

Thresholds of the Self: Exploring Liminal Identity in Yukio Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask*

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Abstract

In Confessions of a Mask (1949), Yukio Mishima presents a protagonist, Kochan, whose identity remains in a persistent state of flux, defying normative borders of sexuality, morality, and selfhood. Kochan's attraction to male bodies, repulsion towards his own frail physique, his violent fantasies, and performance of normative masculinity constructs a self that oscillates between inner expressions of selfhood and societal expectations. Though he attempts to mould himself to avoid scrutiny, his heightened self-awareness causes him to remain vigilant about his performativity. This study combines Victor W. Turner's theory of liminality and Erik H. Erikson's notions of identity formation to explore how the protagonist's self exists as a threshold space where identity is constantly negotiated and selfhood becomes a performance that both conforms to and transgresses social norms. This study contends that as a result of constant inner conflict, Kochan fails to achieve a stable identity and exists in a state of permanent liminality.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Performance, Homosexuality, Liminality, Yukio Mishima

Introduction

“...in the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity” (Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* 130)

The concept of identity has always been central in the discourse around human existence. For centuries the question, “who am I?” has intrigued philosophers, writers, artists, and ordinary people alike, who have tried to answer it as per their understanding of the world. Various schools of thought have also tried defining identity. Considering its multiple interpretations, it would be fair to assert that identity is a deeply nuanced and dynamic construct. It not only defines how an individual develops their sense of self but also determines how the society perceives them. In simple terms, identity shapes one's relationship with their own self and with the surrounding world. It is formed by the intersection of various factors such as gender, class, and socio-cultural background with an individual's thoughts, beliefs, personality, and life experiences.

Yukio Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask* (1949) depicts the life story of Kochan who struggles

to come to terms with his identity. He experiences a severe identity crisis due to his suppressed homosexuality and sadomasochist fantasies. The novel illustrates complex themes of identity, sexuality, and alienation. It also highlights the impact of stigma associated with homosexuality on the psyche of an individual. Early in his life, Kochanrealises that he finds men attractive, especially beautiful men who will eventually die painful death. This inclination towards beauty, violence, and death makes him feel alienated. He understands the consequences of revealing these dark desires in front of the society. But he fails to abandon his heart's longing for "Death and Night and Blood" (Mishima 16). Hence, he constructs a metaphorical "mask" that hides his true self and enables him to play the socially acceptable role of a heteronormative male. His inner tendencies clashes with the persona he projects in front of the society and leads him to a state of hypervigilance.

The confessional tone of the novel makes the reader understand Kochan's anxiety, guilt, shame, and fear surrounding his sexual orientation quite clearly. Critical readings of the text have often underscored the parallels between the life of the protagonist and that of the author hence, some critics have categorised it as *ashishōsetsu* or I-Novel, a genre popular in 20th century Japanese literature characterised by its confessional autobiographical style. Although, *Confessions of a Mask* encompasses certain elements of a traditional *shishōsetsu*, it defies the conventions of the genre by rejecting strict adherence to rawness. In the novel, Mishima deliberately chose to focus on certain facets of his life while omitting the rest. His choice exhibits an intentionality with the narrative and an inclination towards aestheticism and theatricality.

This paper aims to analyse *Confessions of a Mask* by adopting a collaborative framework using Erikson's notions of identity formation and Turner's concept of liminality. It examines how the protagonist finds himself unable to experience the spatiotemporal continuity of identity and spirals into a state of "identity diffusion". By viewing Kochan's inner struggle through the combined lenses of Turner and Erikson, this study argues that the mask constructed by Kochan traps him in an unresolved threshold existence where he can neither fully assimilate into the heteronormative social order nor openly express his inner desires. This suspension between conflicting identities compels him to exist in a state of permanent liminality.

