

# The Temple of The Golden Pavilion': Yukio Mishima's Incantation Between Philosophy and Literature

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## ABSTRACT

Philosophy is a complex subject. This complexity arises from the way one comprehend the truth. There are many ways in the subject itself such as logical, analytical, and many other set of rules which gain the solution for its complexity. But, as philosophy gained its wings, there are certain schools that do not stick to this set of rules. Existential school of continental philosophy is one of them. Here, the philosophy is loosened up with fiction. Constructing philosophy through fiction makes it more effective as well as more apprehensible. Thereby, understanding philosophy tends to be more simple. The paper discusses about the connection between philosophy and literature through one of the most famous works of the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima, names, *'The temple of the Golden Pavilion'*. The philosophical elements hidden beneath the fictional lines of Mishima is been analysed and discussed and the importance is debated across the paper.

**KEYWORDS:** The Golden temple, Beauty, Zen Buddhism, Existentialism, Fiction, Philosophy, Reality

## INTRODUCTION

"An intense light poured constantly from outside the golden temple onto one side of my face. How brightly its shown- that insult!"<sup>1</sup>, says Mizoguchi (the protagonist) in Mishima's novel *Kinkaku-ji* (Golden pavilion). That insult is a form of admiration towards aesthetic experience one has when they encounter an absolute beauty in existence, which is the central theme of the work. Analysing the different aspects of novel, we must begin with the writing style of the author, Yukio Mishima<sup>2</sup> and his idea conveyed through his works. He creates an awe in the reader, thereby making the literature profound primarily, and then, we slide into his philosophy. He hides philosophical elements in his strong sense of language which later, he makes, rather, obvious through the character development and his point of view. He usually brings traditional stories, daily life of a Japanese person, usually Buddhist themes and conventions in terms of a psychological analysis, questioning one's deep rooted beliefs, political norms and constant journey through keenness and receptiveness. The work, *'the temple of the golden pavilion'* is based on a true story, the burning of the famous old Zen temple of the golden pavilion, *Kinkakuji*<sup>3</sup>, in Kyoto, by one of their younger priests in 1950. The novel is a picture of philosophical conceptions conveyed in the form of fiction. The unending with an idealized beauty and

<sup>1</sup> Page 31; Mishima, Y. (2001). *The temple of the golden pavilion*. Vintage.

<sup>2</sup> *Mishima Yukio | Biography, Books, & Facts*. (2024, March 29). Encyclopedia Britannica.

<sup>3</sup> *Kinkaku-ji*. (2024, April 17). Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinkaku-ji>

his destructive quest to fully absorb it and live a life is the epitome of art portrayed in this work. The novel sparks discussions with oneself of his internal conflicts, emotions, hate, guilt, anger, frustration, inferiority complex and many such perplexed human feelings which make one question the life and live it in the quest to find a meaning. This existential philosophical idea of life is the thread of the novel, which is sketched in the form of fiction, which makes it even more enlivening.

## DISCUSSION

Philosophy as a subject is always considered one of the toughest discipline to deal with. The logical systems, the theories, the arguments on reality, the language comprehensions and different notions, beliefs and sub topics are quite complicated. But, there is a school which has a new approach to this complex and intricate premises of the subject. It is the Zen Buddhist school. From early ages, since Zen Buddhism started to communicate with the world, the way it propagated is through was the medium of literature and art. Zen Buddhist philosophy in its core was hidden in words of fiction and painted colours of the art which gave a very new outlook to philosophy in the world. So, the school itself brought a unique idea of understanding great principles of Buddhism through literature. Later, many writers took this as an inspiration and came up with expressing philosophical ideas through their fictional stories and poetry. Philosophical fictions are not just stories, it creates a bridge between the imaginary fictional world to the reality, which is in a constant conflict inside a man's mind. Here, in the same way, Yukio Mishima, in this work, has opened a persistent questioning of different notions, a journey of a person's mental growth, his existential disagreements as well as, how much a man can hold up his thirst of beauty the world beholds.

In the work, 'The temple of the golden pavilion', the protagonist begins his journey as a kid who is mesmerised by the stories of the golden temple. He is a stutterer, one his biggest insecurities, which peaks in this entire work as he explains, "My stuttering, I need hardly say, placed an obstacle between me and the outside world. It is the first sound that I have trouble uttering. This first sound is like a key to the door that separates my inner world from the world outside, and I have never known that key to turn smoothly in its lock"<sup>4</sup>. This itself shows a picture of the character and how he views himself. This portrays how a man's insecurity can engulf one's life, which keep on travelling along with one as a shadow, being the darkest part of oneself. Where one tries to accept one's insecurity, he finds some other source of security. That security will be so high on oneself, that, one will be trapped in there forever. Here, Mizoguchi finds security in beauty.

