Beauty as Poison: Queer Desire, Misogyny, and Fragmented Selves in Yukio Mishima's *Forbidden Colors*

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Abstract

Yukio Mishima's *Forbidden Colors* (Kinjiki, 1951) stages a disturbing interplay between homoerotic desire, misogyny, aesthetic cruelty, and postwar cultural anxiety. At its heart lies the alliance between Shunsuke, an aging writer consumed by bitterness toward women, and Yuichi, a beautiful young man whose homosexuality becomes a tool for revenge. The novel aestheticizes cruelty and transforms beauty into a weapon, displacing the repression of queer desire onto women who are vilified as grotesque or expendable.

This article examines *Forbidden Colors* through psychoanalysis, queer theory, and cultural critique. Freud's narcissism and Lacan's mirror stage illuminate the Shunsuke–Yuichi dynamic as one of projection and doubling, while Judith Butler's gender performativity and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's homosocial desire frame Yuichi's shifting sexual roles. Julia Kristeva's abjection and Luce Irigaray's critique of phallocentrism expose the structural misogyny of the text. The novel also reflects Mishima's broader cultural despair about postwar Japan and the encroachment of Western modernity, echoing Stuart Hall's notions of ruptured identity and Homi Bhabha's contested spaces of cultural negotiation.

Ultimately, Mishima offers not a liberatory vision of queerness but an ambivalent one, where male beauty is exalted through the degradation of women. The novel becomes a mirror of resentment, encoding both personal and cultural anxieties about gender, desire, and the fractured modern self.

Keywords: Mishima, *Forbidden Colors*, queer desire, misogyny, narcissism, postwar Japan

Introduction

When Yukio Mishima published *Forbidden Colors* in 1951, Japanese readers encountered a novel that unsettled on multiple levels. Its frank portrayal of male homosexuality broke taboos, while its relentless vilification of women revealed an undercurrent of resentment that disturbed feminist and humanist critics alike. At once homoerotic and misogynistic, the novel situates beauty within a framework of cruelty, making the male body a weapon and the female body a scapegoat.

The narrative revolves around Shunsuke, an aging, disillusioned writer who despises women, and Yuichi, a young man of exquisite beauty whose homosexuality makes him emotionally detached from women. Shunsuke recruits Yuichi into a scheme of vengeance, urging him to use his beauty to seduce and discard women. Early in the novel, Shunsuke declares: "Women are nothing but meat for the bed and tools for men's vanity" (Mishima 47). This brutal statement sets the tone for the misogyny that pervades the text.

This article argues that *Forbidden Colors* is a novel where desire and resentment intersect. By weaponizing Yuichi's homosexuality against women, Mishima creates a disturbing economy in which beauty is exalted at the cost of femininity. Through psychoanalysis, queer theory, and cultural

critique, we can see how the novel encodes anxieties not only about gender but also about Japan's postwar cultural identity.

I. Aesthetics of Cruelty: Beauty as Weapon

Yuichi is introduced as a man "so beautiful that the world seemed unworthy of him, as if desire itself had sculpted his face" (Mishima 87). His beauty is not neutral—it is sacred and dangerous. Shunsuke immediately identifies its potential: "Your beauty is like poison to them. Use it. Twist them with your silence" (Mishima 102).

Beauty here becomes cruelty. Yuichi seduces women not out of desire but out of obligation to Shunsuke's scheme. His cold detachment is celebrated as a form of purity: the ability to manipulate without being corrupted by heterosexual desire. Mishima thus aestheticizes cruelty, suggesting that true beauty must be destructive.

Freud's notion of narcissism clarifies this economy. In *On Narcissism*, Freud argues that narcissism involves withdrawing libido from external objects and reinvesting it in the self (75). Shunsuke invests his failed desires in Yuichi, whose beauty becomes a projection of his own idealized masculinity. The misogyny that emerges is not simply hatred of women but a rechanneling of male desire into a purified, self-contained aesthetic ideal.

II. Queer Ambivalence: Homoeroticism and Social Subversion

While *Forbidden Colors* foregrounds homosexuality, it does so in ambivalent terms. Yuichi's true eroticism is reserved for men, yet his queerness is never celebrated as liberatory. Instead, it is deployed as a form of social subversion against women. Yuichi confesses, "I cannot feel desire for them, only pity mixed with a kind of boredom" (Mishima 156). His homosexuality becomes a mechanism of detachment, making him a useful tool for Shunsuke's resentment.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* helps situate this tension. Sedgwick defines homosocial desire as the continuum between male friendship and erotic attachment (2). Yuichi's male relationships are charged with this intensity, while women are reduced to obstacles or experiments. Yet his queerness does not destabilize patriarchy—it reinforces it, because it channels resentment toward women rather than dismantling gender hierarchy.

This ambivalence reveals Mishima's divided impulses. On one hand, he disrupts heteronormativity by making same-sex desire central to the narrative. On the other, he co-opts queerness into misogyny, turning homosexuality into a weapon of patriarchal vengeance.

