

Article Arrival Date**02.05.2025****Article Published Date****20.06.2025****A PROMINENT FIGURE IN JAPANESE LITERARY AND SOCIAL THOUGHT,
MISHIMA YUKIO****JAPON EDEBİ VE TOPLUMSAL DÜŞÜNCESİNİN ÖNDE GELEN TEMSİLCİSİ
MİSHİMA YUKİO****Dr. Gulnar YUNUSOVA**

Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Nizami Ganjavi Institute of Literature,

Department of “Azerbaijan–Asia Literary Relations,” Baku, Azerbaijan

ORCID ID: [0000-0002-3372-4422](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3372-4422)**Abstract**

The writer is a member of the society in which they live, and their works are closely tied to that society's values, contradictions, and transformations. The life and work of Mishima Yukio are among the clearest examples of this idea. The main phase of Mishima's literary career coincides with the second half of the 20th century – a period marked by dynamic and flexible development in modern Japanese literature. After the devastation of World War II, Japanese writers sought to express the profound social, political, and cultural changes experienced by society through literature. This era was characterized by the emergence of new literary tendencies that reflected the traumas of the past and the complexities brought about by modernization and globalization. In postwar Japanese literature, the clash between traditional values and modernity emerged as a central theme. In this context, Mishima Yukio stands out as a writer who consistently explored the degradation of Japanese national identity and national ideals, and the necessity of preserving traditional ideals. Mishima advocated for a return to Japan's traditional values and the restoration of the emperor system. Unwilling to accept the defeat of the society he represented, Mishima ended his life in 1970, at the age of 45, through harakiri – a striking indication that he recognized no boundary between art and life, and sought to realize his ideals in both realms.

As one of the most unique literary figures in Japanese literature, Mishima Yukio's life and work construct a world where tradition collides with modernity, and beauty with death – inviting readers to explore this complex world.

Keywords: 20th century, Japanese literature, Mishima, national values, tradition, death, modernity, beauty

Özet

Yazar, yaşadığı toplumun bir üyesidir ve onun eserleri bu toplumun değerleri, çelişkileri ve değişimleriyle yakından bağlantılıdır. Mishima Yukio'nun hayatı ve edebi üretimi bu düşüncenin en belirgin örneklerinden biridir. Mishima'nın edebi kariyerinin ana dönemi, 20. yüzyılın ikinci yarısına denk gelir ki, bu zaman dilimi modern Japon edebiyatında dinamik ve esnek bir gelişim dönemi olarak nitelendirilir. İkinci Dünya Savaşı'nın yıkımlarından sonra

Japon yazarlar, toplumun yaşadığı derin sosyal, siyasi ve kültürel değişimleri edebiyat aracılığıyla ifade etmeye çalışmışlardır. Bu dönem, geçmişin travmalarını ve modernleşme ile küreselleşme süreçlerinin yarattığı karmaşıklığı yansıtan yeni edebi eğilimlerin ortaya çıkmasıyla karakterize edilmiştir. Savaş sonrası Japon edebiyatında geleneksel değerlerle modernliğin çatışması önemli bir tema olarak öne çıkmıştır. Bu bağlamda, Mishima Yukio, edebi mirasında Japon ulusal kimliğinin ve ulusal ideallerin bozulması ile buna karşılık geleneksel ideallerin korunmasının gerekliliğini sürekli işleyen yazarlardan biridir. Yazar, Japonya'nın geleneksel değerlerine dönmesini ve imparatorluğun yeniden tesis edilmesini savunmaktaydı. Temsil ettiği toplumun yenilgisiyle barışamayan Mishima, 1970 yılında – 45 yaşında harakiri yaparak hayatına son vermiştir. Bu olay, Mishima'nın sanat ile hayat arasında bir sınır tanımadığının ve ideallerini her iki alanda da gerçekleştirmeye çalıştığının açık bir kanıtıdır.