Beauty, for him, is the golden temple, which is sunken deep into his blood, as he says, "It is no exaggeration to say that the first real problem I face 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 really did exist there, it meant that my own existence was a thing estranged from beauty"<sup>5</sup>. Aesthetic experiences are one's inner feelings. The emotion that one have towards a particular object of aesthetic beauty is truly

personal for a man. Here, for the protagonist, he lives his life for beauty. But he gave a meaning for it, 'the golden temple'. The philosopher Immanuel Kant's idea of disinterestedness<sup>6</sup> of a aesthetic beauty experience is to focus on the artwork itself, by approaching the beauty without any interest, without any

<sup>4</sup> Page 4; Mishima, Y. (2001). *The temple of the golden pavilion*. Vintage..

<sup>5</sup> Page 20; Mishima, Y. (2001). *The temple of the golden pavilion*. Vintage.

<sup>6</sup> *Aesthetic Judgment (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)*. (2023, February 16).

greed, temptation, rather accept that as a universal existence to admire as such. Here, this philosophy is being reminded as he approaches golden temple with utmost temptation, later he falls off and treats it like his own self. How much beauty can engulf one's internal essence and the madness is well depicted by Mishima through this work of art.

His father, being a priest in the temple, recites glories of the beauty of the golden temple, which is being imprinted on the mind of Mizoguchi since childhood. For him, golden temple is the ultimatum of beauty that exist in the world. For him, golden temple was a golden light of hope and beauty, which is incomparable with the rest of the world. The intensity of this idea of beauty is being questioned to its extreme in the rest of his work. This fixation drops, as he first visit the temple in person with his father, to continue his lineage to become a priest at the temple himself. The golden temple, which, he has made the ideal existence of beauty, was nothing but an old temple, like any other ones, which didn't excite him to the slightest and made him question his idealism of aesthetics within himself, as he quotes, "the temple aroused no emotion within me. It was merely a small, dark, old, three-storied building. The phoenix on top of the roof looked like a crow, that had alighted there for the rest. Not only the building fail to strike to me as beautiful, but even I had a sense of disharmony and restlessness. Could beauty, I wondered be as unbeautiful a thing as this?"<sup>7</sup>.

There is a hidden philosophy in questioning ones ideal notion of something, when experienced in reality shatters to pieces. Beauty in this case, as he fails to understand the term beauty, which he gave a tremendous meaning in the form of golden temple, was now shattered to pieces. As he quotes with disappointment, "golden temple might have adopted some disguise to hide its true beauty. Was it not possible that, in order to protect itself from people, the beauty deceived those who observed it? I had to approach the golden temple closer; I had to remove the obstacles that seemed ugly to my eyes; I had to examine it all, detail by detail, and with these eyes of mine perceive the essence of its beauty. Inasmuch, as I believed only in beauty that one can see with one's eye, my attitude at that time was quite natural"<sup>8</sup>.

On his days in the golden temple, he has regular sessions and normal activities in the temple which makes him grow as a person day by day. Mishima has discussed this Zen problem as a philosophical endeavour in order to make one question on how one deal with internal voices. There is a famous Zen problem called "Nansen Kills A Cat"<sup>9</sup>, which is been discussed in one of the sessions at the temple. This problem is discussed in detail by Mishima in this work, where, a kitten appears in mount Nan Ch'uan. The monks of the two hills finally gets the cat and then it becomes an object of dispute. Father Nansen, in order to put an end to this dispute caught the kitten by its neck and keeps a sickle thereby, says, 'if any of you can say a word, this kitten shall be saved; if you cannot it shall be killed'. No one was able to answer hence, the kitten was killed. But the solution according to the superior of Mizoguchi was not that difficult. The reason Nansen killed the kitten was to cut away the illusions of self and had eradicated all irrelevant thoughts and fantasies from his mind. Putting his insensibility into practice, he had to cut off the kittens head and had thus cut off all contradiction, opposition and discord between self and others. Such deep philosophical questions has been constantly reminded in Mishima's work, thereby, showing the clarity between how such philosophical ideas can be created by fiction and understood in a significant manner.

<sup>7</sup> Page 23; Mishima, Y. (2001). *The temple of the golden pavilion*. Vintage.

<sup>8</sup> Page 23 ;Mishima, Y. (2001). *The temple of the golden pavilion*. Vintage.

<sup>9</sup> Page 61; Mishima, Y. (2001). *The temple of the golden pavilion*. Vintage.

Later on, as his father dies, he enrolls in Otani university, with the help of his superior, along with his friend Tsurukawa, who he acquainted while staying in the golden temple before attending the university. He and Tsurukawa parted ways for a while, since, they knew each other for a long time, so they wanted make new friends. Another chapter begins in Mizoguchi's life as he meets a friend, who is a club-footer, named, Kashiwagi. Though they share similar disabilities (being a stutterer and a club foot), made him think, may be, he can understand him. Later, they become acquainted through a very deep philosophy. This is why he explains that when a beautiful girl offers herself to him, he turns her down without any reticence. The motive of this action stems from a willful resistance on his part to submit to an outer power, beyond his control and to be thus assimilated by something he recognizes to be superior than him. In this case, it is the woman's beauty. Later, as his friendship becomes strong with Kashiwagi and he meets new girls, but the hovering effect of Golden temple still blocked him from freeing himself, and enjoy the life pursuits.

