Chapter IV

THE MISHIMA PHENOMENON
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(a) Mishima and Modern Japan

In the context of ultra-nationalism it is difficult to ignore the dramatic suicide of Yukio Mishima. A brilliant and well known figure his act caught the imagination of the world and when put next to the other images of Japan common around the world, the super-rational economic animal and with the remaining fear of 'the revival of Japanese militarism' we tend to ascribe it to some cultural madness but with a certain residue of unbelief.

Mishima and four followers, members of his Shield Society (Tate no Kai) had invaded the office of the commander of the Ground Self-Defence Force Headquarters (Tokyo) General Mashita and tied him to his chair. Then Mishima had stepped out to the balcony, hanging hung streamers with slogans he proceeded to address the thousand odd soldiers standing there. Right from the beginning he was jeered at and they became louder by the time he reached the essence of his harangue, "Now the self-Defence Force must become a real national army; the Constitution has got to be changed." To those whom he thought he could incite to rebellion he had to beg for attention, he had to ask, "Isn't there a single-man who will listen to me," and the only answer he received was renewed jeering.

1 Japan Times Weekly (Tokyo), 5 December 1970.
Though he had planned to go on for two hours, he stopped after seven minutes with 'Long Live the Emperor.' He went back to the office and committed seppuku in the true Samurai tradition. There is a tendency to view it as a pathetic and futile act; it would seem to be more than the gesture of a passing moment, for while the self-defence force men did not rise up at his call, the then Prime Minister Sato came out with a statement not long after that the Constitution should be changed. An important function of the ultra-nationalist groups is to act as an advance guard for the ruling powers and to provide a contrast against which the ruling class can appear to be reasonable and moderate. They act as a wedge to expand the areas of political action.

Mishima's concern has always been the essence of the Japanese state and he continuously talked of the 'cultural emasculation' and moral degeneration of post-war Japan. In contrast to this he posits the myth of a pre-war state of national integrity represented by the Emperor, characterized supremely by the Samurais in a self-chosen death. For Mishima through suicide identification of the individual was possible with the national essence, the Emperor. In his novels one finds a constant identification of death and beauty. Thus he appreciates Noh drama because it is the ideal focus for the quietism of the soul and "beneath its mask that beauty must conceal death, for some day, just as surely, it will lead me away to destruction and silence."

2 Quoted in J. Bester, "This is Japan 1970", Orient/West (Tokyo), 1970.
His formative years were spent in the high tide and supreme confidence of pre-war Japan. Mishima was born in 1925 and made his literary debut in 1946. It must have been then that he began to idealize the idea of sacrifice and suicide for it was then that the Bushido spirit was moulded to fit the needs of a bureaucratic industrial nation-state. With war, it would be easy for a romantic writer to idealize death and link it with beauty. War was not suffering and mass slaughter and atrocities but an aristocratic, intellectual and aesthetic field. As he himself remarked about the days of war "I recall with tremendous bliss and sense of happiness that I once lived in such age". For Mishima, then post-war Japan could be nothing but a betrayal, inaugurated by the declaration of the Emperor's humanity.

Mishima and the Revival of the Samurai Spirit

Clifton describes the dream of a student in which he observes a demonstration and a traditional shrine festival. He does not feel a part of the political demonstration and the shrine festival seems to him dreary and commercial when contrasted with similar festivals described in court novels and the memory he preserves of those he witnessed as a child in rural areas. All he feels is alienation from the core of his character and even while outwardly condemning the symbols of culture, inwardly he

attempts to recover and restore them. Since past experience is unreliable arises the problem of totalism or psychological extremism which disdains the symbols of logic and science in favour of a reversion to Kokutai. Sometimes this results in violent, homicidal assaults to protect the sacred identity of Japan. Further youth stress 'sincerity of feeling and purity of motive' and the pure and spontaneous, that is aesthetically perfect act.

Yukio Mishima, more articulate than others expresses these sentiments when bemoaning the fact that the people's sense of values are multiple he says, "We will show you the existence of a value greater than the respect for human life. This is not liberty or democracy. It is Japan. It is the Japan we love with all its history and traditions.