Japon edebiyatının en özgün edebi figürlerinden biri olan Mishima Yukio'nun hayatı ve eserleri, gelenek ile modernliğin, güzellik ile ölümün çarpıştığı bir dünya yaratır ve okuyucularını bu dünyayı keşfetmeye davet eder.

Anahtar kelimeler: 20. yüzyıl, Japon edebiyatı, Mishima, milli değerler, gelenek, ölüm, modernlik, güzellik

Introduction

In the second half of the 20th century, Japanese literature underwent a developmental phase influenced by significant social and cultural changes. During this period, issues such as the loss of national identity, the influence of Western modernism, traumas caused by defeat, and the spiritual voids of urban life formed the main themes of literary creation. One of the most prominent figures in 20th century Japanese literature, Mishima Yukio, not only expanded the boundaries of Japanese literature by representing various aesthetic and ideological movements but also had a significant impact on world literature. Mishima, whose life and work are rich in philosophical, aesthetic, and political nuances, is remembered both as a writer and a public figure for his unique way of thinking, strong creativity, and the tragic end of his life.

187

Born as Kimitake Hiraoka, Mishima Yukio entered the world on January 14, 1925, in a noble family in Tokyo, the capital of Japan. Until the age of 12, he was raised by his grandmother Natsuko, who had a profound influence on his personal development and worldview. Natsuko had grown up in the household of Prince Arisugawa Taruhito and maintained her aristocratic ambitions. She did not allow Mishima to go out in the sunlight, engage in sports, or play with other children his age. In his autobiographical novel “Confessions of a Mask”, the writer expressed his grandmother's restrictions as follows: “My grandmother, both because of my illness and to protect me from bad influences, forbade me from playing with the boys in the neighborhood”. (Mishima, 2024, p. 27)

Some researchers have linked Mishima's fascination with death to the influence of his grandmother Natsuko. Although Mishima had a frail physique in his early years, he possessed intellectual brilliance and was highly talented. His writing ability began to show itself as early as his school years. In his essay “Sun and Steel”, Mishima wrote about this: “The essays I wrote during my school years astonished the teachers. Because in those essays, even the slightest connection with reality was imperceptible. Most likely, I had understood the very complex and

infinite nature of the Word while still a child, and by avoiding the negative, I only used its destructiveness in a positive sense". (Mishima, 2017, p.123)

In 1931, Mishima Yukio enrolled in Gakushuin, the Peers' School of the Imperial Court, which was intended for the children of the Japanese aristocracy and high-ranking government officials. From an early age, Mishima showed a great interest in literature. At Gakushuin, he read not only classical Japanese literature but also devoured European authors such as Greek mythology, Raymond Radiguet, Friedrich Nietzsche, Oscar Wilde, Jean Cocteau, Rainer Maria Rilke, Thomas Mann, and Charles Baudelaire with admiration, drawing inspiration from their works. Kazuki Takada, in his study titled "A Comparative Study of Mishima Yukio and Oscar Wilde: With Particular Reference to their Views of the Absolute", notes the influence of many foreign writers and thinkers on the formation of Mishima's worldview, emphasizing that Raymond Radiguet played a particularly important role in Mishima's early creative period. *"In Mishima's case, it is also possible to indicate that he was greatly influenced by some foreign authors and thinkers. Especially in his earlier years he traced their style and the atmosphere created within their works to form his own style. Firstly, Raymond Radiguet (1903-1923) deserves mention as a foreign writer who influenced him. When Mishima first read his novel, Le Bal du comte d'Orgel [Count d'Orgel], he was fourteen or fifteen years old. That book then became a Bible for him for a long time."* (Takada, 2004, p.16) The early death of the French writer Raymond Radiguet and the themes in his works deeply fascinated Mishima, who took a particular interest in Radiguet's life and literary output. Mishima characterized Radiguet's writing as *"the story of a boy who wants to grow up quickly, who strives for early maturity"*. (Mishima, 1955, p. 103) This perspective reflects themes also present in Mishima's own work – such as youth, the desire for maturity, the resulting inner conflict, and a race against time. Mishima was not only influenced by Radiguet, but he also analyzed his writing style and applied similar methods in his own works. Mishima explicitly stated, *"I wrote "Tōzoku" (Thieves) as the final resolution of my experiences related to Radiguet."* (Mishima, 1956, p. 285) This statement underscores the significant role Radiguet played in Mishima's literary development.

