Senhri Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies
A Journal of Pachhunga University College
(A Peer Reviewed Journal)
https://senhri-journal.pucollege.edu.in/
10.36110/sjms.2024.09.02.002

2456-3757 (P)
2582-6840 (e)
Vol. 09, No. 02
July-December, 2024

REPRESENTATIONS OF DISABILITY IN SELECT WORKS OF YUKIO MISHIMA AND OSAMU DAZAI

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores disability representation in Yukio Mishima's The Temple of the Golden Pavilion and Osamu Dazai's No Longer Human, focusing on the protagonists Mizoguchi and Yozo. Through the lens of disability studies, particularly the social model of disability and theories of stigma (Goffman, 1963), this paper examines how Mizoguchi's speech impairment and Yozo's psychological distress function as markers of exclusion, alienation, and resistance. Mizoguchi's stutter renders him an outsider in a society that values aesthetic perfection, leading to his destructive obsession with beauty. Similarly, Yozo's masked existence reveals the performative aspects of social conformity, highlighting the intersection of mental illness and cultural expectations. While both characters embody forms of disability that complicate traditional perceptions of impairment, their narratives ultimately challenge the rigid societal norms that marginalize them. By analyzing their experiences, this paper argues that Mishima and Dazai critique Japan's postwar anxieties, using disability as a metaphor for individual and collective crisis. These works not only expose the exclusionary nature of social ideals but also call for a re-evaluation of how disability is perceived and represented in literature and society.

Keywords: *Disability, Alienation, Psychological, Conformity, Societal Norms.*

Introduction

Disability in literature often serves as a metaphor for alienation, suffering, or societal dysfunction, particularly in postwar narratives. In Japanese literature, Yukio Mishima's *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* and Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human* provide intricate portrayals of disability that reflect personal and societal turmoil. This paper examines how disability functions in these novels, arguing that Mishima and Dazai use their protagonists' impairments to critique rigid social expectations, individual alienation, and the

destructive pursuit of aesthetic or moral ideals.

Yukio Mishima (1925–1970) and Osamu Dazai (1909–1948) are two of the most prominent postwar writers in modern Japanese literature and like their literary creations, they both lived highly unusual lives. Osamu Dazai, born Shuji Tsushima, was born on 19th June 1909 to an affluent, upper-class Japanese family. He committed suicide with his mistress on 13 June 1948 at the age of thirty-nine. He has an almost cult-like following in Japan till today and his popular novels are considered modern-day classics. Yukio Mishima was born on 14 January 1925 as Kimitake Hiraoka. His literary works and his creative and eccentric endeavours gained him international fame; he was considered for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1968, though he did not win. After a failed coup d'état of the Tatenokai, his right-wing, unarmed civilian militia, he committed ritual suicide by seppuku at the age of forty-five on 25 November 1970.

This paper examines two texts namely, *No Longer Human* (1948) by Osamu Dazai and *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (1956) by Yukio Mishima, to explore the complex and unusual representations of disability and the disabled body. Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human* details the story of a detached young man named Oba Yozo who feigns a cheerful facade by wearing the mask of a clown to fit into society. The story follows his physical and mental dissolution through alcohol, drugs and prostitutes, eventually leading to a failed suicide attempt and his confinement to a mental institution. *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* by Yukio Mishima is a fictionalized account of an actual incident in 1950. The narrator, a physically unattractive young Zen acolyte named Mizoguchi who suffers from extreme stuttering, burns the temple due to his obsessive feelings for the beauty of the Golden Temple and his realization of the lack of beauty in his life.

Theoretical Framework: Disability in Literature and Society

Disability can be understood as any physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment that impedes the ability of individuals to take responsibility for their daily functions and hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (United Nations 4). The perceived functional limitations and restricted ability to participate in public life through wider social, economic and political interactions often lead to social isolation and discrimination. Disability represents a marginal position in society, "a state that is considered 'othered' relative to our expectations of what the 'able-bodied'" or, in other words, "healthy and productive members of society" should be (Stevens 1).

Anthropologist Robert Murphy revealed in his book *The Body Silent* (1987) that one of the most upsetting results of his acquired disability was the uncomfortable reaction his disability prompted in others, which stemmed from the unpleasant foreshadowing his presence cast on able-bodied others, fearful of a similar fate. Disability disrupts social relations by causing "social discomfort" in people without disabilities because, during interactions, they tend to "focus

disproportionally on the existence of the disability" rather than on "the presence of someone with a disability" (Jaeger and Bowman 21).

