

The psychology of repressed desires in Yukio Mishima's *Thirst for Love*

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Abstract: The gap between desire and what is socially accepted often leads to tremendous inner turmoil; when that turmoil is disallowed, it can lead to tragic and bloody consequences. This research article examines the psychological effects of repressing one's desires and the costs of living with the reality of never living a whole life through the protagonist, Etsuko, in *Thirst for Love* (1950) by Yukio Mishima. The paper identifies the psychological substructure of repressed desires and examines how Mishima has presented them as a source of inner conflict and a driving element of Etsuko's actions. The research employs the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to understand the repressed desires of Etsuko that manifest in destructive activities: obsession, self-punishment, and self-destruction. The study further explores how Mishima has employed the themes of sexual desires, unrequited love, and unfulfilled emotions and represents through Etsuko the tangle of social obligations and personal inhibitions in post-war Japan. Through a qualitative approach and textual analysis, it explores how the unknown desires of Etsuko lead to the emotional and psychological deterioration of her being, disclosing the dangers of repression within the context of Japanese post-war society, wherein traditionalism and the individual's desires often clash with one another. This research argues its ability to elucidate the potential for violence when these desires are denied.

Keywords: desire, identity, post-war Japan, psychoanalysis, repression, violence

Introduction

In modern literature, there exist authors whose works profoundly influence the thinking of generations, becoming deeply ingrained in

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cultural history and literature. Yukio Mishima (1925-1970), one of the greatest Japanese writers, playwrights, and poets of his time, is known for his controversial literary style that can mostly be branded as a nationalistic radical. One of his famous novels, *Thirst for Love*, is a tragic love story dealing with the human psyche and suppression of desires. Published in 1950, *Thirst for Love (Ai no Kawaki)* chronicles the journey of Etsuko, a young widow grappling with the pursuit of love and acceptance in a culture that prioritizes conformity and tradition above all other ideals. Mishima examines the concepts of longing, isolation, and the quest for self-discovery in a rapidly changing post-war Japan through Etsuko's experiences. The novel is a compelling and intellectually stimulating piece of literature that nevertheless profoundly impacts readers today.

The novel centres around Etsuko, a young woman living with her father-in-law, Yakichi, and his family after the death of her husband. She is depressed and feels trapped due to the domination of Yakichi and his sexual advances, which she has no choice but to give to him, and becomes entangled in a destructive web of desire and denial when she finds herself obsessed with the young gardener Saburo. The most important aspect of her character is her intense desire for love and affection. She is desperate to be loved by someone who will make her feel wanted. The fear of abandonment is from her childhood and her loveless marriage. As a result, she has deep-rooted insecurities and constantly needs validation from others. Sexual desires further complicate Etsuko's need for love, affection, and validation. Etsuko is attracted to men who are emotionally unavailable to her and are abusive. She often attracts relationships that are unhealthy and destructive. The novel is a touching portrait of unfulfilled longings and subtle emotions that mould human patterns. It also explores Japan's intricate psychological and cultural conflicts after the war.

“Etchan is lucky,” said Chieko. “She doesn't know how tyrannical father can be. One moment, though, she's happy, and the next moment she's depressed, but-let the matter of Saburo be what it might-I just can't fathom how a woman can, before the period of mourning for her husband is over, become her father-in-law's mistress.” (Mishima 2009, 22)

The story takes place after World War II and vividly depicts a society struggling to define itself in the face of fast modernity and the enduring influence of traditional beliefs. Society, especially the women in the house, judges Etsuko for her sexual relationship with her father-

in-law, Yakichi, and not the other way around. Even though it was Yakichi who took advantage of Etsuko's helplessness, Japanese culture was such that traditional values and morality were expected to be followed by women and would unsee all the wrongdoings of men against women and society.

The repressed desires, otherwise called unconscious drives, are commonly viewed themes in sociology, psychology, and literature. They portray deep views into a character's subconscious and unconscious mind and are embedded with deep meanings and insights relating to humans. Relentless, they remain an obstacle to the performance and health of an individual, resulting in frustration, alienation, and isolation (Akhtar 2020, 244). Although it would have originated in psychoanalysis, it now enters the realms of literature and philosophy. The result can be seen in many plays, essays, and books. In contrast, it is much rarer for repressed desires to be analysed within the Japanese cultural framework using a more contemporary theory. Very little academic work has been conducted on Yukio Mishima's works, generally, particularly *Thirst for Love*, regarding the repressed desires of personality psychological analysis. As such, this paper will discuss the psychological conceptions in Mishima's novel from a perspective expounding the repressed desires within.