By the sixth grade, Mishima had already become the youngest member of his school's literary club editorial board. His first contributions to Gakushuin's literary journal were primarily haiku and waka poems, but he later began focusing on prose. Due to chronic health issues, Mishima was forbidden from spending much time in daylight. At the age of fifteen, he expressed his dark inner world in the following poem:

And still the light

Pours down; men laud the day.

I shun the sun and cast my soul

Into the shadowy pit. (Mishima, 2017, p.128)

In 1941, at the age of 16, the young writer's first short story, "The Forest in Full Bloom" (Hanazakari no Mori), was published in the literary journal "Bungei Bunka" with the support of his teacher Fumio Shimizu. The literary pseudonym "Mishima Yukio" was given to him by his teacher Shimizu and editorial board member Hasuda Zenmei to prevent potential negative reactions from the writer's family. "Mishima" was the name of a railway station. On their way to meet the young writer at the editorial office, Shimizu and Zenmei had passed through that station and seen snow (yuki) on the peak of Mount Fuji. Thus, the author of "The Forest in Full Bloom" was introduced to the literary world and readers under the name "Mishima Yukio." As Mishima Yukio took his first steps as a writer, Hasuda Zenmei acted as a mentor. In the editorial notes of the journal, Hasuda highly praised Mishima's talent, writing: *"This young writer is a child sent from the heavens of eternal Japanese history. He is much younger than us, but has*

already stepped into literature as a fully formed writer". (Zenmei, 1941, p. 116) In 1943, when Hasuda was called to serve as a lieutenant in Southeast Asia, he said farewell to Mishima with the words: *"I entrust Japan's future to you"*. (<https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/三島由紀夫>) This farewell had a profound impact on Mishima's later life. It is worth noting that in 1945, Hasuda Zenmei shot and killed his commanding officer, who blamed the Emperor for Japan's defeat, and then committed suicide with his own weapon. Both figures – Fumio Shimizu and Hasuda Zenmei – played crucial roles in Mishima's literary and ideological development. Shimizu guided Mishima toward classical Japanese literature, shaping him as a writer, while Hasuda, with his devotion to national values and self-sacrifice, deeply influenced Mishima's ideological outlook. Their impact left lasting traces in both Mishima's works and his life.

In 1944, Mishima graduated from high school as the top of his class and, at his father's insistence, enrolled in the Faculty of Law at the University of Tokyo. He later wrote: *"In September 1944 – a year before the war ended – I graduated from the school I had attended since childhood and entered university. I was forced to choose law as my major due to my father's firm insistence. But it didn't matter to me, because I believed I would soon be conscripted and die in battle, and that my entire family would perish in air raids without a single survivor"*. (Mishima, 2024, p.118) After graduating in 1947, he worked for one year at Japan's Ministry of Finance. During his university years and tenure at the ministry, Mishima wrote his first novel, *"Thieves"* (Tōzoku, 1947–48). In this work, he explored themes of individual versus society, changing moral values, and the struggle of finding one's place in a transforming world, showcasing his innovative literary style.