III. Gender Performativity and Postmodern Instability

Yuichi is not a stable character but a performer. He acts out heterosexual charm to seduce women he does not desire, then retreats into his homosexual detachment. As he admits: "I can smile at them, I can touch their hands, but my heart is untouched, like stone beneath silk" (Mishima 163).

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* illuminates this dynamic. Butler argues that "gender is performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (25). Yuichi's masculinity is precisely such a performance, one that never coincides with his true erotic desire. His fluidity destabilizes essentialist notions of identity, aligning with postmodern skepticism of fixed categories.

Yet this fluidity is not emancipatory. Instead of freeing Yuichi, performance renders him hollow. He becomes, in Shunsuke's words, "a mirror for others' desires, but never his own" (Mishima 190). Mishima presents queerness not as authentic identity but as fragmented performance, reflecting the instability of modern subjectivity.

IV. Shunsuke's Double: Psychoanalysis and the Mirror Stage

The relationship between Shunsuke and Yuichi is one of doubling. Shunsuke, the disillusioned mind, sees in Yuichi, the beautiful body, an image of the masculine ideal he cannot attain. Lacan's mirror stage from *Écrits* is instructive here: identity forms through misrecognition of an image that appears whole but is unattainable (94). Yuichi becomes Shunsuke's mirror, embodying the youth, beauty, and cruelty the older man lacks.

Shunsuke admits: "In you I see the youth I squandered, the beauty I could never possess, the cruelty I only imagined" (Mishima 198). This confession exposes the narcissistic projection at the heart of their relationship. Shunsuke simultaneously worships and manipulates Yuichi, using him as both fantasy and weapon.

Freud's narcissism and Lacan's mirror stage converge here: Yuichi is Shunsuke's ideal ego, projected and controlled, yet never truly his own. This doubling reveals the novel as a psychoanalytic drama of projection, resentment, and fractured selves.

V. Women as Abject: Misogyny and Symbolic Exclusion

Women in *Forbidden Colors* are depicted not as full subjects but as grotesque figures. Keiko, whom Yuichi is pressured to marry, is described as "a duty wrapped in silk, heavy with expectation" (Mishima 212). Madame Kaburagi, desperate for Yuichi's affection, is mocked as "a shadow of desire clinging to fading flesh" (Mishima 245).

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection in *Powers of Horror* clarifies their role. Abjection involves expelling what threatens the subject's coherence (3). Women in the novel represent reproduction, emotion, and decay—forces that Yuichi and Shunsuke reject to preserve masculine autonomy. They are expelled from the symbolic order, reduced to grotesque figures of excess.

In *This Sex Which Is Not One,* Luce Irigaray's critique of phallocentrism reinforces this point: women are reduced to "containers of male desire" (25). In Mishima's narrative, they exist only as functions within a male psychodrama. Misogyny is not incidental but structural, essential to Mishima's aesthetic of male beauty and cruelty.

VI. Cultural Trauma: Postwar Japan and Western Anxiety

The misogyny of *Forbidden Colors* must also be situated within its cultural context. Written in postwar Japan, the novel reflects anxieties about Westernization, defeat, and the erosion of tradition. Shunsuke equates femininity with cultural decline: "Once men were warriors, poets, lovers of the sublime. Now they bow to women and feed on their smiles" (Mishima 134).

Stuart Hall's notion of identity, in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, as formed through rupture and continuity (227) resonates here. Mishima projects Japan's rupture with its traditions onto women, who become symbols of decay and weakness.

Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity as a "third space" in *Location of Culture* (37) is notably absent. Mishima rejects hybridity in favor of purity—of masculinity, of aesthetics, of national identity. This yearning for purity foreshadows his later political extremism and tragic ritual suicide, where beauty and death were fused into one final performance.

Conclusion: Beauty as Poison, Desire as Resentment

Forbidden Colors is a novel where beauty is inseparable from cruelty, and where homoerotic desire is entangled with misogynistic resentment. Yuichi's beauty becomes poison, weaponized against women at Shunsuke's command. His queerness destabilizes heteronormativity yet is co-opted into patriarchal vengeance. Women are abjected, reduced to grotesque figures, symbols of decay rather than subjects of desire.

Through psychoanalysis, queer theory, and cultural critique, the novel emerges as both deeply misogynistic and profoundly revealing. It encodes Mishima's anxieties about masculinity, modernity, and cultural decline. By aestheticizing cruelty, Mishima transforms misogyny into narrative structure.

Ultimately, *Forbidden Colors* confronts readers with an unsettling truth: beauty can be weaponized, desire can be poisoned, and art can reflect resentment as much as transcendence. In Mishima's hands, the male body becomes both sublime and destructive, while the female body becomes expendable. The result is a novel that disturbs as much as it fascinates, a mirror of postwar despair and a testament to the dangerous allure of beauty entwined with resentment.

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