Traditionally, writers have treated sexual repression in their fiction within religiously or socially influenced dichotomies. Most stories work with desire in a conformist and repressed society, the desire often being the story. In most cases, stories like these are read as cautionary tales or tales of retribution, and the dynamics of desire at work contrast with the dynamics of repression, which are abnormal (Dodd 2020, 16). Such novels include Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, *The Talented Mr Ripley* by Patricia Highsmith, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, and *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov. Yukio Mishima's novel *Thirst for Love* is a fine example of body and matter, symbolizing the dilemma between social and individual premise in the Cartesian mind and matter paradigm.

Rowland (2016, 158-162) notes that desire has been tolerated and celebrated throughout history, reflecting the intricate sociocultural perspectives surrounding this enigmatic construct. Rowland emphasizes that desire is a psychic and affective force manifested in tangible activities, such as play and drama, with learning occurring within the context of natural, material bodies in the social and cultural

milieu. In *Thirst for Love*, the characters employ various defence mechanisms to cope with their repressed desires, as elucidated by Freudian theory. One prominent defence mechanism is displacement, where unpleasant feelings are redirected from the actual source to a substitute object. This is exemplified when a character shifts anger from a triggering event to a different, less threatening target.

This study employs the qualitative method of textual analysis to understand the protagonist's psychology according to Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan's arguments. It analyzes the textual representation of suppressed desires, such as forbidden love, sexual longings, and yearning for death, according to Etsuko's relationships with Yakichi and Saburo. According to the Freudian psychoanalytic theory, unconscious desires fuel the narrative flow of the conscious desires of an individual. The unconscious is the most significant area, and it means the repressed parts of the human mind that contain painful, sexual, and aggressive desires of a person throughout life. The Freudian psychoanalytic perspective is based on the premise that unconscious desires drive the narrative flow of an individual's conscious desires. According to the psychic model of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, consciousness, referring to the area containing the person's current thoughts and perceptions, is the smallest area. The second area, the pre-conscious, refers to the sensations located in the periphery of consciousness. The unconscious, the most significant area, refers to the parts of the human mind that are repressed. It is in these parts that painful, sexual, and aggressive desires are flushed throughout the entire life of a person (Heller 1988, 354). According to Lacanian theory, 'the Other' is, in essence, the locus of human language. For Freud, the concept of the 'Other' about humans exists in stage one and represents the object of love in a shadowy and fugitive way (Tan 2023). Lacan claims that Freud relegated subjectivity to a secondary position. In psychoanalytic practice, the aim is to return from the 'other' to the 'Other' to find the inalienable object behind the mirage of satisfaction again (Tan 2023). In analysis, the object of love can thus be object a, which Lacan describes as neither outside nor inside us but rather in an uncertain zone between the two.

Freudian theory of repression and Jacques Lacan's theory of the gaze and desire

In Freud's psychoanalytic theory, repression is a significant concept in which traumatic experiences are pushed into the unconscious, leading

to repressed emotions and wishes, which manifest themselves in different ways. Freud's theory of repression is fundamental to his neurosis model and has been expanded beyond clinical psychoanalysis. It is the basis for psychoanalytic literary criticism, which often appears static and less multiform (Akhtar 2020, 248). The novel *Thirst for Love* is a metaphorical structure where repressed desires are revealed—wishes, fantasies, fears, and emotions suppressed by feelings of guilt. Freud's model of the repressed is paradoxical in and of itself since it is described as an entity hidden beneath the conscious mind.

In Lacanian theory, 'the gaze' is pivotal in shaping desire, as it is intricately linked to the concept of the 'other.' According to Lacan, desire emerges from the inability to fulfil needs directly and is mediated through language and societal norms. This notion aligns with the characters' desires in *Thirst for Love*, where their yearnings are not only influenced by their internal psychological processes but also by external perceptions and societal expectations (Feng 2022). Lacan's framework of desire, encompassing needs, desires, and demands, delves into the intricate relationship between the subject's desires and the influence of the 'other' – the social and cultural context.

Freud's idea of a repressed desire refers to people who act in another way due to estrangement between the natural ego and superego. In the story *Thirst for Love*, Etsuko's repressed desire for sex, love, and human relationships is due to her never experiencing adolescence and the act of intercourse. Her desire to experience adolescence during her twenties is illustrated by her appreciation of flowers around a mountain villa, showing her inalienable pleasure in experiencing it to escape her grief.

Per Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, the concept of repressed desires delves into the intricate nature of human desire and its manifestation in the unconscious mind. Lacan posits that desire emerges from the gap between needs and demands, perpetuating a perpetual transformation cycle through a chain of signifiers. This concept is crucial in understanding how individuals navigate the symbolic order, seeking a delicate equilibrium between their desires and those of others. According to Lacan, human desires are often intertwined with the desires of others due to the lingering influence of the 'object a' from infancy, leading individuals to find satisfaction in ideological fantasies. Furthermore, Lacan's assertion that 'man's desire

is the desire of the big other' underscores the illusory nature of desire, emphasizing its perpetual, enigmatic quality (Feng 2022).

