

Is There a Way Out?: The Inhuman Politics of Noboru and His Gang in Yukio Mishima's *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace with the Sea*

Merve Aydoğdu
Middle East Technical University

“True beauty is something that attacks, overpowers, robs, and finally destroys.”¹ Thus says Yukio Mishima, born in 1925 as Kimitake Hiraoka, the Japanese author. If this sentence is counted as the epitome of his philosophy of life, it will not be surprising to realize his fascination with sexuality, suicide, violence, and death in his works. He was the man of extreme passions; that is why it was hard to satisfy him. To quote by Cawthorne:

“In his autobiographical novel *Confessions of a Mask*, [Mishima] revealed that he was a man incapable of feeling passion or even feeling alive unless he was embroiled in sadomasochistic fantasy, dripping with blood and death. He said that he had written the book to channel his own homicidal instincts and the pen-name he chose- Yukio Mishima- could be written so that the characters also read ‘mysterious devil bewitched with death.’²

The keywords of passion, blood, death, and instinct unlock the plot of his novel *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*. This time the mysterious devils bewitched with death, out of their instinctive passions of death and in the name of having absolute dispassion, shed blood.

Before starting to analyze the novel deeper, it would be useful to add more to Mishima's biography. He was of samurai ancestry and eventually he killed himself in 1970 in the same manner as the samurai did. He was the ardent defender of traditional Japan and carrying the spirit of the samurai in his veins; he tried to revive their values and opposed fervidly the westernization of his country after its defeat in World War II. He strived for the preservation of Japanese culture and tradition against the threats of the Western world. To this end, in one of his short stories “Patriotism,” which is about a married couple who decide to commit hara-kiri, Mishima did not hesitate to exalt the

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1. Doris G. A Bagen, *Woman's Weapon: Spirit Dispossession in the Tale of Genji* (Hawaii:University of Hawaii Press, 1997), p.108.
 2. Nigel Cawthorne, *Sordid Sex Lives: Shocking Stories of Perversion and Promiscuity from Nero to Nilsen* (London: Quercus, 2011), p.172.

emperor. In the story, “[t]he lieutenant’s farewell note consist[s] of one sentence: ‘Long live the Imperial Forces.’”³ With its political tone, its emphasis on death, and its explicit sexual details, the short story reflects the personality of Yukio Mishima.

Hara-kiri or *seppuku* is a traditional Japanese ritual suicide performed by the samurai in the face of an injustice. Committed to die honourably rather than being captive at the hands of the enemy, or as a death penalty for those who have involved in serious crimes, the devout lieutenant of “Patriotism” defines it as “a sensation of utter chaos, as if the sky [falls] on his head.”⁴ Just like his character does in the story, Mishima commits seppuku in his war of patriotism. On 25 November 1970, together with the members of his army called The Shield Society, he attempts to overthrow the government, demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister. By reading his manifesto, he tries to make a military coup to restore the power of the emperor, his trial ending in failure. His endeavour to fight for what he believes in can be observed through his characters in his novel, which is the main concern of this study.

Mishima penned his novel- *Gogo No Eiko* originally- in 1963, seven years earlier before his death. The novel recounts the story of Fusako, her son Noboru, and his would-be father Ryuji. Mishima’s obsession with death and blood is embedded in this novel, too. In his effort to examine the futility of human life, he uses Noboru and his gang and through their acts and speech, he shows how dehumanization works. He creates characters who cannot relate themselves to the world they are living in, who are against the agents of socialization like love, marriage, and all sorts of emotional bonds. The love of Fusako and Ryuji merely makes Noboru annoyed who, in the end, will lead to the murder of Ryuji. Dehumanization is the key word of the novel and it is the object of this paper to exhibit how and to what end people devoid of feelings can become monstrous. It seeks to reflect the delusions of the gang whose members try to express themselves in a suffocating society by using bloody methods.