Literature Review

Confessions of a Mask has been critically interpreted through various theoretical lenses, highlighting its intricate portrayal of the protagonist's inner world. It has been read through the lenses of translation studies, psychoanalysis, homosexuality, and gender performance. Saeki (1997) takes a comparative approach to analyse the protagonist's sexuality by mapping modern concepts of homosexuality with traditional Japanese male-male love customs known as *nanshoku*. Rhine (1999) explores the novel through the theory of gender performance as proposed by Judith Butler, underscoring the theatricality of the protagonist's heteronormative behaviour. Mason (2011) analyses how the samurai code (*Bushidō*) was interpreted by Inazō Nitobe, Yukio Mishima, and Nisohachi Hyōdōto redefine Japanese masculinity and national identity, turning the concept into a political tool. Rajmohan(2015) provides a re-reading of the homosexual discourse arguing that the protagonist's desire goes beyond sexuality and enters the realm of perfection of the spirit. Carland-Echavarria (2020) analyses the translation of the novel in English and its critical reception in the 20th century anglophone society. He highlights the differences in sexuality in Japanese and anglophone society. Zhou (2022) investigates the correlation between homosexuality and misogyny in Mishima's oeuvre. Chidiac (2026) explores the intersection of Mishima's life and works through a psychological lens in order to understand his literary genius. Yunusova (2026) analyses the life of Yukio Mishima in the context of twentieth century Japan and highlights that there is no boundary between his life

and works. While the existing research provides crucial insights, it mostly focuses on Kochan's homosexuality. The liminal aspect of his identity has not been explored. Therefore, the present study moves beyond the existing discourse around the protagonist's sexuality and examines how his sense of self remains perpetually fractured. This study examines moments of bodily surveillance, performance of heterosexuality and masculinity in the narrative as elements that underscore the liminal nature of the protagonist's identity.

Methodology

The present study uses a qualitative research methodology that focuses on the textual interpretation of the novel using Victor W. Turner's theory of liminality and Erik H. Erikson's theory of identity formation. These theories were selected as they enable a deeper analysis of the protagonist's internal conflict and development of his selfhood. Erikson's theory explains the stages of identity formation and the crisis an individual faces during the process, whereas Turner's theory highlights the transitional state in which identity remains unresolved. The combined application of these theories provides a new perspective for understanding the fragmented identity of the protagonist and highlights its liminal nature. This analysis is based on the close reading of the text, focusing on narrative events, dialogues and symbolic elements and their interpretation in the light of the selected theories.

Theoretical Framework

French folklorist and ethnographer, Arnold Van Gennep coined the term "liminal" in his pioneering work *Les rites de passage* (1909). It originates from the Latin term *limen* meaning threshold. The term "threshold" indicates notions of movement, passage and transformation. In this work, Van Gennep formulates a tripartite structure to define certain coming of age cultural rituals that were practised in tribal communities: rites of separation (pre-liminal), rites of transition (liminal), rites of incorporation (post-liminal). The liminal stage symbolises the transitory period when a subject undergoes separation from old identity before being incorporated into a new identity in certain rituals of transition from childhood to adulthood.

After fifty years of its publication, *Les rites de passage* was translated in English as *The Rites of Passages* (1960). In the same decade, Victor Turner borrowed Van Gennep's concept of liminality and further refined it. In his essay, "Liminal to Liminoid," Turner comments, "During the intervening phase of transition, called by van Gennep 'margin' or 'limen' (meaning 'threshold' in Latin), the ritual subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few...of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states." (Turner 57). His scholarship highlights the ambiguous state of a liminal subject who remains suspended between established social norms. Turner posits, "the attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous," since they "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space). An individual's identity can be described as liminal if they exist on the cusp of different social roles, identities or cultures etc. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between" (Turner, *The Ritual Process* 95).

Close reading of *Confessions of a Mask* reveals that there is no synergy between Kochan's internal and external self. Thus, he remains suspended "betwixt and between" opposite roles. His failure to completely accept either of the roles puts him in a tormenting state of "permanent liminality" (Szakolczai 219). To critically analyse the protagonist's identity, this study combines Turner's theory of liminality and Erikson's notions of identity development. Erikson defines the process of identity construction as a result of an individual's exploration of multiple options and commitment to the option that aligns with their core. An integral element

in the process of identity development is “identity crisis”. Erikson describes identity crisis as a “crucial moment, when development must move one way or another” (*Identity, Youth, and Crisis* 16). Though challenging, identity crisis serves as an important turning point in life. It helps individuals decide the course of their lives and acts as a catalyst for personal growth. “Crisis refers to the adolescent’s period of engagement in choosing among meaningful alternatives; commitment refers to the degree of personal investment the individual exhibits” (Marcia 551). Failure to resolve identity crisis leads to identity diffusion, leaving individuals without a clear understanding of themselves and their role in society. Erikson’s concept of identity diffusion complements Turner’s concept of liminality as both suggest a sense of dispersion, loss of centrality, uncertainty and ambiguity.