In 1948, Mishima left his job at the ministry to devote himself entirely to writing. That same year, he rose to fame in the Japanese literary world with the publication of his novel *"Confessions of a Mask"* (Kamen no Kokuhaku), rich with autobiographical elements. The novel delves into themes such as the individual's role in society, self-acceptance (or the inability to accept oneself), and existential crisis. As in many of his works, Mishima addressed motifs of death, loneliness, and alienation – reflections of his own internal struggles. Death, in particular, was a defining aspect of his psyche: *"As I said before, the future was a burden to me. From the very beginning, life had cornered me with a sense of obligation. Even though I knew it was impossible to fulfill this debt, life kept scolding me for not repaying it—tormenting me, inflicting guilt. I felt that a sudden, unexpected blow dealt to life by death might bring relief, might lighten the load"*. (Mishima, 2024, p.119) These thoughts reflect the pressure and anxiety Mishima felt in the face of life's duties and responsibilities – a manifestation of the human quest for meaning. His attraction to death can be seen as a desire to escape these burdens. As researcher Karaca notes: *"Death had penetrated the depths of Mishima's soul; it had taken root as both a thought and a longing. The traumatic experiences he recounted – his claim of remembering his birth, a childhood shaped by an authoritarian and depressive grandmother, and early encounters with death – are important in understanding how the seeds of his obsession with death were sown. Over time, these seeds evolved into multifaceted perspectives on death, both personal and societal"*. (Karaca, 2023, p.822) For Mishima, death also symbolized loyalty to national values and tradition, particularly the samurai code, and served as a rebellion against modernity. In traditional Japanese culture, death could be viewed as an aesthetic act. Mishima embraced this idea, stating: *"For me, the most natural way of life was to approach death daily, without doubt"*. (Mishima, 2017, p.144) He believed that modern people had lost this aesthetic relationship with death, approaching it with cowardice and meaninglessness. This reflected the deep philosophical divide between tradition and modernity: *"Unlike the ancient Greeks, our contemporaries lack the urge to live beautifully and to die beautifully"*. (Mishima, 2017, p.143) Through the act of death, Mishima sought to express the modern human's internal fragmentation on both individual and national levels. Thus, for him, writing was not merely a

means of expression but also a tool for self-exploration, moral inquiry, and spiritual introspection. Literature was a mirror of his inner world and his views on society. *“Literary style was my fortress – shielding me from fantasy and its faithful shadow, sensitivity. I asked only one thing of my style: never forget tension; always stay alert, like a ship’s first mate. I despise defeat more than anything”*. (Mishima, 2017, p.140)

The novel that brought Yukio Mishima international acclaim was “The Temple of the Golden Pavilion” (Kinkakuji, 1956). The narrative is based on actual events that occurred in Japan during the 1950s, specifically the arson committed by a monk at the renowned Kinkakuji Temple located in Kyoto. Through its poetic language and dramatic structure, the novel left a lasting imprint on global literature. In this work, Mishima skillfully integrates themes that frequently recur in his oeuvre – violence, passion, religion, and history – achieving a remarkable thematic harmony. The protagonist, Mizoguchi, becomes consumed by an obsessive fascination with the temple’s beauty. His yearning to possess this idealized aesthetic ultimately drives him toward an irreversible and destructive course of action. At one point, he reflects: *“I was completely alone; the Golden Pavilion had enveloped me from all sides. Who belonged to whom? Did I belong to the Pavilion, or did it belong to me? Perhaps we had succeeded in attaining the rarest of equilibria? The Pavilion became me, and I became the Pavilion”*. (Mishima, 2023, p. 138) Characteristic of Mishima's literary sensibility, the novel underscores the inseparability of beauty and death. The author held the belief that the apprehension of true beauty could only be achieved through the lens of mortality. In this regard, the epigraph Mishima selected for his semi-autobiographical novel “Confessions of a Mask” is especially illuminating. It is a passage from Dostoevsky’s “The Brothers Karamazov”, which reads: *“Beauty... is a fearful and terrible thing! Fearful because it is undefinable, and it is impossible to define it because God has posed numerous riddles... It is not only terrible, but also mysterious. Here, the devil struggles with God, and the battlefield is the human heart”*. (Mishima, 2024, p. 4) This intertextual reference underscores Mishima’s philosophical engagement with the metaphysical dimensions of beauty and its relation to human suffering, spiritual conflict, and existential ambiguity.

