he is fond of complaining about “the agonies he suffers in his life of decadence” (165), he continuously spends his time pursuing pleasure and living a dissipated lifestyle. Naoji calls him a “genuine idiot-hedonist” (166) because unlike him, no shame or suffering lies behind the painter's dissipation. Such figures illuminate Dazai's central concern that consciousness becomes anguished not merely by performance but by the awareness that one is performing. The absence of this awareness allows secondary characters to conveniently glide through roles that torment Dazai's protagonists.

In *The Temple of Golden Pavilion* by Yukio Mishima, Mizoguchi's friend from the university named Kashiwagi is born with clubfeet. He has a habit of using his deformed feet to incite pity, sometimes even falling purposely on the road and hurting himself, in order to attract women's attention. He explains his secret:

That was all an act. I've practiced falling down on that road dozens of times, until I can now give such a convincing performance of having a bad fall that anyone would think I'd broken a bone.... But you should have seen what happened. The girl's already beginning to fall in love with me. Or rather, I should say she's falling in love with my clubfeet. (106)

He is described as a “self-sufficient” being and “a shadow that asserted itself” who suffers from “none of that shyness, none of that underhand guilt” as a consequence of his deceptive acts which Mizoguchi experiences (86). Unlike Dazai's characters, Kashiwagi feels no shame or fragmentation; his performances fortify rather than destabilize him. His manipulation of his deformity is not self-deception but an intentional crafting of the self that demonstrates Mishima's fascination with aesthetic self-construction.

The protagonists, on the other hand, are burdened by the performative mask they put on and the deception that entails. In *No Longer Human*, Yozo puts on the façade of different personas ranging from a fun-loving clown, a Marxist student, a

well-kept man, and a devoted husband to disguise his intense alienation and appear as a normal person. He creates disturbing portraits of himself in “ghost-style techniques” (56) that expose the true self he has desperately concealed from others. However, the belief that there is no escape from “the harrowing reality” he lives in (55) persuades him to hide his self-portraits from others, signalling his resolution to continue his performative and theatrical acts to hide his true self and deceive those around him by never uttering “a single truthful word” (27). However, his deception intensifies his existential collapse, demonstrating Sartre’s claim that bad faith ultimately fractures the self. This is illustrated by his statement:

I find it difficult to understand the kind of human being who lives, or who is sure he can live, purely, happily, serenely while engaged in deceit. Human beings never did teach me that abstruse secret. If I had only known that one thing I should never have had to dread human beings so, nor should I have opposed myself to human life, nor tasted such torments of hell every night. (37)

In *The Setting Sun*, Naoji, the protagonist’s brother, is born into a wealthy aristocratic family that experiences decline in the postwar period of change and turmoil. He tries to conceal his refined and noble upbringing to fit in with the common people by putting on the façade of a coarse and brutal degenerate preoccupied only with drinking and pursuing worldly pleasures. To commit to his performative and deceptive acts, Naoji even trivializes his familial ties and neglects his responsibilities as a son and brother. He states:

I wanted to become coarse, to be strong – no, brutal. I thought that was the only way I could qualify myself as a “friend of the people.” Liquor was not enough. I was perpetually prey to a terrible dizziness. That was why I had no choice but to take to drugs. I had to forget my family. I had to oppose my father’s blood. I had to reject my mother’s gentleness. I had to be cold to my sister. I thought that otherwise I would not be able to secure an admission ticket for the rooms of the people. (154)

Behind Naoji's life of dissipation lies great suffering because the mere fact that he is acting and unable to reveal his true self fills him with shame, guilt and anguish. Stating "I cannot think of the slightest reason why I should have to go on living" (153), Naoji eventually commits suicide. His death becomes the logical endpoint of a consciousness unable to reconcile its freedom with the roles it forces upon itself.

Dazai incorporates existentialist elements into his retelling of classical Japanese folktales in *Otogizoshi: The Fairy Tale Book of Dazai Osamu*. In the story "Urashima-san", the hero Urashima is portrayed as a meek and mild character who speaks of being cultured and refined and the significance of immersing oneself in tradition. He refuses to indulge in adventure because he considers it to be beneath his "gentlemanly refinement" (30). However, as he goes on an adventure to the Dragon Palace with the tortoise, his refinement and his kindness are revealed to be performative and untrustworthy. In his bickering with Urashima, the tortoise exposes him as "a snob" whose kindness is "nothing more than a minor diversion" (33) and whose refinement becomes suspicious because he turns into "a quivering hick" when he is "confronted with the real thing" (43). He explains the hypocritical nature of Urashima's kindness, stating "you think that your own acts of kindness are proof of a higher morality, and deep down inside you feel you deserve some sort of reward" (32). The tortoise's accusations reveal the fragility of Urashima's self-presentation, serving as a critique not of moral weakness, but of the bad faith that underlies cultivated identities.

The story "Click Clack Mountain" further reveals deception as woven into human relationships. In the words of Dazai, it is "all about deception, from start to finish" (68). The rabbit's revenge on the tanuki (raccoon) is criticized by Dazai as too extreme of a deception that goes against the noble technique "sanctioned by Bushido, our nation's Way of the Warrior" (68). The "mischievous but fundamentally harmless" tanuki, who is captured by the old man and in danger of being made into tanuki stew by the old woman, struggles to free himself and resorts to tricking and scratching the old woman in order to escape. The rabbit, who is friends with the old man and old woman, exacts her revenge on him by secretly setting fire to his hide and almost

burning him to death, after which she pretends to be a medicine peddler and gives him red hot pepper paste as medicine for his burn wounds. She then cunningly fools him into “boarding a boat made of mud” and “sailing to a watery grave” as the boat eventually dissolves in the water (70). The rabbit’s extreme acts of deception, disguised as justice, blur the line between rightful revenge and existential cruelty. Deception is shown not as moral failure but as an inevitable feature of existence in a world without stable meaning.

In *Confessions of a Mask* by Yukio Mishima, the protagonist Kochan’s life is one of performance and deception because he lives a double life as a closeted homosexual man in private and a heterosexual man on the outside. Because his sexuality fills him with self-loathe and shame, he actively constructs a façade of “normality” (131) that adheres to traditional ideas of masculinity by forcing himself into relationships with women despite his utter lack of love and attraction for them. His performance of masculinity is an existential strategy to avoid the anguish of acknowledging his freedom to desire differently. His confession that he even “contemplated suicide for the first time” (138) in his life reveal the cost of living in bad faith. While masquerading heterosexuality, he acknowledges that life is a stage and he swears to play his role faithfully without prioritizing love or desire, as he states, “I was to play my part on the stage without once ever revealing my true self” (68).

Across these narratives, performance and deception emerge as existential tools for evading anguish, negotiating freedom, or enduring identity in a world devoid of inherent meaning. Dazai shows the collapse that follows such evasion, while Mishima reveals the power that can be derived from performance when it is embraced as self-creation. Together, they illuminate the mask as a fundamental structure of existential life and not just not a psychological or social artefact. Thus, in both writers, the mask becomes the threshold between the self and the world, exposing the paradox of freedom in which the freedom to choose can become the very reason one chooses to withdraw or conceal.

Destruction and Death as Existential Transcendence:

Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima feature in the selected texts for this study characters that struggle against postwar uncertainty and the existential condition of living in a world stripped of inherent meaning. The collapse of Japanese traditional and cultural values in the wake of Japan's defeat in World War II has left the characters confronting the absurd, a condition in which familiar structures of meaning vanish thereby leaving the individual radically free yet unbearably responsible for defining their own existence. Humans often make failed attempts to transcend and get pass the limits of their physical and social circumstances. The escaping of ourselves into various ecstasies or fantasies highlights the experience of the bodily self as a substance trapped in its stifling existence and desperate for a way out thereby denoting the limitation of existence (Bergo 2). Faced with the "radical freedom" to create meanings and "the burden of responsibility" (Sartre 1946: 29) for everything they do, the experiences of the protagonists serve as distinct representations of their confrontation with the absurd. In this context, destruction and death emerge as existential responses in an attempt to transcend the limits of being, to escape the burden of freedom or impose meaning where none exists.

In Dazai and Mishima's works, death features prominently not merely as an end but as a philosophical act, a confrontation with nothingness in which characters seek clarity, escape, or self-creation. Influenced by both Western existentialist thought and Japan's postwar crisis, the two writers portray death as a complex, paradoxical form of transcendence. For Dazai's protagonists who are more or less prone to passively surrender to life's meaninglessness, death becomes an escape from the torment of existence. Mishima's characters contrastingly embrace death as a deliberate, almost sacred act of self-definition. This further illustrates how the concept of death is still largely shaped by the Japanese cultural beliefs while also getting informed and more accentuated by Western existentialist thought.

Bushido, the Samurai code of conduct in feudal Japan, emphasises on loyalty and honour until death and the collective over the individual. It is precisely because of this Samurai warrior mentality that has been ingrained so intricately into the Japanese society since the 1300s that dying by one's own hand is not considered sinful or

shameful. Paradoxically, it has even been seen as “the best way out of certain situations” (Lyons 10). The samurai emphasis on “death as a course of honor or freedom” has had its effect on the society at large (11). “Death for a cause unworthy of dying for was called a “dog’s death” but it is “true courage to live when it is right to live, and to die only when it is right to die” (Nitobe 53). The warrior who chooses suicide over dishonor or defeat, the samurai who follows his lord in death, the wife who will not live without her husband, the man who dies in reparation for a wrong, or because he has been shamed and will not live with the stain of that shame, and the suicidal kamikaze pilots in World War II who sacrificed their lives for their country all serve as examples for this. Modern Japanese writers are said to have been a high-risk group because in addition to having a neurotic compulsion toward suicide, they come from a tradition that seemed to authenticate and legitimize suicide as a means to restore honour as propagated by the warrior mentality (Lyons 11). This cultural legacy normalises death as a valid moral and existential choice, a theme modern writers inherit and reinterpret.

Shintoism is the Japanese indigenous belief system that posits the notion that all things in nature have souls or spirits. Literally meaning the way of the gods, Shinto is a traditional belief in the existence of a spirit or deity called “kami” in all aspects of nature. One’s ancestors can also transform into kami and adds blessing and protection to his lineage. Hence, shrines, the “dwelling place for the kami” (Ono 46), are erected in most Japanese homes to worship and pay homage to their ancestral kami. In Shinto, the gulf between the gods and human beings is narrow and similarly, the boundary between the physical world and the spiritual realm is even more porous. The Japanese terms associated with the spirit’s location are “konoyo” meaning this world here, which refers to the precinct of the living, and “anoyo” meaning the yonder world over there which refers to the other side, the long-term abode of the dead. From “over there”, the spirit still retains an interest and a connection with in the affairs of “this world” and as it develops slowly into “the local collective ancestral deity called kami”, it remains concerned about “family identity, survival, and welfare” (Iwasaka, Toelken 15). Thus, death for a good cause is a valour, while death against other worldly impediments may also be perceived as an escape into undefined freedom. In Shinto’s perspective, it

reveals how death is situated close at hand with the Japanese and not far removed from their everyday life. The prospect of transformation into a kami for a human being after death suggests death as becomes a transition rather than annihilation, reinforcing the Japanese familiarity with mortality.

The Japanese disposition to death, particularly to suicide, therefore can be largely attributed to these age-old beliefs and traditions surrounding death in Japan. Death, particularly suicide, is a common theme for Dazai and Mishima not just in their literary works, but in their deaths as well. There are a number of prominent Japanese writers who died by suicide in Japan. To name a few, Ryunosuke Akutagawa committed suicide in 1927 by drug overdose due to anxiety about his future; Osamu Dazai, after many failed attempts, successfully committed suicide with his lover in 1948; Yukio Mishima committed seppuku or ritual suicide, in 1970 and Kawabata Yasunari, the Nobel Prize winner, committed suicide in 1972. These suicides are obviously not of the same kind, but there is no denying that suicide looms exceptionally large in Japanese culture. Suicide in the Western European Christian tradition has been associated with sin and there is a strong religious and social sanctions against it. However, it is important to note that in Japan, suicide takes many forms and “there have not been even any religious impediments or sanctions against suicide” (Lyons 10).

Osamu Dazai’s life closely mirrors his fictional works in that much like his characters, he experiences alienation, self-destruction and existential despair that pervade his novels. Similar to his protagonist Yozo from *No Longer Human*, Dazai struggled with the meaning of life and descended into depression, alcoholism, and failed relationships. Seeing himself beyond redemption, he made multiple suicide attempts before his final act in 1948 with his lover in a double suicide. Therefore, in the parallels between him and his characters, Dazai comes to exemplify the blurring of the line between his art and his tragic reality where art and life become inseparably intertwined in a transcendental act.

The protagonist Yozo from *No Longer Human* likewise confronts existence as a burden too great to bear. He commits multiple failed suicide attempts to escape his

suffering. Experiencing bouts of despair and anxiety every now and then throughout the narrative, Yozo tries to dispel his feelings of hopelessness by self-dissipation through in alcohol, drugs and women. He states that he is “weary beyond endurance of the task of being a human being” and reflections on his “dread of the world and its bothersomeness, on money, the movement, women” and his studies make him feel like it is impossible to go on living (86). After a failing second attempt at suicide, he plans to attempt a third one, saying, “There's no chance now of a recovery. No matter what sort of thing I do, no matter what I do, it's sure to be a failure, just a final coating applied to my shame. I want to die. I must die. Living itself is the source of sin” (163-164). His sentiments reflect the Sartrean anguish, that is, the horror of being radically free yet incapable of finding meaning. Describing his life as an “Inferno” (164), a hell with reference to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the only way of escaping his hell on earth is through ending his life. This reveals death as the only conceivable transcendence and a release from the self he cannot inhabit.