Disabled and abnormal individuals have historically received positions of alienation. A minority status has always been placed in opposition to a prescribed, majority-based notion of what it means to be able. The nature of disability is such that, unlike most other characteristics,

"Disability... is not a static, unchanging or immutable condition. Most people who have a disability were not born with it. Disability can manifest as a physical or cognitive issue, coming from a range of factors – genetics, accident, external circumstances, or advancing age. Some people who have disabilities argue that they do not have one . . . In short, it can be very difficult to establish a comprehensive definition of disability that accounts for the full range of conditions and impacts" (Jaeger and Bowman 6).

Scholars and activists are committed to defining disability because of its potential for putting into words the experience of disability, connecting it with larger intellectual frameworks that influence how individuals and society as a whole identify, manage and experience disability.

Sociologist Erving Goffman introduced the concept of "social stigma" in his 1963 work *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Through case studies and interviews, Goffman examined how individuals navigate their social identities when they are excluded from full societal acceptance.

The term "stigma" originates from Ancient Greece, where it referred to physical marks or signs meant to reveal something morally or socially undesirable about a person. These markings, often cut or burned into the skin, signified that the individual was a slave, criminal, or traitor—someone deemed impure and to be avoided in public spaces (Goffman, 1963, p.1).

While some forms of stigma remain physically visible, others, such as those associated with mental illness, are often hidden. This exhibit explores the role of stigma in shaping societal perceptions of mental illness and neurodivergence. It examines various methods used to create visible markers for mental health conditions and how these markers contribute to the broader societal effort to define what is considered "normal" versus "abnormal."

Disability in Japanese Society

Japanese Buddhism displays a direct association of disability with negative karma or destiny. For instance, the birth of a disabled child was interpreted as a statement about the parents' morality (Nakamura 34). Disability has often been assumed to be a type of curse or punishment traceable to a family's karma in Japan (Stevens 25). The Buddhist term for fate/karma called *in-nen* encapsulates the notion that present events are directly or indirectly related to the right or wrong actions of individuals or their ancestors (Kato 131). It reflects the uniquely Japanese subtext of bias against disability seen as both an individual and a familial

attribute. At the same time, the same perspective can be applied positively to interpret the birth of a disabled baby as a good omen, a blessing for others in the family "*to erase all the bad fortune in our family lines*' (132).

Since early times in Japan, disability was approached more logically and categorized based on the severity and perceived level of impairment which related disability directly to the individual's capacity for labour (Nakamura 35). The level of disability experienced affects the way an individual is viewed by society and his/her capacity to participate in the public space and gain social status. Blindness caused by diseases, farming accidents and poor nutrition was prevalent during the early history of Japan. By the eighth century, blind storytellers with the four or five-stringed lute called *biwa* roamed the country and were referred to as biwa *hoshi* (lute priests). They chanted narratives in exchange for alms, thereby spreading news, popular songs, and local legends in their journey through Japan (Fries). Blind people were mainly encouraged to enter professions in the field of arts and medicine; they were also composers, masseurs, and practitioners of acupuncture and moxibustion (Ogawa 16). In her book *Disability in Japan,* the social anthropologist Carolyn S. Stevens states that the Japanese approach to disability reflects "how it is sometimes shunned (like the 'leech child' and associated with bad karma) and yet at times embraced and made 'special' (as Ebisu, the god of fortune, and the *biwa* performers)" (27).

Japan's view and treatment of people with disabilities have shifted for the better over time, as in any developed society that moved away from a backward way of thinking and less influenced by superstitions. However, there is a certain level of continuity in beliefs and superstitions despite the secularization of Japanese society. People with disabilities in Japan occupy a liminal position in society where an individual's "discrepancy or shortcoming" caused by their disability constitutes "a gap, or a failing, in social expectations" where "the more serious the discrepancy, the more stigmatized an individual is" (Goffman 204). The social stigma attached to them can induce negative sentiments of fear and hatred in the dominant group due to which their elimination or exclusion from the community can be justified (Akasaka). Disability in Japan is also very often conflated with ageing due to Japan's rapidly 'greying' and becoming one of the fastest ageing societies on the planet with an extremely low fertility rate. While some beliefs regarding bad karma or fault may linger, there are many Japanese who increasingly believe that disability is not a person's fault but "a fact of life" because "no one is free from the possibility of becoming disabled" (Iwakuma 124).