Writer, poet, playwright, actor, and model Mishima Yukio was also a public figure and political activist. He sharply criticized the constitution that Japan was forced to adopt after its defeat in World War II, as well as the regime under American influence. Mishima believed that postwar Japan had lost its traditions under Western influence. For this reason, the desire to defend traditional Japanese values occupied a central place in his works and public speeches: *“In the postwar years, during a period when existing social values were being destroyed, I believed (and often told others) that the time had come to revive the classical Japanese ideal of the unity of culture and the spirit of combat, literature and the sword, Word and Action”*. (Mishima, 2017, p.140) Through the organization “Tatenokai” which he founded in 1968, he sought to guide young people towards military and moral values. Just as he was in real life, in his literary work Mishima was a staunch nationalist who rebelled against the loss of Japanese national values. Nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1968, the author combined traditional Japanese elements with modern literary techniques in his works, giving considerable space to the themes of intimacy and death. In his 1960 short story “Patriotism”, the development of his nationalistic ideas becomes clearly evident. The story is one of the author's most notable works, representing a dramatic and aesthetic expression of the tension between tradition and modernity. At the same time, the story can also be seen as a literary expression of the author’s ideological views. Mishima rebelled against the loss of Japanese national values, consumerism, Americanism, Japan's increasingly modern culture, and the forces of globalization. He considered Japan’s rising economic prosperity a danger for Japanese youth, and the growing globalization a threat to the Japanese people as a whole. In an interview with the BBC, he defended samurai culture

in opposition to globalization, saying: *“We have an ancient samurai culture. They lived only for their honor and always looked down on values like money. I want to revive some Samurai spirit through it, because I don't want to revive Harakiri itself, but through the vision of such a very strong vision of Harakiri. I wanted to inspire and stimulate younger people. And through such a stimulation, I wanted to revive some old traditional sense of honour, or sense of very strong responsibility, and such a sense of death in honour. That's my purpose”*. (Youtube, 2007)

Toward the late 1960s in Japan, student movements began at almost all universities. The students, who set up barricades all around the institutions of higher education, were demanding a change in the administrative system. *“The student protests of the late sixties indicated, reaction against both a diplomatic policy which followed in the wake of America and a domestic policy of a highly managed society exacerbated the underlying instability of the social system”*. (Shuichi, 1983, p.286) Toward the end of the 1960s in Japan, student uprisings – fighting against the traditional structure of society – were ultimately suppressed with the help of military forces. One of the most memorable revolts of that period was an attempted coup by the writer Mishima Yukio. Together with his comrades, Mishima entered the headquarters of the Self-Defense Forces, aiming to incite the soldiers to rebel and overthrow the government. However, he failed to achieve his goal. While the events were being broadcast live on television, he announced that he would commit suicide and returned to the commander's office, where he took his life through “harakiri”. Mishima said farewell to life exactly as he had envisioned in “Confessions of a Mask”: *“What I was really seeking was a natural death”*. (Mishima, 2024, p.128). His defeat in 1970, at the age of 45, was seen as the defeat of the society he represented. Mishima Yukio's suicide cannot be viewed solely within the context of his personal life; rather, it can be seen as a symbolic expression of broader social and cultural processes. According to Professor Dr. Selchuk Esenbel, a scholar of Japanese history, Mishima's suicide can be interpreted as *“a torment caused by the confrontation between civilization – that is, Japanese cultural identity and Western civilization”*. (Esenbel, 2021, p.135) Although this analysis does not fully explain the reasons behind Mishima's suicide, it provides a significant perspective for understanding the intense tensions and deep cultural fragmentation of the era. This approach highlights the collective identity crisis and contradictions arising from Japan's encounter with the West, lying behind the personal drama of Mishima's life. In the final period of his life, Mishima reflected his decision to commit suicide in the last stage of his life with profound spiritual and philosophical depth through the poetic work “Icarus” (1968), which he wrote during his final years:

And did the heavens abet the plan to punish me?