The same sentiment recurs in *The Setting Sun* where Naoji, the brother of Dazai’s protagonist, views suicide as liberation from the collapse of aristocratic identity and the unbearable responsibility of living. In his journal, he asks the question, “The world is out of joint. Doesn’t that mean in effect that I have no choice but suicide?” (67). Stating that he has no will to live as a disgraced aristocrat in his suicide letter to Kazuko, he says, “I am better off dead. I haven’t the capacity to stay alive. I haven’t the strength to quarrel with people over money. I can’t even touch people for a hand-out” (159). His statements express Camus’ absurdity where suicide appears as a final reckoning with the void when the world ceases to make sense. Kazuko suggests that his excessive drinking of alcohol must be “only in the hope of death” (78). He pleads his sister to not feel sorrow over his death and desires to be “liberated completely from the suffering of living and this hateful life itself” (159), framing death as transcendence from the intolerable burden of existence.

The story of “Urashima-san” from Dazai’s *Otogizoshi: The Fairy Tale Book of Dazai Osamu* reinforces this conception of death. Urashima, who embarks on an adventure with an ancient tortoise to the Dragon Palace down under the sea, is filled

with grief upon reaching land as he finds that hundreds of years have passed during his adventure. The village and houses have disappeared, with “Nothing to see but empty fields. No people! No roads! And the only sound was the wind in the pines” (61). He despairingly opens the princess’ gift from the Dragon Palace and is instantaneously turned into a three-hundred-year-old man. He dies after living for another ten more years as a white-haired old man. Though one may see the unfairness of his fate or the cruelty of the princess gifting him such a gift, Dazai’s interpretation aligns with the existential impermanence. Death becomes “the gift of oblivion” (xiv), a mercy that spares him the anguish of living in a world where everything he once knew has vanished. Death is a state of grace given to him for escaping his sufferings as it prevents him from living a long, lonely life in a world where everything and everyone he knew had disappeared. Dazai’s closing line, “Time and tide are man’s salvation. Oblivion is man’s salvation” (64), encapsulates his view that death offers the transcendence life cannot.

Mishima, however, frames death as deliberate transcendence. Like Dazai, Yukio Mishima’s life and suicide closely mirror the fate of his protagonist Isao in his novel *Runaway Horses*. In the novel, Isao is a young ultranationalist who seeks to overthrow the modern Japanese Government and reinstate Japan’s imperial values. He dies by committing a ritual suicide after the failure of his revolutionary attempt. Mishima, much like Isao, formed a right wing private militia to restore imperial values and preserve the emperor’s honour. His failed coup at the Japan Self-Defense Forces headquarters and the realization of his lost cause resulted in him performing ritual suicide, mirroring his character’s fate with an uncanny accuracy. Hence, the novel is not merely fiction; it prophesized Mishima’s self-created martyrdom and the transformation of his death into a deliberate, almost sacred act. For Mishima, death becomes the aesthetic fulfilment of a life-project where action and being converge.

Mishima’s characters also pursue transcendence through acts of destruction. In *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* by Yukio Mishima, the nihilistic, stuttering protagonist Mizoguchi’s desire to burn the Golden Temple arises from a sense that beauty itself negates his existence. Viewing his existence as “a thing estranged from

beauty” (20), “the imperishability of the temple” (41) overwhelms him. When the temple faces the threat of destruction during the war, it gives Mizoguchi the sense that he and the temple “inhabit worlds of the same dimension” (43). However, as the Golden Temple stands tall and firm even after the war, this fills him with hopelessness because the bond between him and the temple has been cut and he has lost “his purpose in living” (57). He therefore decides to destroy the temple as a way to pull down the temple from its unattainable plane of existence to a state closer towards his own, thereby bridging the gap between him and the temple. He believes his burning of the temple will have “great educational value” (186) and “the meaning of the world would surely change” (184). He claims that therein “lay the basis of [his] sense of freedom” (189) and only through this could “a new life begin that was made specially to order for [himself]” (186). By burning it, he seeks to destroy the absolute that humiliates him and paradoxically reclaim agency in an indifferent world. His act becomes a quintessentially existential project of self-creation through destruction.

Mizoguchi’s friend in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Kashiwagi, enacts a different form of transcendence. Born with clubfeet, he like Mizoguchi sees himself as ugly. However, he refuses to be reconciled to the conditions of his existence and instead weaponizes his deformity. He states, “To have a pair of clubfeet – such was the condition of life for me, such was its reason, its aim, its ideal, such was life itself” (93). He deliberately parades his clubfeet instead of concealing it from others, as for instance, when he intentionally falls down and pretends to hurt himself in front of a girl to garner her sympathy and attention. He states, “I couldn’t bear the idea that a woman should treat a perfectly normal man and someone like myself on a basis of equality. It seemed to me like a terrible self-defilement” (89). He demands that he should be treated differently and that things should be arranged more luxuriously for him than most people require. His manipulation of pity becomes a deliberate revolt against the conditions of his existence, asserting meaning where circumstance denies it. His statement, “if the world changed, I could not exist, and if I changed, the world could not exist” (89), encapsulates Mishima’s logic of transcendence through self-fashioning, where the act of shaping one’s own death becomes the ultimate assertion of control.

The Frolic of the Beasts by Yukio Mishima features the protagonist Koji who engages in acts of destruction through violence and crime. After becoming entangled in a love triangle with Yuko and her husband Ippei, Koji takes Yuko to a place where Ippei is having intimate relations with another woman. As Ippei is caught red-handed, the scene that unfolds before Koji, who is in love with Yuko, is nothing as he has imagined in his head and nowhere near satisfactory. He had previously hoped to “witness the very instant when the truth of perverse human nature begins to shine” (47), but what he unexpectedly sees is the “the ungraceful collapse of the drama he had believed in” (48). Upon seeing the senselessness of the scene before him where the culprit Ippei slaps Yuko twice and she falls to the floor, Koji decides to assert his own meaning and make an impact in the reality they inhabit. He violently assaults Ippei, causing him to be severely impaired. He states, “I could no longer endure that putrid world; a world bereft of logic. It was necessary that I impart some logic into that world of pigs’ entrails. And so you see, I imparted.... the logic of the wrench” (51). His violence is an existential creation, a revolt against absurdity rather than mere moral transgression.

In *The Setting Sun* by Osamu Dazai, the protagonist Kazuko enacts destruction as transcendence of her own inherited identity. Rejecting aristocratic and traditional morality, she defies societal expectations by becoming a mistress and birthing a child out of wedlock. Kazuko initially tries to adapt to her new life after the downfall of the aristocracy by toiling in the fields and working meagre jobs. However, her eventual inability to make sense of her life or tolerate the conditions of existence ultimately prompts her to execute acts of defiance. Summoning “the sheer courage.... in tearing apart without any hesitation all manner of conventional ideas”, she must “destroy” and “start a revolution” in the passion of her love (112); she “can’t go on in simple compliance” to continue living hence she must “survive and struggle with the world” in order to accomplish her desires (124). Her choices in embracing sexual autonomy, defying social expectations, and consciously overturning inherited norms reflect an effort to transcend the limits imposed on her existence and to create a new moral horizon of her own making. Though traces of the old morality continue to bind her, particularly through financial dependence, she wills herself to struggle with her child

and fight for their place in society. She states, “I have been able to push back the old morality, however little. And I intend to fight a second and a third engagement together with the child who will be born” (173) and together, they “will live in perpetual struggle with the old morality, like the sun” (174). This existential revolt mirrors the broader human struggle to construct meaning in an indifferent world, signalling her transformation into an individual who chooses, acts, and creates despite the constraints surrounding her.

Alienation and the Absurd: The Conditions of Existence:

As postwar Japan became increasingly urbanized and competitive and Japanese society underwent massive transformations that disrupted traditional, communal and familial structures, many individuals experienced feelings of isolation, psychological detachment and a sense of not belonging in society which can be defined as alienation (Tamaki 10). A prevalent phenomenon in contemporary Japan is ‘*hikikomori*’, a form of severe alienation that leads to social withdrawal where individuals, often young adults, withdraw from society and social interactions and seek extreme isolation by confining themselves to their homes for extended periods that can last up to months or years (Zielenziger 25). In the present chapter, however, such forms of withdrawal are read not merely as issues of identity or belonging but as manifestations of existential estrangement, a condition in which individuals confront freedom, meaninglessness, and the collapse of external frameworks that once stabilized human life. Marginality is the condition of being on the edges of power structures or existing outside the dominant cultural, political, or social mainstream. Here it is used not in a sociological sense, but to describe an ontological position in which the self finds the world unintelligible, indifferent, or resistant to coherence. This chapter thus reads alienation and marginality as conditions of existence rather than as conditions produced merely by social or cultural displacement.

Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima works are permeated with themes of alienation and marginality as their characters navigate an atmosphere where their estrangement from society and their inability to assimilate render them into perpetual outsiders. Their irresolvable internal conflict, despair and disillusionment, as well as

their struggles with identity and societal expectations lead them to experience such a deep sense of alienation that it sometimes produces dissociation or self-negation. However, in the existential framework of this chapter, these experiences are read as expressions of the human encounter with absurdity, radical freedom, and the inability to feel “at home” in existence and not primarily as crisis of identity discussed in chapter three. They find themselves on the margins of society where they are unable to fully participate in the reality they live in or establish genuine human connections. This is not merely an individual affliction but an existential condition in which inherited values have collapsed and no new structures reliably replace them. Their alienation echoes Sartre’s notion of being “condemned to be free,” where the subject, deprived of external structures of meaning, experiences existence as a solitary project without any guarantee.

The selected narratives by Dazai for this thesis, that is, *No Longer Human*, *The Setting Sun* and *Otogizoshi: The Fairy Tale Book of Dazai Osamu* are imbued with a profound sense of existential despair and alienation hangs over the heads of the characters like a dark cloud. Yozo in *No Longer Human* struggles with alienation since childhood. The frightening presence of his father, his molestation at the hands of the maidservants, and his inability to fit in with his peers from a young age all contribute to his growing isolation and disconnection from people as he enters adulthood. He harbours an intense dread for human beings, a category from which he excludes himself, because he is unable “to feel the least particle of confidence in [his] ability to speak and act like a human being” (28). Forcing himself into the role of a clown since he believes that if he can make people laugh, “the human beings probably won't mind it too much if [he] remain outside their lives.... [He] shall be nothing, the wind, the sky” (29). This self-erasure becomes a form of existential homelessness that shows an inability to inhabit one’s own being or participate meaningfully in the shared world. Yozo’s inability to inhabit the category of “human” illustrates the existential condition of estrangement where he does not merely lack social belonging but feels ontologically separate from the world, unable to reconcile the self he experiences with the self the world demands.

He spends time with prostitutes, and excessive drinking and drug use cause his teeth to fall out, yet the relief he finds lasts only briefly. His detachment becomes so profound that when his wife is raped, he watches with tearful eyes and thinks, "This is just another aspect of the behaviour of human beings. There's nothing to be surprised at" (148). This cold observation is not indifference but a sign of existential derealization, in which the world appears devoid of moral coherence or emotional intelligibility. Yozo observes that others can struggle against society when unhappy, but his misery stems from his vices, leaving him "no specific plan to stave off [his] descent" (158). His alienation spawns feelings of dissociation where he no longer associates himself as a human being; he believes his ghost-style portraits of himself are actual depictions of the true self he has hidden from everyone and this is "the harrowing reality" from which there [is] no escape" (55). These portraits serve as existential testimony, illustrating the Sartrean split between facticity and transcendence where the self behind the mask is experienced as monstrous, unassimilable, and irreconcilable with the world.

Yozo considers himself as a "social outcast" (67) from birth. In line with the existential belief in the meaninglessness of existence, Yozo views the world as "a place of bottomless horror" (133) where human efforts, relationships and struggles are futile. His involvement with the student Marxist group is not from conviction but from fascination with its irrationality. His attraction to irrationality reflects existential nausea, caused by a recognition that systems of ideology offer no stable meaning or grounding for the self. As he pursues carnal pleasures after leaving his childhood home and antagonizes his family with his degenerate ways of living, the thought of home continues to haunt him. During his time with a woman named Shizuko, he works as an illustrator in a magazine and sudden thoughts of home move him to tears. "Home" here functions as the symbol of an impossible origin point, a place of existential belonging that he yearns for but to which he cannot return. After his second suicide attempt, he awakens saying "I'm going home", accompanied by "profuse weeping" (154). He is saddened by how people distinguish between their behaviours at home and on the outside as he feels he is "the only one completely left out" and deserted to endure loneliness because of his "perpetual flight from human society" (111).