Discussion

In Mishima’s *Confessions of a Mask*, the protagonist, Kochan, is raised by an overly affectionate grandmother who fearing for his frail health, prohibits him from intermingling and playing with boys of his age, eating certain kinds of food, and keeps him sheltered in her own sickroom. The absurd conditions of his childhood environment force him to turn inwards and fosters a feeling of life long alienation. As a young boy, Kochan develops a fascination with figures such as the Egyptian queen Cleopatra and the famous Japanese magician, Shokyokusai Tenkatsu. Enamoured by their ornate appearances and commanding presence, he attempts to imitate them by dressing up in feminine attires, finding a profound sense of satisfaction in embracing femininity. However, the immediate disapproval of his family and the subsequent sadness and isolation compel him to realise that his true desires will never be accepted socially. To avoid being scrutinised by the society, he puts up a mask of masculinity and starts behaving “like a boy”. Kochan’s “mask” can be interpreted as a performative act through which he constructs a socially acceptable identity while suppressing his desires. His performance of masculinity conforms to Judith Butler’s notion that “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 191). Kochan realises early in his life that “what people regarded as a pose on [his] part was actually an expression of [his] need to assert [his] true nature, and that it was precisely what people regarded as [his] true nature which was a masquerade” (Mishima 20). However, his masquerade does not remove his internal struggle; instead, it reinforces his liminal condition as he becomes increasingly aware of the split between his performed self and inner reality. Instead of becoming his defence mechanism, it intensifies his alienation as the narrative unfolds.

Kochan’s alienation aggravates as he enters adolescence where his attraction toward men traps him between desires and performance. The absence of male role models in his family makes him “unusually curious about men and [strengthens] their attraction to him. On the other hand, from a Freudian point of view, Mishima [misidentifies] himself during the narcissistic period around the age of six, which is what Lacan called the mirror period” (Zhou 569). It does not seem surprising that the boy, raised in an “oppressively feminine” atmosphere, “both identifies strongly with women” - as evident when he dresses as Tenkatsu and Cleopatra while simultaneously harbouring “a romantic longing for men, especially those ‘rough’, low-class men who represent the opposite extreme to his grandmother’s ideal of aristocratic gentility” (Starrs 101).

His yearning for “sheer life force” manifests in the form of his attraction towards Omi, his classmate. For Kochan, Omi becomes “a precise definition of the perfection of life and manhood...” (Mishima 41). His strong muscular body, dominating demeanour, and a sense of superiority not only ignites carnal desires in him but also develops a feeling of jealousy tinged with frustration with his own incompetence to embody similar beauty and vitality.

During moments where his peers discuss instances of attraction towards women, Kochan, though feeling no sensual attraction internally, chimes in and participates in the discussion as if those fantasies are his own. He feels compelled to “pose as a mature, cynical sensualist...” (Mishima 69) and meticulously rehearses every gesture to maintain his facade. Mishima reveals how Kochan’s imitation of heteronormative identity does not originate from genuine self-expression but from the constant fear of exposure and social ostracism. The realisation of his sexual non-conformity and the subsequent fear put him in a state of hypervigilance that constantly torments him. He adopts an internalised gaze and starts visualising his actions through the lens of societal expectations. This act of surveillance transforms even his mundane actions into elaborate theatrical performances leading to uneasiness and self-consciousness. Kochan initially misinterprets his anxiety and self-consciousness as signs of him being more mature than his peers. Eventually, he realises that the reason other boys lacked such anxieties was due to the fact that they were being their natural selves while he was performing an act: “the other boys had no such need of understanding themselves as I had: they could be their natural selves while I was to play a part, a fact that would require considerable understanding and study. So, it was not maturity but my sense of uneasiness, my uncertainty, that was forcing me to gain control over my consciousness” (Mishima 70).