The main setting of the story is a big house furnished in Western style in which Noboru and Fusako Kurado live together. “There wasn’t a single Japanese room in Fusako’s house”⁵ and in this sense, Fusako represents the post-war Japan with its changing attitudes, with its interest in Western goods. On the basis of his biography, it is possible to claim that Mishima is criticising the society from many aspects. What he criticises is

3. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, Penguin Books, 1970), p.102.

4. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, p.122.

5. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, p.89.

the assimilation of the Japanese under Western values; what he criticises is the impositions of that society.

Noboru is the thirteen-year-old son of Fusako and his father has already been dead for five years when the novel starts. Noboru has a close relationship with his mother. This is because he does not have a father figure with whom he can establish an intimate relationship and it is also due to the traditional way of the Japanese culture Noboru was born into. However, the important point is that Noboru has an abnormally close contact with his mother in that almost every night he is watching his mother through a peephole hidden behind the drawer. By this way, Fusako is introduced:

“She was only thirty-three and her slender body, shapely from playing tennis every week, was beautiful [...] Her neck and arms were lightly tanned [...] Her haughty breasts inclined sharply away from her body.”⁶

Although the sexual emphasis is explicit in these sentences, later Mishima will use them to show the stolidity of Noboru and his gang towards sexual drives.

The seemingly peaceful family atmosphere of mother and her son is intruded by a man—Ryuji the namesake of the novel. Being past thirty, he is an outsider- “a man with no ties,”⁷ and he is unable to develop a sense of belonging:

“He found himself in the strange predicament all sailors share: essentially he belonged neither to the land nor to the sea.”⁸

He is also quite a sentimental man:

“[H]is concept of ideal love: a man encounters the perfect woman only once in a lifetime and in every case death interposes –an unseen Pandarus- and lures them into the preordained embrace.”⁹

In Mishima’s work, love and death interlace. Somehow, Ryuji feels it from the beginning and Fusako’s love always makes him remember death. Once “her sweat and perfumed fragrance reaching him on the breeze seemed to clamour for his death”¹⁰ or Fusako’s “kiss was death, the very death in love he always dreamed of.”¹¹ The association of love with death can be taken as the foreshadowing of Ryuji’s murder in the structure of the novel, but it is also a reflection of the author’s personality who is incapable of feeling

6. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, pp.8-9.

7. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, p.17.

8. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, p.15.

9. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, pp.32-3.

10. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, pp.35-6.

11. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, p.62.

unless he is not bombarded with extreme feelings. The interconnectedness of death and desire is traceable in his short story “Patriotism,” too. To exemplify, the narrator asks: Was it death he was now waiting for? Or a wild ecstasy of the senses? The two seemed to overlap, almost as if the object of this bodily desire is death itself.¹²

Whatever the reason is, the theme of love is embedded in the novel to show the humane feelings of the people who can find meaning in life through love. It is so great that Ryuji starts “[feeling] snugly in place in an anchored, amiable world”¹³ and gives up sailing. Ryuji’s decision to abandon his passion may be interpreted as his weakness; on the other hand, it is sacred and understandable that he sacrifices his passion for something greater and more fulfilling: mutual love he has been craving for years and years.

Likewise, the joy of love contributes much to Fusako. Love fuels her and their love ends in marriage. After the couple declares their decision to Noboru, he is not feel pleased and labels marriage a silly act. But, why does he find it silly? Because, Noboru is the devil’s disciple.

He is the member of a gang consisting of six members. They have no names; they call themselves Number One, Two, Three –Noboru, Four, Five and the Chief. “They are all smallish, delicate boys and excellent students. In fact most of their teachers lavished praise on this outstanding group and even held it up as an encouraging example to poorer students.”¹⁴ However, contrary to their fragile bodies and perfect appearances, their heart is as hard as iron. It is ironic that they are set models for the worse students. It seems that Mishima has a concept of world in which there is villainy and that where we are living in is not a safe place. Identically, at certain times, the gang comes together and discusses the uselessness of Mankind, the insignificance of Life. “The precocious boy of thirteen and his companions despise life as boring, hypocritical, sentimental, fictitious, and ultimately meaningless.”¹⁵

The fact that they do not use their names is the concrete proof of their attempt to dehumanize themselves. The gang as a whole is engaged in exercises for the purpose of losing their feelings. They are practising ‘absolute dispassion,’ they try to get rid of their all humane feelings. They think that these feelings and activities associated with them are humiliating and insignificant. With “full iciness of [their] heart,”¹⁶ they try to transform themselves into something non-human:

12. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, p.112.

13. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, p.77.

14. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, p.40.

15. Hisaaki Yamanouchi, “Mishima Yukio and His Death.” *Modern Asian Studies*, 6/1 (1972), p.8.

16. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, p.114.

“Noboru had been trained in such a way that practically nothing sexual [...] could surprise him. The Chief had taken great pains to ensure that none of the gang would be abashed by such a sight [...] [he] had explained them in detail, instructing the boys with some warmth about the insignificance, the unworthiness of such activity [...] [T]hey disdained their classmates, foolish, dirty, pitiful boys brimming with curiosity about sex.”¹⁷

The boys are trained not to be influenced by sexuality. That is why the sex scene of his mother and Ryuji does not come as a shock to Noboru. It is detestable for him and for the gang. The sexual activity increases Noboru's contempt for Ryuji because he is involved in a humane affair with “his mother” and now that the married people are expected to have sex –a kind of social construct- Noboru gets angrier.

A few pages later he despises all mankind and sets down Ryuji's crimes. Ryuji's acts indicate that his entertaining himself –what for the common people are normal doings- makes him blameful. It is noteworthy that checking the list, Noboru notices the fact that he is unconsciously jealous of his mother and immediately removes the item of jealousy. Because it is one of the most natural instincts of a person, jealousy is contradictory to the objective value judgments of his. It is against his aim of being absolutely dispassionate.

He wants to be senseless, but it is ironic that he also wishes for feeling the pain. That is why he imagines himself being caught by his mother while spying on them. We can assume that what Noboru is against is the positive feelings of the humankind. On the contrary, he welcomes agonizing ones like pain, death. To prove that he is living, Noboru wants to feel the pain. Unable to express himself by humane ways, he takes shelter in violence. What drives him to kill the kitten with the encouragement of the Chief is the same force; he wants to feel alive. Once disregarding love, it is the only way to prove that your heart is beating. The fact that he wants to feel alive shows the contradictory personality of Noboru, though. While striving for dehumanization, his struggle to “feel” something creates a dilemma. His jealousy for his mother, his watching her through the peephole, and his peeping at the sex scene all appeal to him which proves that he wants to feel “human.” Being a child of thirteen, we can suggest that he has not completed his maturation process and that he is under the influence of group members. We can both claim that Noboru harbours his antithesis in himself and that he does not have a full-fledged individual identity.

In any case, they claim that “[m]atchless inhumanity was a point of pride with every one of them”¹⁸ and the members put Noboru's cold heart to test. Having no pity in

17. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, p.45.

18. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, p.44.

himself, Noboru thinks that killing will fill the world's great hollows. Thus, it seems that performing violence serves both to show that they exist in this society and to prove that this society for which they are trying to find a way of expressing themselves is hollow. With this purpose in their minds, they can dehumanize themselves feeling "overjoyed at the spattered blood on the log"¹⁹ when Noboru kills the kitten. Their aim is to find a meaning in the world through violence. For them, the society and living does not have any meaning. Death is meaningful; they find the joy of life in death. That is how they observe the dead kitten:

"[B]eneath the surface was a smooth expressionless interior, a placid, glossy-white inner life in perfect consonance with Noboru and the others [...] Now [Noboru's] half-dazed brain envisaged the warmth of the scattered viscera and the pools of blood in the gutted belly, finding wholeness and perfection in the rapture of the dead kitten's large languid soul. The liver, limp beside the corpse, became a soft peninsula, the squashed heart a little sun, the reeled-out bowels a white atoll, and the blood in the belly the tepid waters of a tropical sea. Death had transfigured the kitten into a perfect, autonomous world."²⁰

They mutilate the kitten to see life in its most clear sense, without the pettiness of the skin. They are in search of the meaning in life and in this context; the English flashcards Noboru studies become quite suggestive: abandon, ability, aboard, absence, absolute.²¹ The gang has abandoned the feelings of being human; they have the ability to estrange their hearts and perform violence; they are aboard in search of life in death; in the absence of their humanity they become savage; all to the end of absolute dispassion. Why do they kill then? Why are they looking for a meaning? What makes them think so?