As he walks home drunkenly from a bar in Ginza after his drinking session, he repeatedly sings, “From here it's hundreds of miles to home... From here it's hundreds of miles to home”, and as he weeps, he resumes, “Where does this little path go? Where does this little path go?” (157). What Yozo means by home remains unclear, yet his yearning reveals profound displacement. He breaks away from traditional and cultural moralities by prioritizing the self in a modern context, but his experiences suggest deeper loss and directionlessness. Branded as “madman” or “reject” and “disqualified as human being” (167), Yozo is an outsider whose existence exists on the margins of two worlds in neither of which he belongs. This liminality marks an existential suspension where he struggles to anchor himself in any coherent narrative of meaning. His longing for a home that cannot be reached underscores his existential homelessness in which neither the past nor the present can accommodate him.

In *The Setting Sun*, Dazai poignantly illustrates alienation and loss in the immediate postwar years. Between the disintegration of old values and certainties and the reconstruction of a ruined nation, Dazai's characters are left to drift aimlessly without direction. Their drifting is emblematic of the existential condition described by Camus in which inherited meaning dissolves and individuals confront the void without guidance. The protagonist Kazuko, tries resolutely to survive in the postwar society without succumbing to despair. She wants to become dissolute and wonders “how it would be if [she] let go and yielded [herself] to real depravity” (78). Depravity and dissolution are common among the masses due to the postwar malaise, with “even perfectly normal people become rather peculiar nowadays if they work in Tokyo – what with all the confusion” (45). She provides justifications for people's depraved lifestyle as their only means of survival, stating:

There was something wrong about these people. But perhaps.... they could not go on living except in the way they do. If it is true that man, once born into the world, must somehow live out his life, perhaps the appearance that people make in order to go through with it, even if it is as ugly as their appearance, should not be despised. To be alive. An intolerably immense undertaking before which one can only gasp in apprehension. (143)

This reflection articulates an existential insight that survival itself may require forms of bad faith, performance, or self-dissociation when the world provides no stable ground for authentic action.

Upon lamenting that she does not understand the world, her mother replies, “I don’t either. I wonder if anyone does. We all remain children, no matter how much time goes by. We don’t understand anything” (124). This admission echoes the existential premise that the world offers no inherent meaning; human beings confront a universe that resists comprehension, leaving them suspended in ambiguity. In recalling how dreary the war was, Kazuko feels that although many events occurred, it seems nothing happened. She cites a poem that reads, “Last year nothing happened/ The year before nothing happened/ The year before that nothing happened (37). Naoji too, when asked to tell his mother about his experience as a soldier during the war, says, “There’s nothing to tell. Nothing at all. I’ve forgotten. When I returned to Japan and got on the train the rice fields looked unbelievably beautiful from the train window. That’s all” (59). Kazuko and Naoji’s recollections of the war as a time where nothing much happened reveal their compartmentalization of the tumultuous period and the traumas they have endured. The “nothing happened” refrain becomes an existential motif: it reflects an encounter with the absurd where trauma becomes unintelligible and memory gives no coherent narrative. Their reflections express the futility and meaninglessness of human struggle.

Kazuko is secretly suspicious of the fragile peace around her and her mother, sensing that a “threatening, dark shadow is already hovering closer to [them]” (27). Her mother’s sickness makes her “aware of the existence of the wall of despair built of all the many things in the world before which human strength is helpless” (106). This helplessness reflects the existential recognition of human finitude or the realization that no amount of effort or moral resolve can protect one from suffering, loss, or absurdity. Between caring for her ailing aristocratic mother and working to earn meagre sums of money, she feels overwhelmed with fear that it is “utterly impossible to go on living” (53) and that “the future has in store for [them] only horrible, evil things” (55). Kazuko’s existential dread and anxiety stem from her failure

to feel belongingness and security in her postwar reality. Naoji too, is perpetually forced to exist in a state of alienation and uncertainty because he can neither return to the noble upper-class salons he has abandoned, nor feel a sense of belongingness with the common folks because they only give him “seat in the visitor’s gallery” (155) like an outsider. Both characters inhabit existential margins in which they live suspended between a ruined past and an inhospitable present, neither of which provides stable anchoring, aligning them with Sartre’s vision of the subject “abandoned” in the world without guarantees.

Otogizoshi: The Fairy Tale Book of Dazai Osamu opens with a grim scene where the narrator reads classical Japanese folktales to his children as they hide in a bomb shelter while sirens and anti-aircraft guns are roaring outside. As he reads these tales, “another, somewhat more elaborate tale is brewing inside him” (4), indicating that Dazai’s retellings of these tales are imbued with existential ethos mirroring the harsh realities they are presented with. In the story of “The Stolen Wen”, although Oji-san’s suffers loneliness despite having a respectable family and “a cloud always hangs over Ojii-san at home” (6). He loves to drink, but drinking at home “leaves him all the more dispirited” because while he craves conversation with his wife and son, they simply “sit at the table with him each evening, eating their dinner in silence” (7). After spending one night in the forest with the ogres and returning home, he initially plans on telling his wife his adventure from the previous night, but in the “stern and austere atmosphere of her presence”, Ojii-san has lost “the will to speak” (18). This muteness reflects existential isolation and the failure of language to bridge the gap between inner experience and external world.

In the forest, Oji-san’s dance performance please the ogres and as a reward, they remove the huge wen from his face. Another old man, upon hearing Oji-san’s story, ventures into the forest hoping to get his wen removed and performs for the ogres. However, the ogres are displeased with his dance and unfortunately attach another wen to his face. The narrator, in deriving the moral of the story, states, “None of them did anything wrong. And yet, although not a single instance of wrongdoing occurs in the story, people end up unhappy” (22). This is a succinct articulation of the

existential absurd. Human suffering is not proportionate to intention, morality, or action, but arises from the indifferent nature of existence. Oji-san's sadness from lack of human connection and affection in his home is suggestive of the futility of human relationships and the impenetrable alienation an individual is subjected to carry within himself. The punishment meted out towards the old man for his efforts mirrors the existential view regarding the meaninglessness of human efforts in the face of an indifferent universe.

Yukio Mishima features protagonists whose alienation arises from their internal conflict and their incapacity to reconcile with societal expectations. In *The Confessions of a Mask*, Kochan has the "sense of being different" (54) and a "strange, piercing unrest" (55) because of his hidden homosexuality. His alienation and suffering are not entirely rooted in his homosexual desires, but also in the existential split between the self he experiences and the self he must perform that creates a continual sense of unreality. Kochan exemplifies the Sartrean split where one's own consciousness becomes both witness and captor. Kochan experiences an incident that occurs during his teenage years. As he innocently relays a message from his friend's mother to another friend asking him to see her because she feels lonesome, Kochan's friend exclaims to him, "Haven't you become dirty minded! You and your way of laughing!" (66). Remembering that his friend's mother is a widow, he finally understands the implication.

This incident becomes a source of misery and alienation for Kochan because it reveals "an obvious difference" between his friend's focus of interest and Kochan's, making him feel "the emptiness of the gulf that separated [them]" (67). As he only has fantasies about men, this incident places him in direct opposition to his peers because it confirms the unusual nature of his sexual inclinations. While other boys his age "could be their natural selves", he must perform and his "artificiality" overwhelms him with "a paralyzing emptiness" (70, 81). His fear of revealing his true self and his sense of uneasiness and uncertainty is "forcing [him] to gain control over [his] consciousness" (70). This hyper-awareness of self mirrors Sartre's notion of

consciousness turned inward upon itself that intensifies alienation because the self becomes an object of its own scrutiny, trapped between desire and impossibility.

Kochan vividly describes wartime existence as a state where “the most fantastic event which we could imagine might actually happen any moment” and it was easier to “imagine the annihilation of one's entire family than to picture things that now belonged to a distant, impossible past” (104). His detachment from not only life, but also death can be seen in his act of either waiting for something to kill him or keep him alive. He comments:

I'm surrounded by such a bountiful harvest of so many types of death – death in an air raid, death at one's post of duty, death in the military service, death on the battlefield, death from being run over, death from disease – surely my name has already been entered in the list for one of these: a criminal who has been sentenced to death does not commit suicide. (138)

Kochan even looks “forward to death impatiently, with a sweet expectation”, hoping it will lift “the heavy weight of life from [his] shoulders” (85). In the postwar atmosphere after Japan's defeat, he feels burdened by the future and “the basic condition of being a human being” (102). Death becomes an existential horizon, a reminder of contingency and a possible release from absurdity. Kochan's dread for the future and his sense of unbelonging are reflective of the postwar existential condition. He becomes suspended between incompatible forms of life and condemned to enact a self he cannot inhabit.

Mizoguchi's sense of alienation in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* stems from his stutter, his sense of ugliness and inferiority, and his social awkwardness. He states, “My stuttering.... placed an obstacle between me and the outside world. It is the first sound that I have trouble in uttering” (4). His speech impediment solidifies and deepens his solitude even more. He claims to lack any “human concern” since boyhood and feels “not the slightest sorrow over [his] Father's death” (29). His obsession with the Golden Temple further accelerates his descent towards alienation because consumed by its beauty, he sees his existence as “a thing estranged from

beauty” (20). Here beauty functions as an existential absolute or an ideal that exposes his own contingency and inadequacy. As he laments, “how empty was my longing for life” (118), his attempt to bridge the gap between him and the temple leads him to become completely detached from his everyday concerns and no longer tethered to his present reality.

Mizoguchi confronts meaninglessness in an incident with a girl named Uiko when he steps before her bicycle and is rendered mute by his stutter, his will “turn into stone”. He notes:

The ‘I’ who had slipped out of his uncle’s house.... In the village roofs whose dim outlines emerged in the darkness of the dawn, in the black trees.... yes, even in Uiko who now stood before me, there was a complete and terrible meaninglessness. Something had bestowed reality on all this without waiting for my participation: and this great, meaningless, utterly dark reality was given to me, was pressed on me, with a weight that I had until then never witnessed. (11)

This is a powerful articulation of existential absurdity: the world appears before him as a brute, meaningless fact, independent of his will or interpretation. Reality is “bestowed” without his participation, overwhelming him with its weight. Even as a Zen acolyte of a Buddhist temple, he realizes that whether he becomes a priest or dies in the war makes “not the slightest difference” (21). This realization echoes the existential claim that human choices have no predetermined essence or meaning, their significance is entirely contingent, and death exposes the arbitrariness of all projects.

Kashiwagi differs from Mizoguchi in the sense that he seeks no consolation in beauty and instead revels in its meaninglessness. For instance, after he brings beauty into existence for a short while as he plays music, his clubfeet and gloomy thoughts remained there “all unscathed and unaltered” (132). For him, beauty’s inability to transform or redeem affirms the absurd: nothing, neither art nor desire, modifies the fundamental conditions of existence. Maintaining a “distance so that the object might remain an object” (96), what Kashiwagi loves about beauty is its uselessness, “the fact

that the beauty which had passed through his body left no mark there whatsoever, that it changed absolutely nothing” (132). Kashiwagi also offers an opinion regarding the absurdity of human nature. His reflection on human nature is equally bleak. He believes people become peaceful when witnessing agony and in serene moments “every possible nightmare” is conceived (99). His worldview rejects transcendence, acknowledging only the unpredictability and irrationality at the core of human existence, which destabilizes any attempt to construct any coherent meaning.

Father Dosen, the Superior of the Golden Temple, is another character who weighs in on the subject of meaninglessness. Putting aside his priestly attires and donning Western coats and hats, Father Dozen embarks on secret rendezvous with a professional entertainer and Mizoguchi uses this act to provoke him. But Father Dozen responds with a gloomy look, “And what if you do know? It amounts to nothing. It’s all quite useless” (165). This moment unsettles Mizoguchi because it reveals an adult, indeed a spiritual authority, who has completely withdrawn from worldly meaning. Mizoguchi sees in him “a human being’s face that had so utterly deserted the present world”, a man who “so thoroughly despised the present world” despite his indulgence with money, women and “every other detail of material life” (165). Father Dozen’s detached view echoes the existential stance that human efforts and entanglements are eventually useless and futile.

The Frolic of the Beasts by Yukio Mishima is tinged with existential anxiety, absurdity and alienation. As the narrator states, “Everything there was to say had been said without saying a thing, and once it was put into words, it all fell apart so easily” (136). As Koji is released from prison after his violent attack on Ippei, Yuko wishes to show sympathy towards Koji’s prison experience, but she is at a loss for words. Similarly, Koji, too, wants to apologize yet cannot articulate his feelings. Their failures in communication reflect the existential conviction that language cannot fully capture human interiority. Koji is in love with her despite the impossibility of their relationship due to Ippei, yet there are times when “his fondness for her only succeeded in raising doubts about what sort of person Yuko really was” (90). He once raises the question, “What if by some chance that corruption that had taken such a firm hold of Ippei had

also rooted itself inside Yuko and inflamed her soul like a summer sunset?” (37). These seemingly suggests the futility of words, human entanglements and efforts in the face of a meaningless existence, and the impossibility of truly knowing the inner nature of those close to us. This uncertainty reflects the existential truth that other people remain fundamentally opaque and as Sartre writes, alienation is intensified because the other’s consciousness cannot be fully known or possessed.