Mishima in Sun and Steel lays the basis for a purely physical act which will recover the group identity. It is a desperate attempt at recovering the safety of the group. It is an attempt to shut up individuality for ever.

In the metaphor of steel and muscle Mishima finds the triumph of the non-specific for they were the same for him. Steel stripped muscles of their unusualness and individuality (which was a product of their degeneration) and, "...I began to assume a universal aspect."


5 Japan Times Weekly, 5 December 1970.

In his search for a beauty of form which is absolutely free from the coercive power of words, for art personalizes words and so prevents them. Mishima found the 'language of the body', which corresponds with physical space. As long as introspection remained, a well defined group vision was not possible but without it, with the body a perfect, non-individual harmony could be achieved.

The basic principle of the body is the cult of the hero for it is only death that sustains the dignity of the flesh. Mishima, re-reading letters written by those who went on suicide squad missions feels that they by dying secured a fixed identity, an "identity established beyond doubt - the tragic identity." This is what eluded Mishima for he was prevented by words from achieving the tragedy of the group. For the group represented the principle of the flesh. To enter the group and go beyond individuality he had to discard words which rejected the significance of the group. The group, defined by Mishima was a concept of "uncommunicable shared suffering, a concept that ultimately rejects the agency of the word." Through the group the divine could be glimpsed but the group must be open to death, it had to be a community of warriors. But this vision of oneness

7 Ibid., p. 80.
8 Ibid., p. 84.
would vanish "resolve itself into nothing more than muscles that simply existed" if he were alone but "held fast by the power of the group" it led him "to a far land, whence there would be no return."

Or as he expressed it in a guide to 'Hidden Leaf', the Samurai code expounded by Yamamoto Tsunetomo (1659-1719), "Bushido is to find the place to die."

(E) The Japanese State and Ultra-nationalists

The State built with American help was admirably suited to the needs of the Japanese ruling class but we must remember that the 'reverse course', was launched by the Americans once the cold war began and with the outbreak of the Korean war, Washington was more interested in building up the potential of Japan's strength. It was at this time that MacArthur called for a 'police reserve force' and Japan's post-war army was born.

By the 1950s, Americans aside from their foreign treaty alignments had come to accept the need for fostering the growth of capitalism so as to strengthen them against communism in China. The Japanese capitalists needed peace to build up their strength so as to be able to fight for the world market. In the present situation expansion need not be territorial but economic,

9 Ibid., p. 86.
10 Japan Times Weekly, 5 December 1970, p. 3.
11 Ibid., p. 3.
which can give more benefits with less burden. A security treaty saved them the expense of an armed establishment.

Since American protection and the need for building up strength kept Japanese eyes firmly turned inwards, a liberal consensus was achieved on the twin pillars of peace and democracy by both conservatives and nationalists. This land of 'transistor salesmen' (De Gaulle's term) found industrial development easy with two wars nearby, first in Korea and then in Vietnam.

While any progressive party was bothered mainly about fighting a return to prewar militarism and in opposing reactionary tendencies the ruling class was able to move imperceptibly to the right until peace came to mean the *status quo*. The alliance of the bourgeoisie with the *status quo* is best represented, symbolically by the marriage in 1962 of the Crown Prince to the daughter of an industrialist.

With an increase in the economic strength of Japan a change in the nature of the state is visible and to Mishima what Japan needed was to formulate modes of action that bind together individuals in a social hierarchy of value. Individuals need to find their place in the social hierarchy by reference to something super-personal.

Is the continued existence of ultra-nationalist groups seen to be an indication of the basic authoritarian character, the failure of democratization and a reassertion of the old militarist values?
In 1970, November after Mishima's suicide the police announced that they had four hundred organizations on their list with about 115,000 members and thirty under special surveillance. It would seem that the existence of these groups with such a small membership is not important as an active and potent force in Japanese politics. The ruling party, the LDP is too strongly enmeshed and there are others who would be in a better position to play an alternative.

These groups, then are the reflection of a symptom, of a malaise which acts as a pointer to the ills of society. For we must note that the post-war ultra-nationalist have concentrated not on an attempt at securing a dominant position in Asia but on the need to restore traditional Japanese virtues like respect for the family system and devotion to the emperor. This approach suits the general tendency up to 1970 of a nostalgic, inward type of nationalism. They view an ideal Japan, where she is independent, strong; where the economy is for the benefit of all a political system based on patriotism and devotion to national interest.

