

The Absence of Fatherhood in Yukio Mishima's novel *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*

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1. Introduction

Yukio Mishima (1925-1970), the writer who chose to end his life dramatically in the manner of the Samurai on 25 November 1970, dealt with the issue of masculinity in many of his works throughout his whole writing career. The pursuit of masculinity was also represented in his numerous works including novels, plays, and stint as a movie star. With the exception of his early works, Mishima showed through his reproduction of paternal stories his intent to diverge from the traditional Japanese novelist trope of writing about motherhood.

In fact, 4 years after Mishima's death, the book "Oyaji: family in the age without father"¹ (1974), which was published by NHK, analyses the Japanese social conditions in the 30 years after World War 2 and mentions that "Now the Japanese society is in an age without fatherhood". Additionally, the writer Chie Nakane also points out in the above book that an ideal father's image in Japan was considered traditionally to be authoritarian; one such example is the Japanese proverb "Earthquake, thunder, fire, and father," which means that typical stern father was as scary as other disasters. Therefore, at the time, fathers lost a considerable amount of prestige and found they were far removed from the ideal old image of an authoritative father figure. Moreover, they were in a difficult situation since the new image of an ideal father had not arisen in spite of their widely-regarded responsibility for the lost war.

In comparison to Akira Fukushima's (1976) opinion, that the Golden Pavilion symbolizes motherhood, Takashi Okai (1986) put emphasis on the fatherhood and regards the relationship between Mizoguchi, the Golden Pavilion, and his father as being stronger than that of his mother, referring to the Oedipus complex². Furthermore, Junko Saeki (1989) focuses on the point of 'the absence of a strong father' when

¹ NHK, "The 70's: Our world" [Oyaji: family in the age without father] (Tokyo: Diamond Sya, 1974) P.24

² Takashi Okai, "The temple of the Golden pavilion, As a metaphor" (Tokyo : Kokubungaku. Vol.31, No 8,1986) P.66-71.

analyzing Mishima's another work *The Confession of the Mask*³.

Taking into consideration the pattern of the loss of fatherhood depicted in Mishima's works, it is more profound than those found in other typical stories about orphans' struggles against the cruel world, due to the loss of their father or mother. Also, the concept of "absence" had been expressed repeatedly even in his early novels, such as *The Thirst for Love* (1950) or *The White Night* (1950), in which he wrote that "absence sometimes means more than existence." The partiality towards these concepts can be regarded as one of the crucial factors in the following analysis.

This study emphasizes the analysis of the influences of the loss of fatherhood upon the main character Mizoguchi and the complexity that supposedly connects cause and effect, referring to his deed of burning the symbol of beauty, the temple of the Golden Pavilion.

2. The father and son

The novel, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (1956), even from the opening hints us the importance of the relationship between Mizoguchi and his father, 'Ever since my childhood, Father had often spoken to me about the Golden Pavilion'. This sentence emphasizes explicitly Mizoguchi's strong relationship with his father and the Golden Pavilion, due to its placing at the beginning of the novel. Moreover, when compared with Mishima's other novels such as 'The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea' (1963) and 'The Silk and the Discernment' (1964) which describe the hatred towards the father figure, the meaning of 'father' in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* has not been a central focal point, until at least the late 80's or early 90's. An interesting point when considering Mishima's intentions and the concept of the absence of the father figure is more strongly expressed in his final work, the tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility*⁴. He mentions the idea of *The Sea of Fertility* was based on the Japanese

³ 'The powerful grandmother and the absence of a strong father prevent him from the affinity for women and brought him a great affection for father.' by Junko Saeki, "The shadow of the absence: The father and son in Mishima's novel *Confession of the Mask*" (Osaka : Tezukayama Gakuin University Press, 1989)

⁴ The series includes *Spring Snow* (1966), *Runaway Horses* (1969), *The Temple of Dawn* (1970) and *The Decay of the Angel* (1971)

ancient novel *The Story of Hamamatu Chunagon* which is about a noble young man who experienced hopeless love with his step sister, and sailed to another country in the far distance to find the possible transmigration of his father's soul. By recognizing the keystone of *The Story of Hamamatu Chunagon*, the similarity shows when consider connections between the father and son which was emphasized. As a matter of fact, the connection between *The Story of Hamamatu Chunagon* and *The Sea of Fertility* was regarded widely as unworthy of much consideration (Terada, 1972)⁵ in spite of his repeated emphasis upon mentioning the source of the original idea.