Kochan’s identity also gets shaped by the ideological environment of imperial Japan where masculinity was not seen as a subjective attribute of an individual’s personality but as a national duty shaped by militarization and the cultural ethos of Bushido. Japan’s samurai code defined the ideal male as physically strong, morally righteous, emotionally disciplined, and capable of sacrificing his life for the nation. Tsunetomo Yamamoto, an Edo era samurai and monk commented that “the way of the samurai lies in death” (qtd. in Flanagan 15). This cultural notion of masculinity mixed with wartime nationalism constructed an ideal male identity from which any deviation was socially condemned. Kochan’s homosexual desires and frail body places him outside the parameters of ideal masculinity. He identifies this lacuna in himself and realises its consequences. To avoid being scrutinized by the society which defined identity through nationalist and gendered expectations, he starts performing normative masculinity. This performance fractures his identity further as he gradually loses clarity regarding his sense of self.

Erikson defines personal identity on the basis of two parallel observations, “the perception of the self-sameness and continuity of one’s existence in time and space and the perception of the fact that others recognize one’s sameness and continuity” (*Identity, Youth, and Crisis* 50). Kochan experiences an unresolvable identity crisis due to his inability to experience this “self-sameness” and the spatiotemporal continuity of identity. The constant flux between inner self and outer persona and the disparity between them pushes him to exist in a threshold space where he must constantly observe his body language, speech, gestures and behaviour to ensure that the mask does not slip. As a subject who is unable to exist liminally, he never gets reintegrated into a stable identity. This liminality becomes a site of his psychological entrapment and corrodes his sense of self. Individuals stuck in the state of permanent liminality are “required to identify with the roles they are supposed to play all the time, all their lives, and their role will become their life....In the end, the differences between ‘life’ and ‘stage’ disappear and it seems that life itself is nothing but performance on a stage” (Szakolczai 222). Kochan believes that in order to survive in the society, he will have to wear the mask of heteronormativity and masculinity his entire life: “Everyone says that life is a stage. But most people do not seem to become obsessed with the idea...I was firmly convinced that it was so and that I was to play my part on the stage without once ever revealing my true self” (Mishima 68).

Liminality is often compared “to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness,

to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon" (Turner, *The Ritual Process* 95). This elucidation mirrors the psychological state of Kochan who is perpetually trapped between conflicting identities. By constructing a fantasy world where his desires intertwine with violence, gore, and death, he exhibits dark attributes of liminality. Almost as a presentiment of future isolation and grief, in his early life Kochan displays a preoccupation with the lives of men who evoked a sense of tragedy in him such as the night soil man and subway ticket collectors. A reflection of this inclination towards tragic lives is evident in his preference for certain fairytales. He asserts, "Although as a child I read every fairy story I could lay my hands on, I never liked the princesses. I was only fond of princes. I was fonder of princes murdered or princes fated for death. I was completely in love with any youth who was killed" (Mishima 15). His childhood fascination with fairytales in which beautiful princes undergo hardships, suffer mortal wounds, and eventually succumb to death, culminates in the morbid sexual fantasies of his teenage years.

With the onset of physical changes and a fixation on the phallus in his teen years, Kochan realises that his inclination towards blood and death is not merely aesthetic but sensual. His sexual awakening reveals itself through a simultaneous attraction to muscular bodies and bloodshed. Contrary to his shy disposition and frail constitution, in his fantasies he finds himself "free to assume the position of dominance [and] transforms himself in a moment from masochistic victim to sadistic torturer" (Starrs 104). He frequently indulges in gruesome fantasises about gory duelling scenes, samurai committing seppuku, soldiers getting struck by bullets, and even cannibalism. At the focal point of his imagination, merging pain and violence with beauty, emerges Guido Reni's painting of St. Sebastian's martyrdom. The protagonist, enthralled by the depiction of St. Sebastian's youthful body being pierced by arrows, experiences an unprecedented sense of excitement and pleasure which eventually culminates in a blasphemous act. Later on, he dissects this incident using theory of German sexologist Hirschfield, who observed that many "congenital invert" display a certain affinity towards pictures of St. Sebastian, linking homosexuality to sadistic impulses. The painting of St. Sebastian with its amalgamation of youthful beauty, pain, violence, and death becomes an erotic symbol for Kochan which he projects on Omi's body in his fantasies. He draws parallels between Omi's act of grasping exercise-bar, revealing his muscular arms and shoulders like "summer clouds" with St. Sebastian's hands tied over his head to the tree of execution. Kochan intertwines erotic admiration of the male body with romanticisation of suffering: "I was one of those savage marauders who, not knowing how to express their love, mistakenly kill the person they love. I would kiss the lips of those who had fallen to the ground and were still moving spasmodically" (Mishima 61).