Various laws and policies relating to disability have been implemented throughout the years by the Japanese government. However, according to a government survey conducted in 2022, nearly 90% of people in Japan believe discrimination and prejudice against those with disabilities continue to persist

(Ishikawa). Disability activist movements were spurred into action in the 1980s. Japan Society for Disability Studies was formally founded in 2003 and its first convention was held in June 2004 (Stevens 16). Japanese disability activists, much like those working for ethnic or gender equality, protest against the marginal status they experience in mainstream society and call for "rights, equal access and disability pride" (Heyer 16). Disabilities are to be perceived not as conditions that need curing or healing, but rather as differences to be accepted and adapted. Sometimes the disability itself is the battle and more often than not, a person with a disability must fight both kinds of oppression; he/she struggles against the limits of his/her abilities while also facing social stigma and oppression that are permeating their everyday lives.

The Role of Disability in Japanese Literature

Japan has an intricate web of beliefs, rituals, cultural traditions and practices that have shaped the country's identity and worldview for centuries. The Japanese term for disability is shōgai, shō meaning 'be a hindrance' and gai meaning 'harm/damage' (Stevens 48). Representations of disability in Japan can be traced back to the earliest legends and creation myths of the Japanese people (Stevens 14). It can be broadly stated that Buddhism and Shintoism, the two main religions in Japan, exert influence on notions of the Japanese 'worldview', which extends to attitudes towards not only physical and mental wellbeing but also disability.

Disability is featured in the creation myths of Shinto where Izanagi and Izanami, the first gendered deities that created the Japanese islands (Mori 30), gave birth to several deities, including the high-ranking Sun and Moon goddesses. They also produced the leech child, whose name probably alluded to the useless or non-existent limbs that prevented him from standing upright even at the age of three. The disabled child was placed on a boat, set adrift on the sea and abandoned by his parents, but he later resurfaced as Ebisu, the god of the sea who remains somewhat physically impaired, and one of the Seven Deities of Happiness who brings good luck to those who honour him (Stevens 24, 25). Other examples include the one-eyed god Katame-no-Kami, depicted as the god of iron manufacture and blacksmithing, and the supernatural creature yōkai who possessed a large, single eye and appeared in Japanese folklore as "a troublesome mischief-maker" (Okuyama).

Psychological and Social Disability: Yozo in *No Longer Human*

No Longer Human is a highly autobiographical and confessional novel by Osamu Dazai that narrates the story from Yozo's point of view through his notebooks. Without sentimentality, he records the casual cruelties of life and its fleeting moments of human connection and tenderness. Right from childhood, Yozo feels alienated and incapable of understanding human beings. He believes from a young age that people are hiding their true nature and human life is filled with "many pure, happy, serene examples of insecurity", "deceit" and "mutual deception" (Dazai 37). His attempts to reconcile himself

to the world around him begin in early childhood and continue through high school where he becomes a clown to mask his true nature and mimics the social conduct of others to fit in. He also suffers sexual abuse from some of the male and female servants of his family, and unable to tell anyone about it, the experience makes him feel corrupted. With an unshakable "mortal dread for human beings" and yet "unable to renounce their society", the act of clowning, of feigning innocent mischief and optimism, is "the last quest for love" he directs at human beings (26).

He experiences moral, physical and emotional degradation upon reaching adulthood where he enters the shady life of crime, alcohol, drugs and prostitutes that eventually leads to multiple suicide attempts and confinement in a mental asylum. He gets expelled from his university after attempting suicide with a bartender where only he happens to survive; he consumes a box of sleeping pills to die in his sleep but this also fails. His incessant drinking does not cease after marrying a young woman named Yoshiko and what little money he earns, he spends on drinking. His health rapidly deteriorates to the point that he frequently coughs blood. He also becomes addicted to morphine and starts having an affair with the pharmacist to get higher doses of the drug. Yozo confesses that his friend Horiki at heart considers him "the living corpse of a would-be suicide, a person dead to shame, an idiot ghost" and not as a person because he lacks the qualifications of a human being (144). He is eventually admitted to a psychiatric ward and upon his release, is sent to live in the countryside with an old maid who watches over him. The novel ends with Yozo saying that he has been living in the countryside for three years and that, even though he's only 27, he now looks like a much older man.