Koji continues his involvement with Yuko and Ippei even after prison, resigning himself to drift along with them. He considers meeting Yuko as his fate. When he becomes briefly intimate with Kimi, he feels as though “for a short while at least, he had escaped from his preordained destiny” (100). Mishima describes the three of them as “three fish caught up in a net of sin” (6) and being brought together instantly by “this delicate spider’s thread that was barely visible in the failing light” (147), suggesting how their entanglement moves beyond human endeavours towards something engineered by fate or destiny. Sensing that his life is lived for Ippei’s sake, he confesses to Yuko, “In the end, I feel like I’ve behaved and lived exactly the way he wanted me to. And that will probably carry on this way from now on as well” (146). Yuko, agreeing with him, tells him, “In which case, you’d better come along, Kōji. And so had I. There’s no going back now after all of this” (147). This illustrates their mutual resignation to the meaningless condition of their existence without struggling against it. This resignation exemplifies the existential condition of being thrown into circumstances not of one’s choosing, and the temptation to relinquish freedom by allowing external forces or “destiny” to determine one’s being.

Ippei grimly advises Koji early on that youth is the only time one can fight, because afterward, “old age is all that awaits you” and “there is nothing other than that” (29). His declaration mirrors the existential pessimistic view that time narrows possibilities and struggle becomes increasingly futile. Koji’s alienation intensifies as he realizes he will always remain peripheral to Yuko and Ippei’s relationship. Disconnected from the villagers, he is tired of “the mediocre concealment of human shame” and “the irony of keeping up appearances” (47). Perplexed by “his inability to feel any regret” (52) after hurting Ippei, he has repeat to himself, almost like a mantra,

“I am a changed person, I have repented” (90) as if words could impose meaning on a meaningless act. His violence, devotion, and self-sacrifice stem from his position as an outsider as he participates in the couple’s lives only from the margins and never from within, embodying the existential condition of being perpetually outside.

Dazai and Mishima’s works explore alienation and marginality as existential conditions rather than social or psychological abnormalities through their depiction of protagonists existing on the fringes of society. They are perpetually at odds with themselves and the expectations imposed upon them. While they embody the self-indulging anti-heroes who expose “the aimlessness and “identity crisis” of a nation set adrift” (Orbaugh 57), their struggles are framed in this chapter through existential concepts such as absurdity, freedom, finitude, and the impossibility of grounding oneself in a coherent world. Drawing from both Japanese spiritual traditions and Western existential thought, these narratives depict characters who refuse or fail to conform to the expectations of the reconstructed postwar state “where each individual is expected to contribute to collective well-being” (Amano 13). Their alienation culminates in destruction, withdrawal or acts of self-assertion, each an attempt to negotiate the absurd world they live in. Their marginality becomes not merely a social position but an ontological issue where life is lived at the boundaries of meaning, where the self confronts the absurd and attempts, however falteringly, to create meanings within it.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

This study identifies Osamu Dazai (1909–1948) and Yukio Mishima (1925–1970) as two of the most significant Japanese novelists of the mid-twentieth century. They can be rightfully regarded as central voices in depicting the disoriented individual grappling with identity fracture and existential uncertainty in the postwar era. Their works align closely with the experiences of the Japanese postwar community who find their own struggles reflected in the protagonists' attempts to navigate the postwar society. Both Japanese and international readers continue to resonate with Dazai and Mishima because their writings articulate universal sentiments of alienation, despair, anxiety, and the search for meaning that transcend cultural boundaries. As such, they remain two of the most widely read and globally recognized figures in modern Japanese literature.

Japan's defeat in World War II caused colossal changes in society, economy, politics, and culture. The purpose of this thesis has been to foreground the significance of Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima in this turbulent era and examine how their works respond to the psychological, cultural, and philosophical challenges of postwar life. The preceding chapters have diligently analyzed the objectives of this thesis by exploring Dazai and Mishima's recurring themes of cultural estrangement, the erosion of selfhood, and the difficulty of sustaining meaning in the aftermath of collective trauma.

Chapter One, titled "Voices from Japan: Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima", introduced the biographical contours of the two writers and the common elements of their wartime upbringing that shaped their bleak, often contradictory outlook on existence. Dazai, "a stranger in his own land," wrote from the perspective of an outsider whose alienation mirrored the condition of a defeated nation (Lyons 2). This made his writing, while remaining classically Japanese, resemble strikingly the condition of the defeated Japan where most individuals encounter a sense of loss and unbelonging. "The timelessness of Dazai's stories" is pronounced because he speaks

of “the situation of each individual as he attempts to find his way in his own time and place” (2). Mishima, by contrast, embodied a complex fusion of traditionalist ideals and modern cosmopolitan impulses, creating a persona in which aesthetic discipline, nationalism, theatricality, and self-fashioning coexist in contradiction (Rankin 2). Since each aspect of his persona seems to be contradicted by another, this tension permeates his literary characters who similarly struggle to reconcile conflicting aspects of the self.

This chapter outlined the six primary texts examined in this study: Dazai’s *Otogizoshi* (1945), *The Setting Sun* (1947), *No Longer Human* (1948) and Mishima’s *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (1956), and *The Frolic of the Beasts* (1961). It also situates both authors within the broader landscape of modern Japanese literature, tracing the historical and cultural developments from the Meiji (1868 – 1912), Taisho (1912 – 1926) and Showa periods (since 1926) to the immediate postwar years (Keene 13). Japan’s defeat in 1945 and the subsequent Allied Occupation created an atmosphere of profound cultural changes, moral ambiguity, and existential confusion. Earlier literary movements such as naturalism, the I-novel tradition, neo-romanticism, proletarian literature, and wartime aesthetics form the backdrop against which Dazai and Mishima emerged.

The postwar writings of Dazai and Mishima diverge in tone and ideology yet share a deep concern with alienation, the fragility of the self, and the destabilizing impact of rapid Westernization and collapsing social norms. As a result of their particular post-war milieu, this period witnessed the rise of existential themes as many writers, including Dazai and Mishima, reflected on themes such as disillusionment, pessimism, confusion and angst, that appear existential or that intentionally take up existential ideas in their writings. They raised new questions about “the meaning of subjectivity, nation, and nationalism and brought about modern definitions of family, gender, sex, and sexuality” (Orbaugh 23).

The chapter also surveys the critical traditions that have shaped scholarly readings of Dazai and Mishima. Early criticism often relied on biographical interpretations, moral judgments, and psychological readings that blurred the line

between author and protagonist. Later approaches introduced formal, structural, ideological, and cultural analyses, viewing identity in their works as constructed, performed, destabilized, and fragmented. Scholars such as Lyons, Okuno, Suzuki, Keene, Iga, Nathan, Slaymaker, Starrs, and Rankin illuminate how both authors negotiate selfhood through narrative performance, embodiment, aesthetic will, trauma, and cultural memory.

While both writers have been extensively studied, scholarship often treats them as oppositional figures: Dazai as the voice of dissolution and Mishima as the champion of aesthetic discipline. Such binaries obscure the shared historical conditions to which they were responding. This study therefore repositions them within a comparative framework, examining how each writer articulates different responses to the same cultural and existential crises. The significance of the study lies in exploring how Dazai and Mishima portray fractured identities and existential anxieties through characters caught between tradition and modernity, conformity and individuality, and the lingering trauma of war. Their protagonists who are alienated, morally conflicted, and often self-destructive reveal the tensions within postwar Japanese identity and reflect the broader human struggle to find meaning in a disoriented world.

Many writers from the same era, such as Kawabata Yasunari, Shohei Ooka, Shusaku Endo and Kobo Abe, similarly explored themes of war, loss, identity, alienation and the human condition in postwar Japan. These writers, though well respected and celebrated, lacked the sensational or tragic aura that encircled Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima. It is not a matter of their literary quality, but how they did not fully resonate with the emotional core of postwar despair and identity crisis defining much of the immediate postwar psyche. They remained primarily literary figures, respected by critics, scholars and serious readers, but never mythologized. By contrast, Dazai and Mishima became icons in literature, films, and manga (Japanese comic/graphic books), and were romanticized as tragic geniuses or doomed rebels, allowing them to serve as emotional mirrors of postwar despair and alienation.

Chapter Two, titled “The East-West Encounter”, explores the intersection of Eastern and Western ideologies in Dazai and Mishima’s texts as well as the cultural discourse on modernity and tradition to underscore the challenges and complexities of cultural encounter in a rapidly changing world. The introduction of democracy, capitalism and foreign cultural products from the West strikingly altered Japanese society and culture (Jansen). While these changes encouraged modernization and economic growth, postwar Japan was also characterized by a teeming sense of disillusionment and disorientation that led to an interrogation of traditional values, cultural authenticity and one’s place in society. These tensions must be understood within Japan’s long and layered history of interaction with the West, beginning in the Meiji era and culminating in the ideological ruptures of the postwar period.

The impact of World War II and the American Occupation was enormous. Japan’s surrender in 1945, while bringing relief to the people, induced the *kyodatsu* condition, “a way of characterizing the “distracted” and “dejected” condition of the people as a whole” that has succumbed to exhaustion and despair (Dower 89). Japan had no sovereignty and autonomy of its own under the American Occupation, and the promulgation of American habits and customs signaled the horizontal westernization that reached into every corner of society in postwar Japan (169). The drafting of the new constitution, demilitarization, and the dismantling of imperial authority radically reconfigured structures of family, gender roles, and social hierarchy. As long-standing cultural foundations collapsed, individuals struggled to comprehend a world in which formerly stable values no longer offered direction or coherence.

These cultural and ideological tensions are vividly reflected in the works of Dazai and Mishima. Their narratives depict characters navigating a Japan suspended between its imperial past and the pervasive influence of Westernization. The emergence of distinctive postwar subcultures like the panpan prostitutes catering to American soldiers, the black market economy, and *kasutori* culture associated with cheap liquor and self-indulgence (Dower 122) symbolized the disintegration of the old order and the formation of a new social ethos. Dazai and Mishima frequently allude to these subcultures to portray characters who excessively indulge in bodily pleasure,

alcohol, drugs, and prostitution as they attempt to cope with the instability of their lives and their disorientation with the world around them. These depictions resonate with the “buraiha” sensibility, a postwar literary mood of decadence, rebellion, and moral exhaustion (Keene 1023, 1025).

Western thought provided Japanese intellectuals with a framework for comprehending their existential and philosophical crises. With the void left by the collapse of imperial and traditional ideologies, these Western ideologies such as Christianity, Marxism, and Existential philosophy provided new frameworks for navigating the trauma of defeat and the uncertainty of modern life. Figures like Dazai’s Yozo and Kazuko invoke biblical teachings to make sense of their guilt, suffering, and alienation. Marxism appealed to the intellectual and political elite seeking ideals of social justice and revolution, yet characters often adopt it cynically or superficially, reflecting the fractured nature of ideological belief in the postwar period. In *No Longer Human*, Yozo, the leader of the Marxist student action group, confesses that he is drawn to Marxists not because of “any common affection derived from Marx”, but because of “its odor of irrationality” and claims his friend Horiki call himself Marxist “out of an empty modernity” (53, 58). This reveals how Western ideologies are often mimicked rather than truly internalized.

The dynamics of mimicry and ambivalence are clarified through postcolonial theory, particularly Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry from *The Location of Culture* (1994). Although Japan was never a traditional colony of the West, the American Occupation produced a semi-colonial condition in which cultural power was asymmetrical. In this context, Dazai and Mishima’s characters embody mimicry as they imitate Western languages, values, behaviours, and ideologies in ways that are “almost the same, but not quite” (122), that is, partial, selective, and deeply ambivalent. Mimicry generates a double bind: it is simultaneously a mode of adaptation to Western dominance and a subtle site of resistance. Through fragmented Christian imagery, uneasy Marxist affiliations, and borrowed philosophies, these characters inhabit a liminal “in-between” space in which identity is neither wholly Japanese nor authentically Western. Their imitation of Western cultural models

illustrates how they adopt Western identities in partial, selective, and performative ways that underscore the instability of their own selfhood. This ambivalence reflects the unstable subjectivity of postwar Japan, caught between reverence for Western progress and resentment of Western intrusion.

Cultural authenticity, defined as genuine cultural expressions, traditions and customs perceived to reflect the historical, social, and traditional values of a specific culture (MacCannell 16), serves as another essential lens for understanding postwar Japan. The concept of cultural authenticity in Japan is strongly rooted in mythological origins tied to the sun goddess Amaterasu (Dower 290), and the belief that “Japan and the Japanese people are uniquely distinct from other cultures” (Sugimoto 124). This is reinforced by long-standing systems such as bushido (the Samurai warrior code of conduct), Shintoism, Zen Buddhism, and traditional customs emphasizing harmony, *giri* (duty), respect for nature and social hierarchy. These values were confronted in the postwar years by American individualism, egalitarianism and modernity. As a result, cultural authenticity itself became destabilized, exposed as fragile and subject to reinvention rather than absolute or timeless.

Dazai’s works demonstrate this cultural fracturing. *The Setting Sun* depicts the disintegration of the aristocratic and military class and the erosion of traditional ideals, while *Otogizōshi: The Fairy Tale Book of Dazai Osamu* undermines established moral frameworks by reinterpreting folktales in ways that expose the tension between cultural nostalgia and modern disillusionment. Mishima’s *The Frolic of the Beasts* reveals similar anxieties, as the priest’s lament that young people have turned their backs on “the customs and traditions of the past” (151) underscores his fear that Japan’s cultural and spiritual foundations are being eroded by Western modernity and materialism. In both authors, cultural authenticity becomes a contested site in which tradition confronts modernity and neither emerges intact.