The notion of repressed desire is used in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical theory as a conceptualization of the subconscious yearning that borders on taboo. However, Mishima uses this theory differently; he does not discuss repressed desire as part of desire but as an ideological construct. This formulation might seem to dismiss or idealize repressed desires, replacing a legitimate silent libido with an imposed and homogeneous unconscious from above. Psychoanalysts define enjoying as the satisfaction of this tension; if there is no tension or unpleasure, one does not enjoy it. They also distinguish between 'principle' and 'reality'—ego processes occurrences according to the logic of reality. The logic of the pleasure principle is such that it amounts to an axiological-state axiology. The libido, or energy, of the pleasure principle can be discharged in several ways, from the simple stick-to-stomach pleasure of food ingestion to the release and enjoyment of sexual intercourse. Since the full realization of pleasure is impossible, and since someone or something will always displease you, yet the pleasure principle compels discharge, closure is sought in a superego-ideal: a constructed ideal self. Thus, the transference from an original, primitive, and formless root ego process to secondary rehabilitative processes of the consignment to an ego ideal diverts and fragments the libido. However, at the same time, these processes enable life to continue (Chervet 2021, 765).

Applying the Lacanian perspective to the novel differs from Freud in the relationship between the ego and the playwright. According to Freud, the playwright dominates the scene and directs the ego. Lacan claims that among various identifications (including literary identification), the playwright's character leads the plot and the actions of the ego to dominate the place in which the ego identifies, along with the mother and the visionary code. In the context of *Thirst for Love*, Etsuko's repressed desires find no room in the conscious mind due to barriers like society or morals and continue to pressure behaviour from the unconscious. People who cannot resolve these kinds of desires are often plagued by neurosis and other psychological problems (Hashim and Mustafa 2022, 28). Her unfulfilled sexual desires and emotional needs are buried under the heavy societal expectations that have been stored in her very rigidly. Etsuko gets obsessed with Saburo, a young servant from a lower order. However, rather than owning up to these feelings and acting directly on them, Etsuko represses them and thus

causes a slow build-up of psychological tension. Through her relationship with Saburo, Mishima emphasises how her desires underline the essential contradiction with social norms about how people should act. Etsuko's regard for Saburo is painful because she knows precisely how improper an emotion is. This is a classic case of Freudian repression, where socially unacceptable desires are pushed to the unconscious, only to pop up in a distorted form.

Etsuko: A portrait of repressed desires

In Etsuko's case, repressed desires are expressed through various actions in the novel that lead to destruction. One such repressed action is the compulsive attraction towards Saburo, a complicated psychological reaction due to the repressed desires. She becomes fixated, irrational, and consumed by Saburo, which leads to self-punishment and a swing from longing to resentment:

I even lost control of myself and deliberately burned my hand in the fire.
Look! I did it because of you. This burn was for you. (Mishima 2009, 187)

Mishima depicts this as self-punishment, wherein Etsuko inflicts mental agony upon herself as a manner of justifying her desires that are repressed in the innermost self. This self-destruction has been typical of suppressed desires; frustrated desires turn into psychological distress due to a lack of fulfilment. The repression of Etsuko thus projects a distorted reality—the idealization of love toward Saburo but with resentment against him for being indifferent to her. This saving projection prevents realising the natural desire for Saburo but increases the psychic turmoil further by filling the gap between an idealized and an indifferent real-life Saburo.

Desire, in Freudian psychoanalysis, embraces every mental activity that leads to satisfaction. Societal norms also help mold 'repression. As a widow in post-war Japan, she should emulate the social norms; desires and emotions must be repressed. This results in a very acute sense of isolation and alienation constrained by her inhibitions and the tightly-knit social fabric around her. Eventually, the effects of this repression drive Etsuko to tragic defeat when her unfulfilled desires express themselves more destructively.

Repressed desires, as defined in the context of psychoanalysis, hold significant importance in understanding the human psyche. According to Lacan's desire theory, repressed desires stem from the gap between an individual's needs and demands. This theory emphasizes that desire

is a continual interplay of signifiers, constantly transforming within the symbolic order. Furthermore, Lacan posits that human desires are intertwined with the desires of others, rooted in the concept of the 'object a' originating from an individual's infancy. Importantly, Lacan's theory underscores that breaking through the illusions of desire is pivotal for the liberation of the subject, highlighting the intricate and profound implications of repressed desires within the realm of psychoanalytic theory (Feng 2022).