To punish me for not believing in myself

Or for believing too much;

Too eager to know where lay my allegiance

Or vainly assuming that already I knew all;

For wanting to fly off

To the unknown

Or the known:

Both of them a single, blue speck of an idea?” (Mishima, 2017, p.164)

This poem expresses Mishima's philosophy of death, as well as his artistic and ideological worldview, in a profound and symbolic way. The writer's suicide was an aesthetic, philosophical, and political act. Themes in the work – such as self-awareness, acceptance of

fate, attraction to death, and the allure of the unknown – allow us to interpret Mishima’s suicide not merely as the result of a personal crisis, but also as the culmination of an ideological performance.

Conclusion

Mishima Yukio, as a writer, public figure, and bearer of ideology, succeeded in leaving a mark on history as one of the most striking figures to expose the internal contradictions of 20th century Japan. In the historical context shaped by student movements, social tensions, and Japan's encounter with the West, Mishima’s worldview and his chosen end – harakiri – serve as a form of critique and analysis of modern Japanese identity. His actions during the final years of his life, and especially his suicide in 1970, should be seen not merely as a personal tragedy but as part of a broader social and cultural narrative. The convergence of Mishima’s aesthetic and philosophical views with his literary and ideological convictions in the act of suicide demonstrates that he recognized no boundary between art and life. Instead, he sought to realize his ideals in both realms, embodying the crises of both personal and collective identity in postwar Japan.

In 1988, a literary prize was established in honor of Mishima Yukio. This award, presented annually by Shinchō Society for the Promotion of Literary Arts, is granted to a work that “creates new ground for the future of literature.” The prize carries a monetary award of one million yen.

References

1. Hasuda Zenmei (1941). 編集後記 [Editor's note]. Bungei Bunka (Nihonbungaku No Kai) (2005)
2. Kazuki Takada, A comparative study of Mishima Yukio and Oscar Wilde: with particular reference to their views of the absolute (Ph.D. dissertation). The University of Edinburgh (2004)
3. Selçuk Esenbel, Japon Modernleşmesi ve Osmanlı. İstanbul: İletişim yayınları (2021).
4. Shuichi Kato, A history of Japanese literature, Volume 3 The modern years (translated by: Don Sanderson). PAUL NORBURY PUBLICATIONS LTD, Tenterden, Kent (1983)
5. Şeyma Karaca Küçük, Yukio Mishima'nın "Vatanperverlik" Ve H. Nihal Atsız'ın Ruh Adam Adlı Eserlerinde Batılılaşma Krizi. İstanbul: Türkiyat Mecmuası 33, 2 (2023), s.815-838.
6. Yukio Mishima interview: [Electronic resource] / Youtube (2011), (video film).
URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NeskvAXHfZw>
7. Yukio Mishima Speaking in English: [Electronic resource] / Youtube (2007), (video film).
URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPAZQ6mhRcU>
8. Yukio Mishima, Günəş və polad (tərcümə edən: Güldəstə). Bakı: "Xəzər" dünya ədəbiyyatı dərgisi 4 (2017), s.121-164.
9. Yukio Mishima, Qızıl məbəd (tərcümə edən: Vurğun Həsənlı). Bakı: Qanun Nəşriyyatı (2023)
10. 三島由紀夫、仮面の告白 [Mishima Yukio, Confessions of a Mask]. Tokyo : Shinchosha (2024, 7th print)
11. 三島由紀夫全集 [Complete Works of Mishima Yukio], "An Attempt at Remodelling Myself (1956)". Tokyo: Shinchosha (1973-76)
12. 三島由紀夫全集 [Complete Works of Mishima Yukio], "The Role of the Blank - The Role of Youth (1955)". Tokyo: Shinchosha (1973-76)