Japan’s encounter with the West ultimately reflects the elusive and unstable nature of cultural authenticity that once formed the backbone of Japan’s national identity. Rather than remaining fixed or immutable, authenticity is revealed to be fragile, subject to reinterpretation, and hollow in the face of profound cultural changes.

Dazai and Mishima, grappling with these tensions through literature, expose how postwar Japanese culture becomes a battleground of conflicting ideologies and unresolved historical trauma. Their characters inhabit a hybrid “third space” in which East and West, past and present, and self and other continually collide. Through this lens, the pursuit of cultural purity or authenticity appears not as a return to origins, but as an ongoing negotiation shaped by mimicry, ambivalence, and the uncertainties of modern identity.

Chapter three titled, “Negotiating Identity in Postwar Japan”, explores the arduous and complicated process of identity formation after the war. The collapse of traditional values and belief systems ushered in an identity crisis for many Japanese who found themselves torn between national identity and the growing emphasis on individual autonomy. A sense of loss and alienation emerged from the disruption of cultural continuity and the need to adapt to a new social framework. The works of Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima reflect this negotiation of identity, where characters juggle the desire for self-expression with pressures of social conformity and maintaining harmony. They depict the fracture of Japanese identity and the complexities of adopting a modern selfhood in a nation struggling to reconcile past and future.

Unlike Western thought, the concept of identity in Japan does not rest on a bounded, unified self but acknowledges the self as adaptive, permeable, and relational. As articulated by Takeo Doi and Takie Sugiyama Lebra, the Japanese self is structured through a surface self presented outwardly and an inner self kept hidden (Doi 29), with a complex interchange between the two. These selves “are not split” and “do not exist separately but, cojoined, form a single existence” (Doi 29). The boundary between them is “far from fixed or impenetrable” and involves constant shifting (Lebra 88). A balance between these dual selves is crucial because if not regulated, “*honne* (true feelings) can run rampant in ways that are extremely grotesque” (Doi 39), disrupting one’s sense of identity. This relational concept of selfhood becomes strained in the postwar era, when traditional structures that once regulated the interaction between inner and outer selves were destabilized.

The characters' inner conflicts elucidate the clash between surface and inner selves. Dazai's protagonists are overwhelmed by inner emotions that render them incapable of maintaining societal roles. The inauthenticity they experience while performing their public façade reveals an irreconcilable rift between selves, intensifying alienation and despair. Dazai exposes how shame, visibility, and fear of judgment corrode the surface self, producing a collapse of both identity and agency. Mishima's characters, by contrast, relentlessly work to refine and master their public façade because they cannot accept their hidden selves. Though inauthenticity arises as they enact these roles, Mishima's characters choose domination by the surface self, indicating that harmonious movement between selves is impossible. In *Confessions of a Mask*, Kochan, whose homosexuality gives him self-disgust and "uncertainty" (70), dons a performative heterosexual mask and plays his "part on the stage without once ever revealing" his true self (68). Through Kochan, Mishima illustrates identity as theatrical performance, a central idea in his aesthetic philosophy.

The chapter also draws on psychoanalytic theory to examine deeper structural splits in the self. Jacques Lacan argues that the subject is inherently divided and is "nothing but this very split" between ego and unconscious (Fink 45), a condition resonant with Dazai's and Mishima's characters. Their protagonists often confront moments when the symbolic order fails to offer coherence, revealing the void at the core of identity. Lacan's objet petit a illuminates Kochan's fixation on St. Sebastian and Mizoguchi's obsession with the Golden Pavilion as unattainable ideals that promise wholeness yet intensify fragmentation. Similarly, Yozo's terror that "Takeichi would see through it" (Dazai 44) recalls Lacan's notion of the gaze, in which being seen exposes the subject's divided nature. These narratives dramatize the collapse of imaginary unity and reveal identity as fundamentally unstable, driven by desire yet fractured by its impossibility.

The conflict between Western individualism and Japanese conformity further substantiates the formation of fragmented identities. Dazai and Mishima suggest that personal autonomy is often illusory, as characters remain bound by fate, social roles, and psychological dependencies. Yozo in *No Longer Human* claims to be different

from others yet moulds himself to gain acceptance by wearing the mask of a clown. He rejects traditional norms but cannot replace them with a meaningful substitute, leading to failed self-actualization and isolation. His dependency on approval and inability to sustain an inner self mirror the collapse of both communal identity and Western individualist models.

Unlike Western notions of self-making, these narratives reflect a more fatalistic view in which personal desires constantly clash with external forces. Acts of rebellion or crime do not equate to self-definition. Individualism appears not as liberation but as a struggle against inescapable entanglements, leaving characters trapped between self-will and destiny. This exposes remnants of traditional values, such as loyalty and self-sacrifice, despite the adoption of Western ideals. Identity thus becomes the site of unresolved tension between historical constraint and modern aspiration. The collapse of militarist ideology also destabilized gender norms, producing a crisis of masculinity in which markers of authority like discipline, self-mastery, dominance lose legitimacy.

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity explains how postwar men in these texts struggle to inhabit an ideal that no longer holds cultural authority. Naoji's degeneracy, Koji's passivity, and Kochan's inability to embody heterosexual masculinity exemplify the collapse of expected gender norms. Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity further underscores these dynamics: masculinity, like identity itself, emerges through repeated performance rather than innate essence. When this performance falters, as in Kochan's staged heterosexuality or Yozo's clowning, masculinity becomes exposed as unstable. Mishima's characters often seek salvation in hyper-masculine discipline or aestheticized control, yet such efforts reveal the impossibility of restoring a unified masculine ideal in a transformed world.

As they glide consciously, reluctantly, or unconsciously between modes of being, the characters emerge as subjects whose identities take shape in the gaps between shifting selves and boundaries. Their sense of self oscillates between modernity and tradition, individualism and conformity, and inner and surface selves, placing them permanently in the margins between social frameworks that never fully interpenetrate. Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity, which posits that cultural mixing

occurs in interstitial spaces, illuminates postwar Japan, where the influx of Western values produces subjects negotiating hybrid identities. Mimicry and imitation demonstrate how characters borrow Western scripts to compensate for the disintegration of native ones, resulting in identities “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 128). Their fragmented identities thus highlight their inhabitation of “an in-between reality” or “borderline existence” (Bhabha 19), existing “betwixt and between” two worlds where they are “neither one thing nor another; or may be both” (Turner 236). They exemplify the production of cross-cultural identities during national turmoil, revealing how postwar Japanese selfhood is shaped through negotiation, tension, and continual re-formation amid cultural dislocation, reflecting Japan’s broader attempt to rebuild meaning after collapse.

Chapter Four, titled “Existence and the Search for Meaning”, scrutinizes the pervasive sense of alienation, existential crisis, and the search for meanings central to Dazai and Mishima’s characters. Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima are among the postwar writers whose works reflect themes that appear existentialist or intentionally take up existential concerns. Their contemporary socio-cultural contexts shaped their life, identity, and worldview; however, Japan’s World War II encounter and its after-effects drove them into a state where “their particular postwar milieu” (Slaymaker 4) resonated with existential problems Western existentialism had philosophized. Hence, there is reason to believe that Western existentialist philosophy reinforced the already staggering self-consciousness of the postwar Japanese. Questions of the self and its existential struggles thus appear central to the writers of the time.

Western existentialism deeply affected creative Japanese sensibilities. The movement, which gained traction in Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries, explores human existence and man’s struggle for authenticity in a meaningless universe. Jean-Paul Sartre posits the notion that “existence precedes essence” (1946:22), suggesting that human beings lack predetermined nature and must shape their destiny through freedom and responsibility. Existentialism emphasizes “freedom, decision, and responsibility” while acknowledging that the quest for authenticity is

often met “with resistance and frustration which births feelings of guilt, alienation, despair and anxiety” (Macquarrie 4).

Introduced in Japan during the 1940s, existentialism exerted immense influence on “the intellectual and artistic communities of postwar Japan” because it offered “a paradigm that helped make sense of the war and the postwar experience” (Slaymaker 14). Its enthusiastic reception partly stemmed from its affinity with elements of Zen Buddhism such as impermanence and nothingness, as well as traditional concepts like *mono no aware* and *wabi-sabi*. Japan’s earlier philosophies had already grappled with impermanence and the fluidity of being, making existentialist ideas especially resonant. This convergence heightened postwar recognition of the absurd. Sartre’s notion that man is “condemned to be free” echoed in a Japan where characters must construct meaning in a world where neither tradition nor Western ideals offer stability.

Dazai and Mishima depict existence as performance, an act of self-creation enabling their characters to adopt societal roles. This performance, endlessly enacted through facades and false selves, is intertwined with deception, whether as survival, self-delusion, or manipulation. This aligns with Sartre’s *bad faith*, the attempt “to flee what it cannot flee, to flee what it is,” by denying one’s qualities and constituting oneself as what one is not (1943:70). Dazai’s protagonists construct performative masks due to alienation and dread but become burdened by their inauthentic disguises. For Mishima, performance is a deliberate act of self-fashioning; his characters wield deception to manoeuvre through life rather than be crushed by it. Both approaches expose the tension between reality and illusion and the repercussions of a life performed rather than lived. Performance also becomes a philosophical confrontation with the void where structures of meaning have collapsed and the self becomes a role rather than an essence.

The selected authors also explore destruction and death as transcendental acts. The escape into ecstasies or fantasies reflects the experience of the bodily self as trapped in stifling existence and desperate to transcend physical and social circumstances (Bergo 2). From an existentialist viewpoint, confronted with “radical

freedom” and “the burden of responsibility” (Sartre 1946:29), the protagonists’ experiences represent confrontations with the absurd. Their attempts to transcend themselves toward future possibilities occur through acts of destruction or death. These gestures resonate with philosophical traditions that emphasize self-overcoming, the leap beyond despair, and transformation through suffering, situating destruction and death as gestures toward transcending the limits of embodied existence.

Mishima’s protagonists actively engage in destruction as transcendence. In *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Mizoguchi burns the temple to pull it down from its unattainable plane and bridge the gap between himself and the structure. Similarly, Koji in *The Frolic of the Beasts* turns to violence to impose logic on a “world bereft of logic” (51). Death features prominently in both authors not merely as an end but as a means of transcendence. For Dazai’s protagonists who are prone to surrender, death becomes an escape from suffering and despair. Mishima’s characters, in contrast, approach death as a transformative, almost sacred act. For him, death becomes an aesthetic ideal affirming purity and intentionality in an indifferent universe. In both authors, death becomes the ultimate confrontation with the absurd, a final attempt to impose meaning on a meaningless world.

This conception of death, though influenced by Western existentialism, is also shaped by Japanese beliefs such as bushido, which views “death as a course of honor or freedom” and “the best way out of certain situations” (Lyons 10–11), and Shintoism, in which spirits or kami inhabit all things and ancestors may transform into kami after death. These beliefs suggest death as merely the act of transitioning from one form of existence into another and how death is not far removed from the everyday life of the Japanese. This cultural framing renders death not as annihilation but as continuity, reinforcing the characters’ desire to transcend their earthly confinement.

Alienation and marginality appear most profoundly in Dazai and Mishima’s works, which portray these conditions as inescapable aspects of existence. Their protagonists remain perpetually at odds with themselves while existing on society’s fringes. Estranged from society and unable to assimilate, they become perpetual outsiders. Their internal conflicts, fragmented identity, and existential despair produce

a profound sense of alienation that often culminates in destruction, identity struggles, and loss of purpose. Positioned on the margins, they cannot fully participate in their social reality or form genuine connections. This contrasts with postwar reconstruction, where “each individual is expected to contribute to collective well-being” (Amano 13). Their existence symbolizes life on the margins, marked by struggle against a world that refuses to accommodate them yet simultaneously offering the freedom to reinvent themselves. Their marginality and alienation are not merely personal afflictions but conditions of life in the postwar environment. For both Dazai and Mishima, alienation becomes the clearest expression of postwar existence, signalling a permanent exile from certainty, purpose, and belonging.

In exploring the crisis of identity and existence in postwar Japan through these selected narratives, this study demonstrates that the tension between past and present is not one of simple opposition but ongoing negotiation and continual intersection. The struggle to balance modernity and tradition becomes a deeply personal conflict that permeates both individual psyche and collective consciousness, shaping the formation of identity and the conditions of existence in the postwar era. While this research has examined key facets of these complexities, other dimensions such as feminist, postmodern, or ecocritical perspectives remain outside its scope. These approaches, though valuable, would shift the focus away from the central concern of this thesis: the persistent uncertainty of selfhood and the renegotiation of meaning in a rapidly changing society. This study instead lays the groundwork for further inquiry into the evolving nature of identity, alienation, and existence in modern Japanese literature, offering a foundation for future scholarship to expand upon.

Because this thesis draws exclusively on English translations of Japanese texts, it is necessary to acknowledge translation itself as a mediating force rather than treating it as neutral or transparent. Translators of the texts such as Keene, Morris, and Weatherby rarely comment on the difficulty of rendering culture-specific idioms, honorifics, Buddhist and Shinto concepts, or the complex social registers of postwar Japan. This reflects widely held expectations that the translator remain invisible and that the text appear effortless to non-Japanese readers. Yet their decisions, whether to

domesticate cultural references for accessibility or retain Japanese specificity, inevitably shape tone, rhythm, and the existential texture of the narratives examined in this study.