In the first chapter of *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Mizoguchi described his father's condition deteriorate as below, 'Father's old illness had become much worse and I was shocked to see how he had declined'. In the memoir style of the novel, the narrator (also Mizoguchi) was represented as a shy, stammering young man who described his own personality as being as changeable as the weather of his father's homeland. Even though the son expressed a cynical attitude at his father's funeral, his inclination to identify himself *vis-à-vis* his father's way of thinking can not be overlooked. In addition, the fact that he had no doubts with being a monk also shows a strong dependence upon his father. Furthermore, the descriptions concerning the concept of the beauty of the Golden Pavilion in this work clearly demonstrated his tendency to force himself to obey his father's beliefs. The power of psychological enforcement became the primary idea in this novel.

Before Mizoguchi was sent to the Golden Pavilion as a monk student by his father, the scene he saw on the crowded train showed a prospective view of his life. By comparing himself to a soldier, he took a cynical attitude toward those young and lively soldiers. The portrait he draws in his mind was that those young soldiers will die and eventually come to the world of death where he, a monk will symbolically administrate. Through this fantasy he changes his inferiority complex into a sense of superiority. For Mizoguchi, becoming a monk was beyond all doubt he unconsciously defended himself in describing his future career and exaggerated the degree of importance of the mission he was assigned on becoming a monk. It can be also pointed out here that the son's self-identity is supposedly linked with his identification with his father.

The above analyses suggested the connection between the son's self identification

⁵ Toru Terada, "*The Sea of Fertility*"1972 (*Bungeidokuhon : Mishima Yukio*)(Tokyo : Kawade Shobou Shinsya,1975) P46

and the father's profession. Even though the affinity between the father and son was scarcely described in this work in the way that normal parents and children do, the psychological bond was strongly demonstrated in Mizoguchi's descriptions. Furthermore, it was concentrated in the representation of the Golden Pavilion's beauty, the symbol of beauty his father had worshipped throughout his life. Therefore, a sense of solidarity was shown in Mizoguchi's psychological dependence on his father. In sum, we can see that his self-identity revealed a strong inclination toward his father.

3. The weak father and the untruthful mother

Mizoguchi's mother was described as an uncultured and calculating woman who belongs to a world opposed to that of the Golden Pavilion's beauty. Mizoguchi described it as seeing the real hell when he saw the scene of his mother's adultery. His father's hand, which covered his eyes, had kept him from seeing this horrible scene. At the same time, the father's deed also covered the son and pulled him away from facing reality as the father provided protection.

Thus, the weak father's hand was the only protection that he could provide to his son. Ironically, the disappointment about his father's powerlessness became transformed into the hatred toward his untruthful mother. This transform of feelings also suggests that the son obeyed his father's will without self-consciousness. Through this inclination we can see the obvious admiration toward strong fatherhood. Despite the fact that the father is powerless, the idealized strong fatherhood was achieved through in the refracted framework of the son's obedience.

Even though the father was described as a weak husband and an old man with a mild and harmless temper, the influence he had on his son showed clearly. Bringing his son to the Golden Pavilion and making him a monk student was the last thing he had done for Mizoguchi. This deed guaranteed his son a connection with the Golden Pavilion. At the same time, under this guarantee the longing for the beauty of the Golden Pavilion could remain unchanged without fail.

Mizoguchi's mother sold the father's little temple and the house extremely quickly after the father's death. This also means there was nothing substantial Mizoguchi could inherit from his father except that which we can say he was forced to receive: the concept of the beauty of the Golden Pavilion. The deed of disposing of the father's

property not only signifies the dispersion and collapse of the family, but also that the son's future devotion to the Golden Pavilion was suggested somehow forcibly, both substantially and psychologically.

As mentioned before, Mizoguchi has a sense of solidarity and self identity with his father. This is represented as the symbol of the beauty- the Golden Pavilion. This concept of beauty can be viewed as a psychological inheritance from his father. However, this inheritance turned into a heavy burden for Mizoguchi. In the process of identifying with father's belief about the concept of the Golden Pavilion's beauty, he was put in a place that lacks peace and harmony because of the different meanings that the Golden Pavilion implies.