As they have stated earlier, they want to break the taboos. For them, real danger is nothing more than just living and it is merely the chaos of existence. There is not any fear in existence itself, but living creates it "[a]nd society is basically meaningless."²² As stated in the novel, the gang is against the order, against the rules. To go beyond these rules by which they think they can find the meaning of life, to find a way out in this gyre, the gang decides to kill Ryuji because "he became the worst thing on the face of this earth, a father."²³ He becomes the leader of the Symbolic Order in Lacanian sense. Now that the gang is in this Order;

19. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, p.48.

20. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, pp.48-9.

21. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, pp.117-18.

22. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, p.42.

23. Yukio Mishima, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, p.127.

“[They] now inhabit a world in which others have needs, desires, and fears that limit the ways in which and the extent to which [they] can attend to [their] own needs, desires, and fears . This new world is one in which there are rules [they] must obey and restrictions by which [they] must abide.”²⁴

This new world consists of “teachers, schools, fathers, society- all garbage heaps.”²⁵ The gang is aware that now that they have obtained language and attended school; they are bound to the rules of the society. Being teenagers, they know that they are the part of the society. Thus, they are motivated to take action to express themselves. Their entrance into the Symbolic Order results in the acceptance of the language, of the name of the father, and of the social and cultural systems prevailing in their community. It underscores the restrictive dimension of the society. In this sense, Ryuji becomes the rival of Noboru and the gang as a whole in that he both steals his mother and happens to be the authorial voice in the society they despise. The gang does not like the fathers and the society. Their ideas on fathers can be summed as follows from their dialogue:

“There is no such thing as good father because the role is bad itself. Strict fathers, soft fathers, nice moderate fathers- one’s as bad as another. They stand in the way of our progress while they try to burden us with their inferiority complexes, and their unrealized aspirations... A father is a reality-concealing machine, a machine for dishing up lies to kids, and that isn’t even the worst of it: secretly he believes that he represents reality. Fathers are the flies of the world [...] And there’s nothing they won’t do to contaminate our freedom and our ability.”²⁶

As the Chief says; “nobody is going to provide you with a purpose in life; you’ve got to make one for yourself.”²⁷ Sometimes we think that there is no meaning or purpose in life and the impositions, rules of the society are mere social construct of chances. What we are doing is not what we really want to, but what we are forced to. It is in these instants that we can see through the Symbolic Order. Considered as a whole, the gang is aware that they have almost become the members of social sphere and they desire to be above the restrictions. The acts of violence, the vow of absolute dispassion are all means to save themselves from the forces of the society. In this sense, we can claim that they can go beyond the Symbolic Order and can reach the Real. They do not want to be the same as the members of the so-called emotional society members in a fictitious society; that is they do not want to have sex; they do not have dreams of being businessman etc. They want to create their own reality.

24. Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.30.

25. Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, p.127.

26. Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, pp.107-8.

27. Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, p.108.

Yukio Mishima portrays six members of the society who try to establish their identities in their own ways. Through the end, the novel underlines that the society is oppressive and the ones aware of this try to find a way out of it. To this end, the gang uses dehumanization as a means to go beyond the social order. The boys find a way to express themselves through violence and by taking the vow of absolute dispassion they try to purify themselves from the impositions of the society. It appears that- as deduced from his biography what Mishima believed was different from the common folk, he thus expresses himself in the novel by creating extraordinary characters. Mishima treasures unique individual more than the society and in the novel, he depicts the adventures of six boys who try to save themselves from the whirlpool and his ideas echo earlier in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*: “Other people must be destroyed. In order that I might truly face the sun, the world itself must be destroyed.”²⁸

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28. Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, (New York: Berkeley Books, 1971), pp.30.