The process of translation involves negotiation, omission, and selection. What reaches us as “Dazai” or “Mishima” is therefore already an interpretation, a hybrid artefact refracted through the sensibilities of another linguistic and cultural framework of the translator. This translational invisibility has implications for how alienation, marginality, and existential despair are understood. This is because the very effects these novels produce, such as their estrangement, ambiguity or lingering cultural dissonance, may be intensified, softened, or subtly transformed through the act of translation itself. Recognizing this layer of mediation not only informs us about the cultural reframing involved in reading Japanese literature in English, but also reinforces the broader argument of this thesis: that identity, meaning, and cultural expression in the postwar era are themselves unstable, negotiated, and continually reshaped as they move across shifting boundaries of language, history, and interpretation.

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**CRISIS OF IDENTITY AND EXISTENCE IN POSTWAR JAPAN:
A STUDY OF SELECT WORKS OF OSAMU DAZAI AND
YUKIO MISHIMA**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
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**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND CULTURE STUDIES
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**CRISIS OF IDENTITY AND EXISTENCE IN POSTWAR JAPAN: A STUDY
OF SELECT WORKS OF OSAMU DAZAI AND YUKIO MISHIMA**

BY

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Submitted

**In partial fulfillment of the requirement of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in English and Culture Studies of Mizoram University, Aizawl.**

Literature in 20th century Japan was shaped by various influential figures, amongst whom Osamu Dazai (1909-1948) and Yukio Mishima (1925-1970) have earned their rightful places. Emerging from the historical and cultural upheavals that characterized postwar¹ Japan, they are considered to be postwar manifestations of “the genuinely alienated writer” and the “human symbol of despair”, “the shadow lurking behind the optimism of postwar reconstruction” (Wolfe 12). They are champions in their depiction of the disillusioned individual struggling with existential and identity crises in a rapidly changing world. The postwar Japanese community saw in their protagonists the mirror of their own uncertainties, anxieties, and feelings of unbelonging. Their exploration of identity, alienation, despair, and the search for meaning secured them international recognition as leading figures of modern Japanese literature.

The rationale for choosing Dazai and Mishima is informed by their emergence in the aftermath of World War II, where their works reflect encounters and negotiations in the wake of Western interventions that affected and destabilized traditional and cultural foundations. These two writers, more significantly among others, have captured on a panoramic scope the authentic pictures of a traditionally paternalistic Japan undergoing radical disorientations at the level of the individual, culture, faith, philosophy, economy, morality and rationalism. Their works record different but interconnected negotiations that shape human existence and meaning in times of cultural dislocation and national trauma. This study therefore undertakes a comparative and theoretically informed analysis that highlights how existence and identity in postwar Japan becomes constructed, performed, and continually renegotiated within conditions of ideological upheaval.

The significance of the study lies in exploring the central crisis of identity and existence articulated in their narratives. The subject matters of Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima encapsulate the moral ambiguity and existential concerns of the

¹ Postwar is a term used to describe the period following the end of a war, especially World War II (1939-45) as per definitions from Collins and Merriam-Webster dictionaries.

postwar era through their exposé of the human condition and the meaning of existence. As Japan struggled with defeat, the atomic bombings, and the American occupation, traditional ideals of family, nation, and hierarchy collapsed. Individuals, freed or deprived of paternalistic patterns, entered a democratic society whose values often conflicted with inherited worldviews. In this space of disorientation, Dazai and Mishima's characters confront alienation², anxiety, moral ambiguity, and the struggle to locate meaning in an altered reality. The material aspects of social existence³ do not answer the deeper self that battles uncertainty and inner conflict. Their works foreground a world traumatically thrust into confusion and rapid Westernization yet haunted by its past, revealing tensions between tradition and modernity, conformity and individualism, and surface self and inner self.

Underneath their morbidity and dark tonality, the selected texts highlight the marginal, improper, and subversive figures who violate conventional norms and destabilize categories of proper Japanese identity. In the postwar era of reconstructing Japan into a cultured nation, there was an attempt to "sanitize culture" by repressing its "dangerous and subversive elements" (Rankin 123). Through their portrayals of characters living "outside proper society" (Dower 61), Dazai and Mishima expose the fracture of the self and the existential dilemmas that emerge when cultural authenticity, belonging, and purpose can no longer be taken for granted. There is a pervasive sense of alienation central to Dazai and Mishima's characters in their experience of the world which places them in a permanent state of despair and unbelonging. Some protagonists succumb to despair through self-indulgence, while others tacitly resist social norms; all represent attempts, whether momentary or sustained, to navigate life in the absence of familiar structures of

² This study uses the term 'alienation' within the context of Japanese society where it refers to a feeling of disconnect or isolation from social norms, values and expectations, social withdrawal, a sense of not belonging or feeling estranged from the world (Tamaki 10).

³ Existence is used in this study to refer to the fact of being, in contrast to non-existence, and the individual, subjective experience of being present in the world as put forth in Existentialism (Scholar's input).

authority and meaning. Their narratives thus “document the failure of the individual to adapt to “modern” society” (Wolfe 16) and the enduring human struggle to feel at home in the world.

The primary texts selected for this study are *Otogizoshi: The Fairy Tale Book of Dazai Osamu* (1945) *The Setting Sun* (1947), *No Longer Human* (1948) by Osamu Dazai and *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), *The Temple of the Golden Pavillion* (1956) and *The Frolic of the Beasts* (1961) by Yukio Mishima. Through an analysis of these works along with their historical and cultural contexts, this research examines how both authors articulate the shared existential and identity crises of the postwar period while offering differing literary expressions of psychological fragmentation, unbelonging, and the search for meaning.

The study employs interdisciplinary approaches, drawing from existentialist philosophy, postcolonial discourse, and Japanese cultural psychology. Critical concepts from Takie Sugiyama Lebra, Takeo Doi, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Homi Bhabha and others are pertinent to this study. Various aspects of Japanese religious and cultural belief systems are integrated to determine how these help shape postwar Japanese identity and worldview. The study is organized into five chapters that explore the historical and biographical contexts of the authors, the East-West encounter and its cultural consequences, the negotiation of identity, the existential search for meaning, and a concluding synthesis of findings. By foregrounding the convergences and divergences between Dazai and Mishima, the research offers a deeper understanding of postwar Japanese identity, culture, and existence, and reaffirms the relevance of these writers to modern Japanese literature.

CHAPTER ONE: Voices from Japan: Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima

This chapter introduces Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima as two of the most influential voices in twentieth-century Japanese literature, highlighting the biographical details and the common aspects of their wartime upbringing. Osamu Dazai was the pen name of Tsushima Shuji, born into a rich landowning family in the Tsugaru region of northern Japan in 1909. His father’s wealthy status provided

him with privileges and advantages in society, but they were also a source of many of Dazai's future woes and distress. He was in part a stranger in his own land, an outsider in his family, and an alien whose involvement with the central culture was always self-conscious and difficult. These made his writing, while classically Japanese, resemble strikingly the condition of the defeated Japan where many individuals encounter a sense of loss and unbelonging. "The timelessness of Dazai's stories" is because he speaks of the situation of each individual as he attempts to find his way in his own time and place (Keene 997). He died by committing double suicide with his mistress in 1948. Alan Wolfe, a critic of Japanese literature, states, "Dazai's personal demons, however, came to seem emblematic of the confusion and demoralization of the postwar years. . . . [He] was not lacking in a self-pity that resonated strongly with the deep strain of victim consciousness then pervading society" (158).

Yukio Mishima was born in Tokyo on January 4, 1925 as Kimitake Hiraoka. He had Samurai ancestry as his grandmother's family belonged to a samurai class. Throughout his life, Mishima was tormented by the elusiveness of his own existence and identity and his devotion to Japanese tradition was combined with a strong attachment to the West. Mishima's "traditionalism, his veneration of the imperial throne, and his worship of cultural purity, strength, and manliness were continually offset by his cosmopolitanism and by his irreverent and campy exhibitionism" (Rankin 2). His stories are a portrayal of his struggles with his own identity and the entwined evolution of his internal and external lives. He died by seppuku, a ritual suicide at the age of forty five on 25 November, 1970 after a failed coup d'état of the Tatenokai, his right wing civilian militia dedicated to defend the emperor. The critic Andrew Rankin states, "In [Mishima's] search for authenticity and relatedness, in his restless vacillations between East and West.... and even in his emptiness, many Japanese have recognized reflections of national anxieties that remain unresolved" (9). The tragic and sensational lives of the two authors, culminating in suicide, have long shaped their public images and contributed to their mythic status.

The chapter surveys the critical traditions that have shaped scholarly readings of Dazai and Mishima. Early criticism often relied on biographical interpretations, moral judgments, and psychological readings that blurred the line between author and protagonist. Later approaches introduced formal, structural, ideological, and cultural analyses, viewing identity in their works as constructed, performed, destabilized, and fragmented. Scholars such as Lyons, Okuno, Suzuki, Keene, Iga, Nathan, Slaymaker, Starrs, and Rankin illuminate how both authors negotiate selfhood through narrative performance, embodiment, aesthetic will, trauma, and cultural memory.

The research gap addressed in the thesis emerges from this evolving critical landscape. While both writers have been extensively studied, scholarship often treats them as oppositional figures: Dazai as the voice of dissolution and Mishima as the champion of aesthetic discipline. Such binaries obscure the shared historical conditions to which they were responding. This study therefore repositions them within a comparative framework, examining how each writer articulates different responses to the same cultural and existential crisis. The significance of the study lies in exploring how Dazai and Mishima portray fractured identities and existential anxieties through characters caught between tradition and modernity, conformity and individuality, and the lingering trauma of war. Their protagonists who are alienated, morally conflicted, and often self-destructive reveal the tensions within postwar Japanese identity and reflect the broader human struggle to find meaning in a disoriented world.

Many writers from the same era, such as Kawabata Yasunari, Shohei Ooka, Shusaku Endo and Kobo Abe, similarly explored themes of war, loss, identity, alienation and the human condition in postwar Japan. These writers, though well respected and celebrated, lacked the sensational or tragic aura that encircled Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima. It is not a matter of their literary quality, but how they did not fully resonate with the emotional core of postwar despair and identity crisis defining much of the immediate postwar psyche. They remained primarily literary figures, respected by critics, scholars and serious readers, but never

mythologized. By contrast, Dazai and Mishima became icons in literature, films, and manga (Japanese comic/graphic books), and were romanticized as tragic geniuses or doomed rebels, allowing them to serve as emotional mirrors of postwar despair and alienation.

The chapter situates both authors within the broader landscape of modern Japanese literature, tracing the historical and cultural developments from the Meiji (1868 – 1912), Taisho (1912 – 1926) and Showa periods (since 1926) to the immediate postwar years (Keene 13). Japan's defeat in 1945 and the subsequent Allied Occupation created an atmosphere of profound cultural changes, moral ambiguity, and existential confusion. Earlier literary movements such as naturalism, the I-novel tradition, neo-romanticism, proletarian literature, and wartime aesthetics form the backdrop against which Dazai and Mishima emerged. Their postwar writings diverge in tone and ideology yet share a deep concern with alienation, the fragility of the self, and the destabilizing impact of rapid Westernization and collapsing social norms. As a result of their particular post-war milieu, this period witnessed the rise of existential themes as many writers, including Dazai and Mishima, reflected on themes such as disillusionment, pessimism, confusion and angst, that appear existential or that intentionally take up existential ideas in their writings. They raised new questions about “the meaning of subjectivity, nation, and nationalism and brought about modern definitions of family, gender, sex, and sexuality” (Orbaugh 23).

CHAPTER TWO: The East-West Encounter

This chapter explores the intersection of Eastern and Western ideologies in Dazai and Mishima's texts as well as the cultural discourse on modernity and tradition to underscore the challenges and complexities of cultural encounter in a rapidly changing world. The introduction of democracy, capitalism and foreign cultural products from the West strikingly altered Japanese society and culture (Jansen 8). While these changes encouraged modernization and economic growth, postwar Japan was also characterized by a teeming sense of disillusionment and disorientation that led to an interrogation of traditional values, cultural authenticity

and one's place in society. These tensions must be understood within Japan's long and layered history of interaction with the West, beginning in the Meiji era and culminating in the ideological ruptures of the postwar period.

This chapter approaches Japan's postwar transformation not as straightforward Westernization but as a negotiated cultural relationship shaped by ambivalence, selective adaptation, and unequal symbolic power. Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry as an imitation that is "almost the same, but not quite" (128) captures how postwar Japanese subjects adopted Western habits, ideas, and aesthetics in partial, ironic ways that signal accommodation without full assimilation. As Bhabha argues, cultural forms repeated in new conditions "will not return as the same" (232), and in postwar Japan this produces a fragile negotiation between residual traditions and emergent democratic values, generating the disorientation and moral exhaustion evident in Dazai and Mishima's characters. Frantz Fanon's reflections on colonial psychology further clarify the inner split of subjects compelled to embody Western modernity while experiencing guilt, loss, or inauthenticity. Edward Said's *Orientalism* explains how Japan, under American Occupation, was reframed through an external representational gaze that defined cultural legitimacy through Western norms. Raymond Williams's categories of the residual and emergent illuminate how traditional Japanese values persist yet become subordinated to newly imposed Western frameworks. Together, these perspectives reveal the East-West encounter as a dynamic process of negotiation rather than binary conflict, positioning Dazai and Mishima's texts as sites where cultural inheritance is continually reinterpreted amidst postwar uncertainty.