While alienation from a society which is too complex and moving at a frantic pace leads an individual to either disassociation or submerging his identity in some ideology. The ultra-nationalists, therefore, might have as cause this estrangement from their work, from other men, from society and from them-

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selves but so do other organizations as the Sokka-Gakkai, the
Communists. The problem of alienation in a society based on
groups raises some problems. If alienation is seen as that
stage of human activity where the creations of man-things, social
relations and institutions - are gaining independence, are comp-
llicating and standing against man, are beginning to overcome man
so that he stands against a strange, exterior force which he can-
not understand because of its obscureness and complexity than
what happens is the reification of persons and the personification
of things and this process culminates in the historical level of
capitalism consequently it is a conception of the human personality
of the individual at a time when men do not appear as individual-
ities and are reduced to bearers of certain roles forced on them.
Their individual characters become suppressed.

In Japan a man would not lose his individuality but his
role as a member of a group and what he would seek to restore then
is not an authentic individuality, as understood from the European
idea but a harmonious relationship with society and nature. An
ideal directly opposed to a mass ideology.

A characteristic of mass man is that he denigrates ration-
alism, realism and truth. Take the question of rationalism. Ultra-
nationalists expound doctrines based on faith, faith in a mystical

13 J. White, *The Sokka Gakkai and Mass Society* (Berkeley,

entity. How if an examination of their social background is made by and large they would be seen to come from the lower sections of society. To these sections education is expensive and therefore out of their reach. Therefore, since learning and reason are seen as a prerogative of the upper classes and since, as a class the ability to acquire this learning is denied, doctrines which achieve success espouse faith and sincerity, simplicity and altruism and are by and large anti-rational. The view in the west is paralleled by the idea of the dangers of learning for the soul.

If we accept what Maruyama Masao says that ultra-nationalism succeeded in weaving an invisible but many layered net over the Japanese people from which they still are not free then the causes can still be found in Japanese society. The crucial factor is the all pervasive psychological coercion which has forced people to behave in a particular manner.

First the question of ultra-nationalism, why ultra? Expansion has been characteristic of nationalism in all countries in the period of the formation of nation states. The crucial difference with other nationalisms lies in the failure of the state to remain neutral over internal values. Such judgement is left to groups, like the Church or to conscience. This is the product of the post-reformation wars of religion in Europe which resulted in the exclusion of religion from realizing its goals through politics but the rulers were still left to find an external justi-
fication for their rule. Hence the split between internal values and external forms, such as a legal system.

Japanese nationalism never faced this problem consequently its control was always based on internal values rather than on authority derived from external laws. For both authority over temporal and spiritual matters was concentrated in the Emperor. While there was no outside ecclesiastical force, the state acted to instill in the people a belief in the 'national essence' and respect for the Emperor.

Even in the struggle for liberalism, the question of the individuals conscience never became a significant factor in defining his freedom. Thus the issuing of the Imperial Edict before summoning the Diet was a declaration that the state monopolized the right to determine values.

In such a situation, even though the Emperor denied his divinity there was no basis for freedom of belief. This resulted in private affairs always being linked to public affairs for an individual even in his personal life was joined to the Emperor but the converse could also hold true, private interests endlessly infiltrate into national concerns.

From the fact that the Emperor embodies in his person absolute values, we see that virtue arises when this starts to spread from its central entity, Maruyama points out that the just

cause and national conduct coexist and therefore whenever the nation acts it is just. Further since national sovereignty is the course of both ethics and power, morality has never been internationalized as the conscience of an individual but associated with national affairs. Power was derived from the degree of proximity to the Emperor.

With these pointers we refer to the diagram (Fig. I) mentioned earlier, we find that vertical linkage fits in with these statements. This type of grouping, we have said earlier gave rise to sectionalism but it is sectionalism in which every element is judged with its respective connexion with the ultimate entity.

Maruyama goes on to say that only by destroying the family structure, that is democratizing it can the ultra-national element be eliminated or rendered harmless. It is the persistence of this traditional nationalism which he sees as the greatest danger to any attempt at democratizing the social structure. These forces could reform once again around the Emperor, thus the flying of the national flag, reviving the national anthem or worshipping at Shinto Shrines are minor phenomena which could be transformed into great political energy.