Kochan's awareness regarding his homosexual fantasies tainted with blood and gore keeps him hyper conscious. He often contemplates about his inability to live a normal life. "My knowledge that I am masquerading as a normal person has even corroded whatever of normality I originally possessed, ending by making me tell myself over and over again that it too was nothing but a pretence at normality" (Mishima 102).

In Erikson's views, society provides a time period to young adults between childhood and adulthood that is generally devoid of responsibilities. He defines it as a "psychosocial moratorium." In this stage individuals freely experiment with their roles and try to find a specific niche that gives them a sense of identity. When an individual finds a specific role, they gain "an assured sense of inner continuity and social sameness" (*Identity and the Life Cycle* 111). This intermediary phase serves as a bridge between what an individual used to be in the past and what they will be in the future. It also helps them in developing harmony between their self-perception and how the society recognises them.

In the novel, Kochan does not get the opportunity to explore different facets of his identity due to his socio-cultural background. He grows up as a sickly boy with homosexual tendencies in a time period where strength and masculinity were expected from men. Society grants him no “moratorium” to experiment with his roles. Therefore, he starts associating shame and guilt with his sexuality. His violent sexual fantasies torment him even more. This guilt, shame, and fear put him into a state of “auto-hypnosis” where he starts imposing heterosexuality on himself. He tries to make himself believe that since he has a phallus like other boys, women must be the object of his sexual desires. To prove this hypothesis, he forces himself in a heterosexual relationship with Sonoko. In a desperate attempt to become “normal” he rejects his sexual orientation and accepts artificiality. What he fails to realise is that there was nothing sexual in his attraction towards Sonoko, it was just platonic love.

Moments of intimacy with her feels cold and arises no passion in him. Still, he hopes that eventually “normality would burst into flames within [him] like a divine revelation. Surely, [he] would be reborn as a different person, as a whole man, just as though suddenly released from the spell of some evil spirit” (Mishima 128). Even when his body remains cold towards Sonoko, he forces himself to believe that one day he will overcome his weakness and love her like a man. Walking on the tightrope of societal expectations while balancing his inner desires becomes excruciating for him. This results in what Erikson describes as “identity diffusion”. A person who suffers from identity diffusion experiences “split of self-images... a loss of centrality, a sense of dispersion and confusion, and a fear of dissolution” (Erikson, *Identity and the life cycle* 122). This identity diffusion highlights that the constant performance of identity forces him into a state of instability, where he fails to form a cohesive sense of self. In the end, Kochan’s identity crisis remains unresolved. And he finds himself stuck in a threshold space where he has to constantly negotiate his identity, resulting in a state of permanent liminality.

Conclusion

Through the combined lens of liminality and identity formation, this study highlights that in Mishima’s *Confessions of a Mask*, Kochan’s selfhood remains suspended in a perpetual state of negotiation rather than reaching a resolution due to the constant conflict between his inner desires and societal norms. His liminality is not just psychological but is also influenced by cultural and historical factors. The traditional samurai code expected men to be warrior like and loyal to the emperor, an extension of this philosophy can be seen in the pre-war and wartime periods that lauded masculinity as a symbol of national duty. As someone who fails to embody these ideals of manhood, Kochan gets trapped in a state of performing normative masculinity. The narrative reveals identity as an unstable and performative process that is influenced by both inner conflict and societal norms. In this sense, Mishima’s novel does not simply portray a failed identity formation but also reveals the impossibility of stable selfhood under conflicting systems of desire and socio-cultural expectations.

Limitations of the Research

This study uses concepts of liminality and identity formation as interpretative tools to examine how Mishima’s work portrays fractured identity but it is important to note that these frameworks are rooted in western anthropological and psychological studies and may overlook the Japanese notions of selfhood and identity formation. This research relies on the English translation of the novel and Anglophone scholarship on Mishima, therefore certain linguistic, and cultural subtleties may not be reflected in the analysis. This study acknowledges the inherent limitations of applying western-centric lenses to a distinctly Japanese literary context. Considering these limitations, future research could examine the novel by using Japanese ideological frameworks such as *honne* (inner truth) and *tatemae* (public facade).

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