The impact of World War II and the American Occupation was enormous. Japan's surrender in 1945, while bringing relief to the people, induced the *kyodatsu* condition, "a way of characterizing the "distracted" and "dejected" condition of the people as a whole" that has succumbed to exhaustion and despair (Dower 89). Japan had no sovereignty and autonomy of its own under the American Occupation, and the promulgation of American habits and customs signaled the horizontal westernization that reached into every corner of society in postwar Japan (169). The

drafting of the new constitution, demilitarization, and the dismantling of imperial authority radically reconfigured structures of family, gender roles, and social hierarchy. As long-standing cultural foundations collapsed, individuals struggled to comprehend a world in which formerly stable values no longer offered direction or coherence.

These cultural and ideological tensions are vividly reflected in the works of Dazai and Mishima. Their narratives depict characters navigating a Japan suspended between its imperial past and the pervasive influence of Westernization. The emergence of distinctive postwar subcultures like the panpan prostitutes catering to American soldiers, the black market economy, and *kasutori* culture associated with cheap liquor and self-indulgence (Dower 122) symbolized the disintegration of the old order and the formation of new, unstable social identities. Dazai and Mishima frequently allude to these subcultures to portray characters who turn to alcohol, prostitution, ideological experimentation, and escapist consumption not as moral decay but as strategies for coping with the new world. These subcultural spaces function as makeshift zones of survival that reveal the emotional fatigue produced when cultural forms must be performed before they can be meaningfully lived. They become “in-between” sites where cultural meaning is actively negotiated under pressure, exposing the psychological toll of navigating a rapidly shifting postwar landscape.

From literature, art, and philosophy to fashion, music, and cuisine, the characters in their novels navigate a world where Japanese tradition, culture and identity are continuously challenged and reshaped by foreign elements. Western thought provided Japanese intellectuals with a framework for comprehending their existential and philosophical crises. With the void left by the collapse of imperial and traditional ideologies, these Western ideologies such as Christianity, Marxism, and Existential philosophy provided new frameworks for navigating the trauma of defeat and the uncertainty of modern life. Figures like Dazai’s Yozo and Kazuko invoke biblical teachings to make sense of their guilt, suffering, and alienation. Marxism appealed to the intellectual and political elite seeking ideals of social justice and

revolution, yet characters often adopt it cynically or superficially, reflecting the fractured nature of ideological belief in the postwar period. In *No Longer Human*, Yozo, the leader of the Marxist student action group, confesses that he is drawn to Marxists not because of “any common affection derived from Marx”, but because of “its odor of irrationality” and claims his friend Horiki call himself Marxist “out of an empty modernity” (53, 58). This reveals how Western ideologies are often mimicked rather than truly internalized.

The dynamics of mimicry and ambivalence are clarified through postcolonial theory, particularly Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry from *The Location of Culture* (1994). Although Japan was never a traditional colony of the West, the American Occupation produced a semi-colonial condition in which cultural power was asymmetrical. In this context, Dazai and Mishima’s characters embody mimicry as they imitate Western languages, values, behaviours, and ideologies in ways that are “almost the same, but not quite” (122), that is, partial, selective, and deeply ambivalent. Mimicry generates a double bind: it is simultaneously a mode of adaptation to Western dominance and a subtle site of resistance. Through fragmented Christian imagery, uneasy Marxist affiliations, and borrowed philosophies, these characters inhabit a liminal “in-between” space in which identity is neither wholly Japanese nor authentically Western. Their imitation of Western cultural models, such as Yozo being described as the “Harold Lloyd of Japan” or Kazuko proclaiming herself a “Nietzschean woman”, further illustrates how they adopt Western identities in partial, selective, and performative ways that underscore the instability of their own selfhood. This ambivalence reflects the unstable subjectivity of postwar Japan, caught between reverence for Western progress and resentment of Western intrusion.

Cultural authenticity can be defined as genuine cultural expressions, traditions and customs perceived to reflect the historical, social, and traditional values of a specific culture (MacCannell 16). In postwar Japan, it must be understood not as the restoration of an untouched essence but as a response to the pressures of cultural negotiation, where tradition becomes a selective reconstruction invoked to stabilize meaning amid Western ideological dominance. If mimicry marks the partial

adoption of Western forms, appeals to cultural heritage represent attempts to re-anchor identity when inherited frameworks have collapsed. Concepts such as Japan's mythological origins tied to the sun goddess Amaterasu (Dower 290), and the belief that "Japan and the Japanese people are uniquely distinct from other cultures" (Sugimoto 124), alongside Confucian ethics, Shinto spirituality, Bushido ideals, and Zen aesthetics, were mobilized as symbolic resources rather than continuous inheritances, gaining force because Western authority threatened to define legitimacy.

These ideals retained emotional power even when their structural foundations had eroded because they offered what Fanon calls "secure anchorage" in moments of cultural disorientation. This dynamic is visible in literature as Yozo's terror before "the god" in a Shinto grove in *No Longer Human*, Dazai's folktale characters failing to "embody the time-honoured spirit of the samurai," and Mishima's Zen-infused aesthetic, where beauty lies in "quiet contemplation," all reveal tradition functioning as a symbolic stabilizer rather than a lived continuity. Their invocation reflects not timeless authenticity but a rhetorical strategy shaped within Western representational frameworks, making cultural authenticity a negotiated stance formed between what is remembered, what is imposed, and what must be lived.

Cultural continuity in postwar Japan emerges not as seamless inheritance but as crisis, leaving tradition as what Raymond Williams terms a residual form that is emotionally powerful yet no longer structurally operative. Dazai and Mishima document this dislocation. In *The Setting Sun* depicts the disintegration of the aristocratic and military class and the erosion of traditional ideals, while *Otogizōshi: The Fairy Tale Book of Dazai Osamu* undermines established moral frameworks by reinterpreting folktales in ways that expose the tension between cultural nostalgia and modern disillusionment. Mishima's *The Frolic of the Beasts* reveals similar anxieties, as the priest's lament that young people have turned their backs on "the customs and traditions of the past" (151) underscores his fear that Japan's cultural and spiritual foundations are being eroded by Western modernity

and materialism. In both authors, cultural authenticity becomes a contested site in which tradition confronts modernity and neither emerges intact.

Japan's encounter with the West ultimately reflects the elusive and unstable nature of cultural authenticity that once formed the backbone of Japan's national identity. Rather than remaining fixed or immutable, authenticity is revealed to be fragile, subject to reinterpretation, and hollow in the face of profound cultural changes. Dazai and Mishima, grappling with these tensions through literature, expose how postwar Japanese culture becomes a battleground of conflicting ideologies and unresolved historical trauma. Their characters inhabit a hybrid "third space" in which East and West, past and present, and self and other continually collide. Through this lens, the pursuit of cultural purity or authenticity appears not as a return to origins, but as an ongoing negotiation shaped by mimicry, ambivalence, and the uncertainties of modern identity.

CHAPTER THREE: Negotiating Identity in Postwar Japan

This chapter explores the arduous and complicated process of identity formation in postwar Japan. The collapse of traditional values and belief systems ushered in an identity crisis for many Japanese who found themselves torn between their national identity and the growing emphasis on individual autonomy. A sense of loss and alienation sprang forth as a consequence of the disruption to Japan's cultural continuity and the need to adapt to the new social framework. The works of Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima from this period reflect this negotiation of identity, where characters had to juggle the desire for self-expression with the pressure for social conformity and maintaining harmony. They depict the fracture of Japanese identity and the complexities of adopting a modern identity in a country trying to reconcile its past with its future.

According to the Jamaican-British sociologist Stuart Hall, "Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact... we should think of identity as a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (68). The 17th century French thinker Rene

Descartes asserts the self as a distinct, thinking entity through his philosophical statement, “Cogito, ergo sum” or “I think, therefore I am” (73) in his 1637 seminal work *Discourse on the Method*. John Locke, the Enlightenment thinker, posits in *An Essay On Human Understanding* (1698) that the continuity of an individual’s “consciousness” of his/her “present thoughts and actions” is central to maintaining a unified, “personal self” (303).

In contrast to Western thought, the concept of identity in Japan does not adhere to the idea of a bounded, impermeable, unified self and acknowledges the self as adaptive, permeable and relational. The Japanese self, as put forth by the Japanese psychoanalyst Takeo Doi and Takie Sugiyama Lebra, a Japanese anthropologist, is constructed by the surface self that is presented to outside and the inner self that is kept closed up and hidden on the inside (Doi 29), with a complex interchange between the two. The two selves “are not split” and “do not exist separately but, cojoined, form a single existence” (Doi 29) and the boundary between the two, “far from fixed or impenetrable” (Lebra 88), involves constant shifting and fluidity. A balance between the dual selves is crucial in maintaining a person’s psychological balance because if not controlled, “honne (true feelings) can run rampant in ways that are extremely grotesque” (Doi 39) leading him/her to lose control and disrupt a person’s sense of identity. This relational concept of selfhood becomes strained in the postwar era, when traditional social structures that regulated the interaction between inner and outer selves were destabilized.

The characters’ inner conflicts in the selected narratives elucidate the clash between the surface self and the inner self. Dazai’s characters are dominated by their inner emotions that render them incapable of performing their societal roles and obligations. The farcical and inauthentic feeling they experience while enacting their public façade highlights the irreconcilable rift between the surface self and the inner self, leading them further to alienation and despair. Dazai exposes how shame, visibility, and the fear of social judgment corrode the surface self, producing a collapse of both identity and agency. Most of Mishima’s characters are individuals who constantly work towards brandishing and mastering their public façade because

they cannot accept their inner, hidden selves. Though feelings of inauthenticity and deception arise as they enact their public roles, Mishima's characters choose to be dominated by their public façade, indicating that harmonious movement between selves is unattainable. In *Confessions of a Mask*, Kochan, whose homosexuality gives him self-disgust, a "sense of uneasiness" and "uncertainty" (70), put on a masquerade through a performative heterosexual mask and play his "part on the stage without once ever revealing" his true self (68). Through Kochan, Mishima also illustrates identity as theatrical performance, an idea central to his aesthetic philosophy.

The chapter also draws on psychoanalytic theory to examine the deeper structural split in the self. Jacques Lacan argues that the subject is inherently divided and is "nothing but this very split" between ego and unconscious (Fink 45), a condition that resonates strongly with Dazai's and Mishima's characters. Their protagonists often confront the traumatic moment when the symbolic order fails to offer coherence, revealing the void at the heart of identity. Lacan's concept of the *objet petit a* helps illuminate Kochan's fixation on the image of St. Sebastian and Mizoguchi's obsession with the Golden Pavilion as unattainable ideals that simultaneously promise wholeness and intensify fragmentation. Likewise, Yozo's terror that "Takeichi would see through it" (Dazai 44) recalls Lacan's notion of the gaze, in which being seen exposes the subject's divided nature. These texts dramatize the collapse of imaginary unity and expose identity as fundamentally unstable, driven by desire yet fractured by its impossibility.

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity explains how postwar Japanese men in these texts struggle to inhabit an ideal that no longer holds cultural authority. Naoji's degeneracy, Koji's passivity, and Kochan's failure to embody heterosexual masculinity exemplify men whose gender identities collapse under the pressure of shifting expectations. Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity underscores these dynamics where masculinity, like identity itself, is revealed as a repeated performance rather than an innate essence. When the performance falters, as in Kochan's staged heterosexuality or Yozo's exaggerated clowning, masculinity

becomes exposed as unstable and contingent. Sedgwick's insight that shame "makes identity" illuminates the affective intensity of these performances: Yozo's horror at being seen through, Kochan's theatricalized desire and self-concealment, and Mizoguchi's destructive response to his own exposure show masculinity experienced as fragmentation. Across Dazai and Mishima's works, men perform identities whose grounding has dissolved, revealing masculinity as a fragile negotiation between performance, desire, and shame.

Western individualism intensified the crisis of *tatemae* and *honne* by destabilizing the balance that had long enabled the Japanese self to shift contextually without fragmentation; postwar characters become split because their inner and outer selves can no longer coexist without rupture. Yozo in *No Longer Human*, calling himself a "social outcast" (67) with a "mortal dread of human beings" (26), performs a clownish *tatemae* so persistently that it becomes "no longer such a strain to trick others" (42) even as his *honne* collapses into self-destruction. In *The Setting Sun*, Kazuko's declaration that "Man was born for love and revolution" (102) and her pregnancy outside marriage signal her attempt to embrace Western autonomy, yet her dependence on men and her mother reveals the limits of self-determination. Naoji's effort to become coarse to escape aristocratic *tatemae* fails, for only "forty percent is genuine" (155) and his vices bring him no joy. Mishima's protagonists likewise display individualism as burden. Kochan in *Confessions of a Mask* describes his "reluctant masquerade" (19) and kisses Sonoko with "not the slightest sensation of pleasure" (131), while Mizoguchi in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, convinced his attachment to the temple is "rooted in [his] own ugliness" (936), burns it in a futile assertion of self.