Ultra-nationalists have continued to stress traditional patterns and the existence of traditional patterns is shown to be the cause of the undemocratic and feudal character of Japan.

16 Ibid., p. 152.
Japan is seen as a country but partially modernized and therefore prey to such aberrations as the suicide of Mishima. However, the criteria for judging modernity has come to mean that it is the same as Westernization. We must bear in mind that it is the existence of traditional elements which have given cohesiveness to Japanese society and are responsible for the speed of development.

While it is one thing to speak of an undemocratic family it is quite another to say that ultra-nationalist forces are the product of such a social pattern. What we can say is that the family pattern has not changed in essence and that this group formation pervades all forms of organization and that this type of structure is conducive to traits which stress loyalty and devotion, exclusiveness and cohesiveness and that they prevent unity, unless there is an external threat.

Ultra-nationalist we have said were based, in pre-war Japan on an alliance with the conservative forces, who dealt in the same symbols as them and on the army. In post-war Japan the Conservatives are too firmly entrenched in power, their affiliations with big business and the bureaucracy are too strong to be really disturbed. The ultra-nationalists on the other hand form a marginal group on the fringe of politics and gangsterism, their fanaticism almost automatically rules out the possibility of winning mass support. Further the groups that do exist indulge in fantastic schemes, for instance a group called the Daiwa to
(Great Conciliation Party) demanded among other things the creation at U.N. expense of a five million strong Japanese army to defend Asia. Another party the Shinyo Taishu (New and Powerful Masses Party) indulges in blackmail, unofficial police work and blackmailing. While yet another, the Fuji Kado Kai (Peerless Poetry Association) is interested only in promoting poetry as a vehicle for promoting and perpetuating the worship of gods and reverence for the Emperor.

The ultra-nationalists, or their movement merely express the prevailing ideology of right-wing nationalism in a more blatant form and these fanatical groups prepare the ground by broadening the area of political choice. With the beginning of 1970s Japan is playing a confident role in world affairs and her economy prospering so an extremist, mystical ideology is not what can win sympathy or support. If the situation was a decisive determinant in the pre-war variety then the post-war situation will see the ultra-nationalist groups languishing in limbo with an occasional dramatic act, which will bring some prominence for a few days.

(d) **Conclusion**

While change during the Meiji restoration of 1868 was far reaching to the Japanese it was not seen as a radical departure from the past but as a perpetuation of what was best in the past

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symbolized in the elevation of the imperial system from obscurity to political sovereignty. The emperor was retained to initiate change within the traditional unity. Yet Japan while it used the past to legitimate the future failed to extend the emotional experience of emancipation from the purely philosophical and aesthetic into the realm of social reality. The projection of the traditional image of the family into the state meant that this bastion of tradition was also identified with the work of change. Whereas in Europe before a nation state could emerge the idea of a Universal Church had to be disposed off and individual consciousness had to confront Christian dogmas for secularization, in Japan the ideologies or institutions had the flexibility of the undefined as well as the tenacity of the functional.

The alternatives in the search for freedom were either a total flight from society on religious or aesthetic grounds or a perfection of the self to free it from the trivialities of one's society. Another reaction would be the sentimentalization of the individual experience.

If then the old nationalism was merely been inlaid at the social base in an atomized form, will it emerge as a politically autonomous force? Maruyama feels that even if there "is a systematic effort to recentralize the dispersed and amorphous national sentiments of today, it does not seem likely that sufficient

strength can be mobilized for the resultant nationalism to be an independent political force." Nationalism in Japan can in no way be classified as ultra-nationalism. The feeling of pride in being Japanese and the justified pride in Japanese accomplishments, in Japanese national development and Japanese values is neither a unique feeling nor by itself fascist in implication. While still heavily dependent on trade with the United States and on its military power the Japanese are increasingly confident of their economic power and potential and if they wish to pursue their goals then they need peace and stability. Mishima's suicide was seen in Japan as a mark that Japan had come of age for the reaction to his dramatic suicide was one of embarrassment rather than what it was meant to have been a call to arms.