There is a philosophy of Kashiwagi in Mishima's work. Everyone will have a Kashiwagi in their life. Kashiwagi presents himself as a resolute and cold hearted person who doesn't want to be teased. This is why he explains that if she brought up his ugliness and his handicap as a reason for her love, it would annoy him because he knows that this is the trait that marks the differences between both of them. So, Kashiwagi is a character that one tackles in their life, where one questions their beliefs and norms. Later on, the change in the perspective of Mizoguchi from Kashiwagi is that, the beauty for him is not something he wanted to keep himself on leash. He is too clairvoyant about the omnipresent, mesmerizing effect of the Golden Temple and keeps on being reminded of his inferiority compared to it. Like, Nietzsche philosophy of 'will to power', his inability to be as outgoing as Kashiwagi or his inbuilt frustration at being mocked at by his classmates and beautiful Ukio, leave him powerless. It is the desire to overcome what he deems to be his weaknesses that motivates Mizoguchi. The act of destruction is an act of going beyond himself.

Mizoguchi at one point comes to realise that, every second he spend in reality, which he wants to experience, like every human being, never comes to fulfilment because of his *Shangri-la*: an illusion, of the golden temple. This strong deluded mind of his is being trapped inside the beauty of golden temple, by which, he cannot find the essence of beauty in any other object of material existence. Finally, when he realises that his superior, who wanted to make him the next superior priest has also turned his back on, and all other existential issues he was dealing in his life, nothing came as a solution for him other than burning the whole temple up. He even ran away, from the place, to find another seclusion, but, golden temple followed him to every extent that, every brain cell of him gets agitated by the beauty and the effect the temple had on him.

Towards the end, it is that strong will to escape from the enclosure of the golden temple and to live a life as a human with minimum humanistic desires and emotions. For the amount of obsession he has for the beauty is making him disturbed frustrated and making him even more inferior which keeps his will to arson intact. The love and affection he has towards the temple never fades in him, but the life he is living, the existential crisis he is facing in his life, the freedom he needs, the expression of choice he wants in his life is all at a dead end. So, he proceed with his plan and sets fire to the temple. He runs as fast as he can and escapes the temple also his prison of his own self and comes out and runs on top of the northern mountain. He has attained the freedom he wanted from all his internal conflicts with

himself as he quotes, “I felt like a man who settles down for a smoke after finishing his job of work. I wanted to live”<sup>10</sup>.

As Mishima ends with this line, the reader is said to have a cleanse in one’s mind.

## CONCLUSION

In this novel, Mizoguchi, in his childhood, had never confirmed the existence of the golden temple and had constructed all his fantasies about it from the idol of the golden temple described by his father. In fact, his father described the golden temple as having no equal in this world, exaggerating its beauty, and from this exaggeration, Mizoguchi came to recognize the golden temple as being absolute and singular. He himself, who is self deprecating, one who feels so much inferiority with himself fantasizes and have amplified excessive imagination of beauty called, ‘the golden temple’. This literature brings out such a prodigious philosophy, existentialism<sup>11</sup>. As existentialism claims to be creating a purpose and meaning to life, the protagonist claims to attain the meaning of life through setting up fire and burn all his existential conflicts that made him turn away from reality. He opened the cage of aesthetic absoluteness and came out of it to live a life and to choose freedom, freedom of choice, which embarks one of the main principle of existential philosophy.

Mizoguchi is a young mind who is tangled up in the difficulty of understanding and comprehending the aesthetic golden temple which is imaginative and the real imperfect existential golden temple which exist in reality. Caught in the complexities of idolization of the temple and societal Zeitgeist and internal conflicts of ones emotions which ultimately leading to his decision to set fire to his own ultimate essence of life and also the bane of his existence. The necessity for the arson lies in securing the absoluteness of the imagined Golden temple.

From this phenomenal work of Yukio Mishima, one can bring out the relationship between literature and philosophy. How deeply Mishima has engraved a philosophical thought with utmost creativity of fiction which makes the existence of philosophy in a separate domain. The way, in which literature can bring out philosophy as a new subject of knowledge, and how well the readers can relate when it is propagated through any work of literature is what makes this an exceptional work of art. Constructing philosophy through fictional writing makes it more effective to learn and understand making it a very useful method to the people.

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<sup>10</sup> Page 247 ;Mishima, Y. (2001). *The temple of the golden pavilion*. Vintage.

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