Saburo and Yakichi: Foils to Etsuko's Repression

Repression is the process or mechanism of repressing and keeping something from becoming conscious. According to Freud, all neurotic symptoms are the results of the existence of repressed conflict in the unconscious (Sanfelippo and Dagfal 2020). According to psychoanalysis, our mind forms its 'real' self through what it represses out of consciousness. It must be kept in mind that for Freud, what is repressed is indeed initially conscious; otherwise, it may not be repressed in the first place. The second important point is that Freud proposed the idea of a topographical representation of our psyche as the first structural model. Freud explained the interaction of these parts according to the level of consciousness, which was named Freud's First Abandonment (Northoff and Scalabrini 2021). It is stated that the conscious part contains the thoughts and emotions the individual is aware of experiencing, and the second part includes the preconscious part, where thoughts may enter conscious awareness but are not currently in the person's consciousness. According to this technique, it is the part of the mental activity we access, and the rest is unconscious.

In the novel, Saburo acts as a foil for the repression of Etsuko and becomes the raw expression of desire. It is not flesh-related lust that makes Etsuko fall for Saburo but the license and spontaneity for life. The dynamics of such repression are further complicated by Yakichi, her father-in-law, who deals with it more subduedly. Interacting with Etsuko and Saburo, Yakichi builds a complex system of repressed desires at individual and societal levels. Mishima's novel shows that pent-up desires self-destruct in their obsession with Saburo. The increasingly intense fixation gradually alienates Etsuko from the world and reality. Her suppressed desires become too great to bear; in the end, she finds a last means of escape through her violence. The novel indicates that if one represses his innermost desires, frustrated

alienation will ensue, and the result will be to lead oneself onto the road of self-destruction:

After a number of seemingly endless, wordless seconds, Yakichi spoke:

“Why did you kill him?”

“Because you didn’t.”

“I wasn’t planning to kill him.”

Etsuko turned toward him with a mad stare: “You’re lying. You were going to kill him. That’s what I was waiting for. You couldn’t save me without killing Saburo. Yet you hesitated. Standing there shaking. Shamelessly shaking. So I had to kill him for you.” (Mishima 2009, 196- 197)

The novel’s climax, where Etsuko stabs Saburo, illustrates how such repressed desires can turn one into a tool of self-destruction. Etsuko has fallen prey to overwhelming feelings against which society has conditioned her to go because it cannot reconcile them with those expectations. Thus, the repression turns to aggression toward herself and others. Stabbing Saburo can be seen as a consummation of Etsuko’s psychological disintegration because the limits break down between love and hate, desire, and destruction. By showing the catastrophic consequences of Etsuko’s repression, Mishima suggests that unacknowledged desires, when left to fester, can lead to tragic outcomes. The novel thus underscores the importance of confronting and addressing one’s desires rather than allowing them to remain hidden in the unconscious.

Conclusion

Thirst for Love is an example of an intensely analytical demonstration of the problem of repressed desire and its consequences at the intersection of human experience in psychological and social dimensions that converge to a tragic point. Through a Freudian and Lacanian analysis, we gain insight into the reasons for Etsuko’s inner struggle and the more significant consequences of repression in human life. Mishima’s portrayal of the psychological deterioration of Etsuko is bleak; there is just about an equal measure of how much danger lurks within unrequited and unfulfilled desires and how much risk lies in inescapable social norms that govern individual identity.

This article illustrates how repressed desires can emerge inside rigid cultural confines. It analyzes how emotional repression operates and the impact of these desires on the characters. In modern society, individuals are often expected to manage their innate drives for pleasure. These desires become repressed, so the characters cannot

identify them. The opposite of repressed desires is sublimation, where base desires are turned into positive social goals. However, such sublimation is possible only outside rigid encodings of desires. Inside rigid societies, desires become repressed, and internal mechanisms arise to control them, producing uncontrolled outcomes instead. In the case of Mishima's characters, repression results in violence, infanticide, and madness.

By applying Freud's psychoanalysis theory to the novel, the study found the human psyche as a conflict between desire and social control. Human desire is influenced by biological factors and social campaigns during adolescence that repress powerful sensory impulses. Repressed desire can lead to psychic crisis and a distorted form of manifestation, such as artificial curiosities and delusional events. The analysis of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory revealed significant findings. Lacan's perspective on desire as arising from the gap between needs and demands provided a profound understanding of the character's motivations and actions in the novel. The concept of the 'big Other' as the source of human desire sheds light on the characters' pursuit of fulfilment and the influence of societal expectations on their desires. Furthermore, the notion of desire as an illusion was evident in the characters' relentless pursuit of love and validation, ultimately leading to their internal conflicts and unfulfilled yearnings.

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