For him, the Golden Pavilion symbolized two different mixed functions. One is this is the last refuge where he could settle down, and a second, more complex function: a place at which he has to fulfill both of his father's and his mother's different ambitions, the pursuit of the Golden Pavilion in both spiritual and material way. As a consequence, the meaning of this important symbol, the Golden Pavilion, combined his dual difficulties in two phases. Given this situation, it is easy to image how difficult it must be to endeavor to conquer and unite these factors.

4. Hero in dilemma

I previously mentioned the notion that Mizoguchi receives as his life's belief about the beauty of the Golden Pavilion from his father without self-consciousness. Therefore, his feelings toward the notion of beauty remained unsettled. That his feelings toward the notion of beauty changed when he encountered happening of people's death around him cannot be overlooked. In fact, his image of the idealized beauty of the Golden Pavilion initially indicated the idealized world of the death in particular. The connection between the notion of death and the notion of idealized beauty to the Golden Pavilion shows the longing for "the idealized world after death". The worship his father had shown toward the concept can be linked to the longing for a utopia, a peaceful and idealized "world after death". However, this notion ended up bringing obstructions to his life and prevented him from maturing.

In contrast, the Golden Pavilion, the place where Mizoguchi was sent by his father, was depicted as a closed society. Disregarding the discipline needed to obey the

religious commandments, the actual system inside the temple works as a small earthly society that is completely dissimilar to the notion of a utopia. Nevertheless, the first time that Mizoguchi saw the real Golden Pavilion, he described his strong disappointment when he compared it with the concept of idealized beauty that his father imparted to him.

The mother's expectation and ambition is to put her son in the position of the top priest in the Golden Pavilion. This means he has to adapt into the system of the temple's closed society and make himself succeed within it. Even though that this road, which his mother pointed out, seems to him like a more practical and possible way to approach to the Golden Pavilion, he considered surrendering to his mother's will to be tantamount to betraying his father. Therefore, not only was the mother's adultery an unforgivable betrayal toward father, but succeeding in climbing to the top position of the earthly administrated system of the Golden Pavilion's closed society would be opposite if compared with the notion of the utopia, the idealized beauty of the "world after death".

In addition, another possible paradoxical situation Mizoguchi has to face will be the problem about the conflicts between masculinity and the receiving of his father's inheritance. The fact that the image of idealized beauty of the Golden Pavilion came out and blocked his way when he tried to lose his virginity represented the fact that his father's notion about the idealized "world after death" prevented him from maturing in a very symbolic way. The process of becoming a man was interrupted by the notion of the idealized beauty of utopia.

As his solution for solving this double paradoxical situation, Mizoguchi decided to burn down the Golden Pavilion. This was not only a solution to bring an end to this paradoxical situation, but also it can be likened to a kind of ritual festival for lost fatherhood. One need only refer to Mishima's concept of beauty, the worship of dramatic moments. By burning the Golden Pavilion, its beauty would remain forever symbolized and stylized.

3 years after the end of World War 2, Mishima classified himself more like a nihilist in his essay "Beautiful Time" (1948), and declared: *The only thing I have been wishing from childhood is that I could live in scenery*⁶. The next year, after the publishing of his first popular work, *Confessions of a Mask*, he mentioned that the

⁶ Yukio Mishima, *Zensyu*. Vol.25 P158

typical Japanese conceptualization of beauty was constantly connected with a concept of death that did not include the religious meaning of rebirth. 3 years before his death, when he wrote about the ideal beautiful death, he mentioned that it should be like a *bushi*, who always pursuing idealized and stylized beauty in life and death. As a consequence in answering the meaning of it, we may connect his aforementioned wish to “live in scenery” with the belief in and worship of the stylized and idealized way of *bushi*.

In sum, Mishima's partiality toward dramatic scenes was represented by the act of burning the Golden Pavilion by the novel's main character. The loss of fatherhood and the pursuit of rebuilding strong fatherhood can be considered as Mizoguchi's main obsessions.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the conflicts in the main character's mind that connected the deed of burning the Golden Pavilion to the relationship of the father and its importance. The sense of solidarity which shows in Mizoguchi's psychological dependence on his father brings him dual difficulties. Despite the fact that the father is powerless, the idealized strong fatherhood was achieved through in the refracted framework of the son's obedience. The absence of strong fatherhood and the desire to rebuild remain crucial factors in this work. The main character's paradoxical situation can be considered in light of the complicated divisions of the concept of the Golden Pavilion.

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