The setting of the novel is in 1930s Japan – a very specific time in Japanese society. Patriotism, ultra-nationalism, war propaganda and loyalty to the country and Emperor were proliferated among the masses. Yozo's turbulent life is certainly in opposition to this collective, nationalist mentality prominent in his countrymen. His participation and involvement in the Japanese Communist Party, which was officially outlawed in 1925, also emphasizes the extent to which he is at odds with the mainstream 1930s Japanese society. Yozo's story from childhood to adulthood suggests that he is someone whose struggle with mental health runs deep. The constant state of depression, dissociation and depersonalization he experiences throughout the novel hinders his ability to live like a normal human being. He may have been born able-bodied without impairments and hence not disabled in the traditional sense of the term. However, his mental state renders him disabled because it impedes his ability to be responsible or functional in his daily life and hinders his participation in society through social, economic and political interactions. Regarding his degenerate way of living, his friend Horiki comments that "society won't stand for it" (120). A bar owner in Kyobashi also says "When human beings get that way, they're no good for anything" (176). He laments that he is "forever branded on the forehead with the word "madman" or perhaps, "reject" and

that he is "disqualified" and has now "ceased to be a human being" (167). He occupies a marginal position in society – "a state that is considered 'othered' relative to our expectations of what the 'able-bodied'" or in other words, "healthy and productive members of society" is (Stevens 1).

In Dazai's *No Longer Human*, the protagonist Yozo's struggles stem from mental illness and social alienation. While not physically disabled, his profound psychological distress functions as a form of disability that prevents him from integrating into society. Yozo's reliance on masks and performative identities aligns with Erving Goffman's concept of stigma, where individuals with disabilities or differences feel compelled to disguise their condition to gain acceptance.

Yozo's mental deterioration and eventual descent into addiction suggest that disability—especially when linked to mental health—becomes an insurmountable barrier in a rigid society. Unlike Mizoguchi, who violently asserts himself against the world, Yozo succumbs to societal rejection, embodying a different but equally tragic response to marginalization. Dazai's portrayal underscores how psychological disabilities are constructed through external expectations, reinforcing the need for a social model approach to understanding mental illness. Additionally, his character arc resonates with modern discussions on depression and social ostracization, highlighting the cyclical nature of alienation and self-destruction. The commonality shared by the two novels of Yukio Mishima and Osamu Dazai is that they mostly feature as their protagonists individuals deemed useless, aimless, abnormal or even impaired by society. Through their action or inaction, these social outcasts can disrupt the stability and foundations of reality for the people around them.

The Disfigured Mind and Society: Mizoguchi in *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*

The Temple of Golden Pavilion by Yukio Mishima is based on a real event that occurred in Japan in 1950 when the Zen temple of Kinkakuji in Kyoto, regarded as a national monument, was burned to the ground by a young acolyte who was obsessed with the beauty of the temple. Similar to this, the novel follows the story of a young man named Mizoguchi, who is studying to become a Zen Buddhist monk at the Kinkakuji temple in Kyoto, Japan. He is obsessed with the beauty of the temple and hopes to one day become the temple's new superior. He spends every opportunity admiring the beauty of the temple, but the temple's beauty taunts and frustrates him because it is a quality that he cannot attain. He is afflicted with a terrible stuttering that hinders his ability to communicate effectively with his peers. Beauty is lacking in his life as he considers himself ugly and deformed due to his stutter. He harbours a secret hope that the temple will be destroyed by the firebombing during the 1944–45 years of World War II, but this hope does not come to fruition as Kyoto is free from bombs and air raids. His obsession with the beauty of the Golden Pavillion causes him to become increasingly estranged from reality until he finally decides to burn it to the

ground. After setting fire to the temple, he finally knows freedom and wants desperately to live.