Across these narratives, individualism becomes not liberation but intensification of alienation, revealing subjects caught between Western autonomy and the deep gravitational pull of conformity, duty, and fate. Unlike Western notions of self-made individualism, the selected narratives reflect a more fatalistic view where personal desires are in constant clash with external forces and acts of rebellion or crime do not necessarily equate to self-definition. Individualism is portrayed not

as a means of liberation but as a struggle against the inevitable entanglements of life, leaving characters perpetually trapped between self-will and destiny. This exposes the remnants of traditional Japanese values, such as loyalty and self-sacrifice, despite the widespread adoption of Western ideals in Japan. Thus, identity becomes the site of unresolved tension between historical constraint and modern aspiration.

Dazai and Mishima's characters exemplify split or fragmented identities. The mere fact of the characters possessing different selves does not constitute a split or fragmentation. Instead, their fragmented identity can be attributed to the irreconcilable rift between their inner self and surface self where "tatemae [public façade] and honne [true feelings] are in such violent conflict" (Doi 87), thereby forcing "personalities to split" since they are "no longer able to coexist" (95). While being conscious of the division between their inner self and surface self, they are tormented by this very division, causing them to experience alienation and inner conflict. Moments of "involuntary unwrapping" (Lebra 66) expose the hidden self: Yozo trembles because "Takeichi would see through it" (44), Naoji confesses that his "coarse" façade (154) only masks the pain of escaping aristocratic expectations, Kochan's mask slips as he is "beset by sexual desire" for the half-naked youth (167), Mizoguchi catches Father Dosen in Western clothing with a geisha (150), and Yuko emits a "bitter, coarse, primitive cry" (48) when Ippei's infidelity is exposed. These ruptures prompt renewed self-wrapping or a complete abandonment of façade, but in either case identity forms itself in the gap between shifting selves. These figures become inhabitants of "two worlds, in neither of which he ever quite belonged" (Park 892), and their different selves oscillate between irreconcilable zones.

Read through Bhabha, these characters inhabit a "third space" where subjectivity is produced through negotiation rather than retrieved from an originary essence. Hybridity becomes temporal as much as cultural as aristocratic residue and imperial masculinity still bind Naoji and Koji even as postwar individualism presses upon them, and Zen aesthetics anchor Mizoguchi despite the demands of a democratized Japan. Identity here is not a movement from tradition to modernity but an ongoing liminality, a dwelling in-between where subjects belong fully to neither

world yet are shaped by both. The fragmented identities of the characters therefore highlight their hybridity as they inhabit “an in-between reality” or a “borderline existence” (Bhabha 19), existing between two worlds where they are neither one thing nor another, or may be both. They manifest most clearly the production of cross-cultural identities during a period of national turmoil and uncertainty, revealing how postwar Japanese selfhood is produced through negotiation, tension, and the continual re-shaping of the self amid cultural dislocation.

CHAPTER FOUR: Existence and the Search for Meaning

This chapter scrutinizes the pervasive sense of alienation, existential crisis and the endless search for meanings central to Dazai and Mishima’s characters. Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima are among the many post-war writers reflecting themes that seemingly appear existentialist or that intentionally take up existential concerns in their writings. These writers have had their own contemporary socio-cultural contexts to powerfully affect their life, identity and worldview. However, Japan’s World War II encounter and the after-effects drove them into state where “their particular postwar milieu” (Slaymaker 4) closely resonate with the existential problems of the modern man that Western Existentialism has philosophized. Hence, there is some reason to believe that Existentialist philosophy of the West must have reinforced the already staggering self-consciousness of the postwar Japanese. Therefore, the questions regarding the self and its existential struggles appear central to the writers of the time.

Western Existentialism has deeply affected creative Japanese sensibilities. Existentialism, philosophical movement that gained widespread traction in Europe particularly during the 19th and 20th centuries, explores human existence and man’s struggle for an authentic existence in a meaningless and absurd universe. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) posits the salient notion that “existence precedes essence” (1946:22), suggesting that human beings lack predetermined nature or essence and because they have freedom and responsibility, their destiny lies with themselves. Existentialism gives precedence to “freedom, decision, and responsibility” for man to distinguish himself while also acknowledging that man’s quest for an authentic self

is often met “with resistance and frustration” which births feelings of guilt, alienation, despair and anxiety (Macquarrie 4).

Existentialism, believed to be introduced in Japan during the 1940s, exerted immense influence on “the intellectual and artistic communities of postwar Japan” because it presented “a paradigm that helped make sense of the war and the postwar experience” (Slaymaker 14). The enthusiastic embrace of existentialist sensibilities from the West can be partly observed as due to its affinity with some elements of Zen Buddhism such as impermanence and nothingness, as well as traditional Japanese concepts like *mono no aware*, meaning the pathos of things, and *wabi-sabi* that celebrates imperfection and impermanence. Japan’s earlier philosophical and literary traditions had already grappled with themes of impermanence, emptiness and the fluidity of being, making existentialist ideas particularly resonant in the postwar context. This convergence of Western existentialism and Japanese philosophies heightened the postwar recognition of the absurd. The anguish of freedom, posited by Sartre’s sense that man is “condemned to be free” (1946:22), echoes sharply in postwar Japan, where characters must construct meaning in a world where neither tradition nor imported Western ideals can offer stable foundations.

A recurring theme in Dazai and Mishima’s works is existence as performance or an existential strategy through which characters fend off anxiety, freedom, and absurdity. Read through Sartre, such performances exemplify bad faith, the flight from freedom into fixed roles that deny one’s own possibilities. Dazai’s figures suffer acutely from this gap between consciousness and the masks they adopt. Yozo in *No Longer Human* learns early that social life is structured by bad faith when he hears adults mock his father, then return with “expressions of genuine delight” (37). His own personas of a clown, a Marxist, and a dutiful husband become “ghost-style” disguises (56) that torment him, for he cannot “live... serenely while engaged in deceit” (37). Naoji in *The Setting Sun* likewise forces himself to be “coarse” and “brutal” (154) to escape his aristocratic identity, yet his performative degeneracy conceals shame and despair, culminating in suicide. Even in *Otogizōshi*, Dazai exposes refinement as deception: the tortoise in “Urashima-san” unmasks the hero’s

kindness as “nothing more than a minor diversion” (33), and “Click-Clack Mountain” proceeds as “all about deception, from start to finish” (68). In each case, performance becomes both a refuge and a source of harm, revealing the existential burden of living in bad faith.

Mishima’s characters, by contrast, engage in performance as a deliberate act of self-creation, using deception not to evade anguish but to impose form on an absurd world. Kashiwagi in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* perfects his manipulation of pity as he states, “I’ve practiced falling down... dozens of times” (106), turning his clubfeet into a calculated instrument of seduction, and doing so without “shyness” or “underhand guilt” (86). His performance stabilizes rather than fractures him, embodying Mishima’s fascination with aesthetic self-construction. Kochan in *Confessions of a Mask*, however, bears the full existential weight of deception as he maintains a façade of “normality” (131) while his true desires remain hidden, constructing a heterosexual mask as both protection and prison. His vow “to play [his] part on the stage without once ever revealing [his] true self” (68), and the hollowness of his kiss that brings “not the slightest sensation of pleasure,” reveal the devastation of living in bad faith. For both writers, the mask is not simply social but existential as it serves as a threshold between self and the world. Yet whereas Dazai’s protagonists collapse under the awareness of their deception, Mishima’s figures reveal the strange empowerment that performance can yield, even as it exposes the paradox of freedom where the very act of choosing one’s mask may also become the act through which one disappears.

The selected Japanese authors look to destruction and death as transcendental acts. The escaping of ourselves into various ecstasies or fantasies indicates the experience of the bodily self as a substance trapped in its stifling existence and desperate to transcend their physical and social circumstances, thereby denoting the limitation of existence (Bergo 2). From the existentialist viewpoint, faced with the “radical freedom” to create meanings and “the burden of responsibility” (Sartre 1946: 29) for everything they do, the experiences of the protagonists serve as distinct representations of their confrontation with the absurd. The exercising of their

freedom to transcend or strive beyond themselves toward future possibilities is done so through acts of either destruction or death, and sometimes both. Such acts resonate with philosophical traditions that emphasize self-overcoming, the leap beyond despair, and transformation through suffering. Destruction and death are situated as gestures toward transcending the limits of embodied existence.

Mishima's protagonists actively engage in acts of destruction as a transcendental act. In *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Mizoguchi's act of destruction in burning down the temple is his way of pulling down the temple from its unattainable plane of existence and bridging the gap between him and the temple. Similarly, the protagonist Koji in *The Frolic of the Beasts* engages in acts of destruction through violence to impart logic into a "world bereft of logic" (51). Death features prominently in both Dazai and Mishima's works not merely as an end but a means of transcendence where death serves as a final act of self-assertion and a means to transcend their limitations. For Dazai's protagonists who are more or less prone to passively surrender to life's meaninglessness, death serves as an escape from suffering and despair. Mishima's characters contrastingly approach death as a means to transform their suffering into a deliberate, almost sacred act. Death, for Mishima, becomes an aesthetic ideal that affirms purity, beauty, and intentionality in a universe perceived as chaotic and indifferent. In both authors, death becomes the ultimate confrontation with the absurd where an effort is made to impose meaning on an indifferent world.

This further illustrates how the concept of death, though influenced by Western existentialist thinkers, is still largely shaped by the Japanese cultural beliefs such as Bushido, the Samurai warrior code of conduct in feudal Japan that views "death as a course of honor or freedom" (Lyons 11) and "the best way out of certain situations" (10), and Shintoism, the Japanese indigenous belief where all things in nature have spirits or deity called kami, and one's ancestors can transform into kami after death. These beliefs suggest death as merely the act of transitioning from one form of existence into another and how death is not far removed from the everyday

life of the Japanese. This cultural framing renders death not as annihilation but as continuity, reinforcing the characters' desire to transcend their earthly confinement.

Alienation and marginality as the conditions of existence appear most profoundly in Dazai and Mishima's works, where they are read not simply as issues of identity or belonging but as encounters with freedom, meaninglessness, and the dissolution of stabilizing frameworks. Dazai's narratives are saturated with existential despair: Yozo cannot "feel the least particle of confidence in [his] ability to speak and act like a human being" (28), forces himself into the role of a clown so that "the human beings probably won't mind it too much if [he] remain outside their lives.... [He] shall be nothing, the wind, the sky" (29), and after a suicide attempt, he wakes up weeping, "I'm going home" (154). His cold observation of his wife's rape as "just another aspect of the behaviour of human beings. There's nothing to be surprised at" (148) registers derealization, while his "ghost-style" portraits are "the harrowing reality" (55). Kazuko and Naoji in *The Setting Sun* recall the war as a time where "nothing happened" (37) and live amid a "wall of despair" (106), with Naoji relegated to a "seat in the visitor's gallery" (155). Survival itself becomes "an intolerably immense undertaking" (143) requiring performance or dissociation. Across these works, alienation becomes an ontological homelessness in which inherited meaning collapses and no replacement emerges.

Mishima's protagonists register alienation as internal split and resigned absurdity. Kochan in *Confessions of a Mask* feels "the emptiness of the gulf that separated [them]" (67), looks "forward to death impatiently, with a sweet expectation" (85), and vows "to play [his] part on the stage without once ever revealing [his] true self" (68). Mizoguchi in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* confronts reality as "a great, meaningless, utterly dark" weight "bestowed... without waiting for my participation" (11), seeing his existence as "estranged from beauty" (20), while Father Dosen's admission that life is "all quite useless" (165) collapses spiritual authority into absurdity. In *The Frolic of the Beasts*, Koji drifts in resignation as "one of three fish caught in a net of sin" (6), confessing he has lived "exactly the way [Ippei] wanted" (146). Through such figures, Dazai and Mishima

portray alienation and marginality not as psychological abnormalities but as existential conditions in which life is lived at the boundaries of meaning, where the self confronts the absurd and struggles, through withdrawal, destruction, or fragile assertion, to create meaning in a world that provides none. These works show that alienation and the absurd form the ground on which existence must be borne, where individuals continue forward not because meaning is assured, but because life, however fractured, still insists on being lived.

CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion

The concluding chapter summarizes the central concerns of this study and demonstrates how its objectives have been fulfilled. In exploring the crises of identity and existence emerging in postwar Japan through the selected narratives, it becomes evident that the tension between past and present is not one of simple opposition but of continuous negotiation shaping both individual and collective consciousness. The encounter between Eastern and Western cultures during and after the war profoundly influenced modern Japanese literature, producing fractured identities, cultural dislocation, and new modes of self-understanding. Through their portrayals of alienation, despair, and the collapse of stable meanings, Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima emerge as key voices whose works capture the complexities of postwar Japanese identity and the existential condition of the era.

The study also acknowledges the role of translation as a mediating force through which these narratives reach global audiences. Since the analysis draws on English translations, translators' decisions on whether to domesticate or preserve cultural specificity shape how themes of identity, alienation, and existential struggle are conveyed. Reading Dazai and Mishima together highlights not their differences alone but their shared articulation of a world marked by dislocation, instability, and the search for meaning after national catastrophe. Their texts reveal how identity becomes fragmented, how existence becomes burdened by anxiety and freedom, and how literature becomes a space for negotiating cultural transformation. The study thus reaffirms their lasting significance in understanding the intellectual and emotional landscape of postwar Japan.

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