Self-loathing is at the heart of the novel. Mizoguchi desires a beauty and purity that he cannot attain and as a result, he comes to resent what the temple symbolizes. Mizoguchi's severance from the social space causes him to be isolated and angry, regarding the world around him with distrust and taking solace only in himself. He sees his stutter as deformity which is in contradiction with the great beauty of the temple. He can no longer tolerate his own identity and his stuttering and this is what compels him to destroy what he sees as the ultimate form of beauty. Regarding his lack of beauty, he states:

"It is no exaggeration to say that the first real problem I faced in my life was that of beauty. At the thought that beauty should already have come into this world unknown to me, I could not help feeling a certain uneasiness and irritation. If beauty did exist there, it meant that my existence was a thing estranged from beauty" (20).

He has a friend named Kashiwagi from school who fascinates him with his nihilistic approach to life. Kashiwagi is born clubfooted which affects his walk and movements and he uses this deformity to seduce women by making them feel sorry for him. Their friendship turns out to be a bad influence on Mizoguchi as Kashiwagi introduces him to smoking, skipping classes, alcohol and prostitutes. Just like Mizoguchi and his stutter, Kashiwagi shares an imperfection that makes them both "tainted" in the eyes of beauty. At one point Kashiwagi discloses his sexual experience with an attractive girl and he becomes repulsed by his clubfeet touching her. Similarly, when Mizoguchi touches the young woman he goes on a date with, images of the Golden Temple come into his mind which reminds him of his ugliness and his sexual desire is crushed immediately. Mizoguchi's erratic and unbalanced mental state by the time he finally sets fire to the temple makes it difficult to identify how much of what is going on in his life is factual and imaginative. An example of this is his growing hostility towards the superior of the temple. The superior of the temple was originally Mizoguchi's benefactor but by the end of the story, he suspects him of all kinds of deceitful and malicious intentions when in reality, the superior seems to be only aware of Mizoguchi's existence remotely.

Mishima's protagonist, Mizoguchi, suffers from a severe stutter that isolates him from society and fuels his resentment toward beauty. His disability renders him both invisible and hypervisible—while he is ignored in social settings, his impairment becomes an internalized source of shame and self-loathing. Mizoguchi's stutter reflects Japan's broader struggle with postwar identity: his inability to articulate himself mirrors the country's fractured self-perception after defeat.

Mizoguchi's obsession with the Golden Pavilion exemplifies the tensions between physical impairment and aesthetic perfection. His desire to destroy the temple symbolizes a rejection of the ideals that exclude him. Mishima presents disability not

merely as an individual affliction but as a lens through which to critique the superficiality of cultural ideals. The novel thus engages with the social model of disability—Mizoguchi's suffering stems not from his impairment itself but from the societal norms that render him inadequate. Moreover, his narrative raises questions about the link between disability and violence, suggesting that the exclusion of disabled individuals can lead to radical expressions of resistance.

Disability, Beauty, and Destruction

Both novels critique Japan's postwar anxieties, but they take different approaches. Mizoguchi's disability is linked to aesthetic ideals, illustrating how beauty and perfection exclude those who do not conform. His ultimate act of arson violently challenges these norms. Yozo, on the other hand, represents a subtler, more internalised struggle, where social expectations erode personal identity rather than incite rebellion.

The contrast between Mizoguchi and Yozo highlights how disability functions in literature: as both a personal affliction and a reflection of societal flaws. Mishima's narrative emphasizes resistance through destruction, whereas Dazai explores resignation and self-destruction. In both cases, disability becomes a metaphor for the individual's failure to conform to an idealized social structure. Furthermore, these works challenge the notion of disability as purely tragic by portraying their protagonists as deeply introspective, albeit tormented, individuals whose conditions offer a unique perspective on the human condition.

Conclusion

Mishima and Dazai's works demonstrate that disability in literature extends beyond the physical or psychological; it is deeply embedded in cultural and societal frameworks. *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* and *No Longer Human* critique Japan's postwar identity crisis through their protagonists' struggles with impairment, rejection, and self-perception. By examining disability through a critical lens, these novels expose the exclusionary nature of societal ideals and question the price of belonging in a world that demands conformity. Ultimately, their narratives suggest that disability, whether physical or psychological, is not merely an individual condition but a powerful commentary on the structures that marginalize difference. Through their complex and tragic protagonists, Mishima and Dazai challenge readers to reconsider how disability is constructed, perceived, and experienced within a society that often values uniformity over individuality..

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