SOCIETY OF THE MASK.
THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN HONNE AND TATEMAE IN JAPANESE CULTURE AND SOCIAL PHENOMENA

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Abstract

The present paper explores the correlation between the mask as a major theme in Japanese art throughout history and as an important social tool, especially when constructing social hierarchies. Expanding upon Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation, we focus on the dissociation between subjective intentions (honne) and the social mask/façade (tatemae) as one of the leading factors behind Japan's post-war identity crisis, reflected in the autobiographical works of authors such as Yukio Mishima and Osamu Dazai. We also seek to analyze contemporary negative social phenomena such as hikikomori through the lens of this cultural conflict.

Keywords: mask, identity crisis, post-war Japan, honne, tatemae

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Introduction

In his 1956 study *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* sociologist Erving Goffman equates human social life to a theatrical performance[1]. He focuses on the way each individual plays their social role, the feedback they receive from peers and the adjustments they make to their own identity based on social context. These aspects greatly influence day-to-day behavior patterns and interactions within society as a whole. A conclusion that can be drawn from Goffman's research is that what we call *the self* is inherently constructed in a social context, through continuous interaction with others. The social self is defined through the so-called "show" one puts on and through the lens of the "spectators" that witness it. Goffman does not see this phenomenon in isolation, pointing out the fact that individuals are often required to perform in teams or "troupes". While this study can, of course, be applied to society as a whole, certain aspects of this expected collective performance are of particular interest when analyzing Japanese cultural and sociological trends. The *Noh* mask is one of the most recognizable symbols of Japanese art and culture, steeped in history and tradition. Throughout Goffman's thesis, the correlation between the mask-as-theatre-prop and its social, invisible counterpart is immediately apparent. In Japanese, the social mask is called *tatemae* ("constructed face"). It sits in clear contrast to *honne* ("true intentions"), an aspect of the individual that is often neglected in the performance of everyday life instead of its fabricated counterpart. The disconnect between true intentions and the weight of social expectations is not unique to Japanese culture, but it is a leading factor behind many of the country's current sociological, cultural and even economic issues, such as the phenomena of *hikikomori,* the high rate of suicide and the ongoing declining birthrate. It is also a recurring theme in contemporary Japanese art, the works and lives of authors such as Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima embodying the country's identity crisis that followed after the Second World War.

The main aim of the present paper is to observe the correlation between the social performance theorized by Goffman and the negative social phenomena it can lead to if improper. We will approach Goffman's theoretical framework in the form of a qualitative study, based on the fundamental relation between social behavior and cultural manifestation.

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[1] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956, p. 1.

Japan is the perfect subject for such a case study due to the overt and assumed distinction between *honne* and *tatemae* (along with all the social expectations it brings with it). As such, it is not uncommon to find clear instances of individuals (or even groups of people) failing to maintain their masks and withdrawing or being forcefully removed from society's "stage". To better understand these instances and their root causes, we will mainly approach the topic through a psychological and sociological lens. However, the importance of art (mainly literature) as a tool for individuals to "take off the mask" and expose the *honne* of entire marginalized communities cannot be understated and, as such, we will also be analyzing several emblematic works that touch upon themes of identity crisis, loss of self and social rejection while employing statistics on order to showcase this cultural trend's impact on the country's demographics.

The Mask and the Self as *Ningen*

Sociologist Robert Ezra Park states that "it is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask."[2] He acknowledges this as the mutual understanding that everyone, everywhere is consciously or unconsciously playing a role that can define the individual. As is the case in Goffman's theory of social performance, Park seems to entertain the idea that individuals can wholly embody their roles and, in a way, become their mask. This idea becomes even more relevant when we analyze the purpose of the mask as a stage prop in Japanese theater, starting with its very beginnings.

Traditionally, the mask (*kamen*) saw usage in early Japanese performance art even before the iconic *Noh* and *Kyogen* theater we know today. Japanese theater masks have their roots in folk rituals, as religious objects. Early forms of Japanese theatrical art such as *Dengaku* (celebrations relating to agriculture and rice planting) and *Kagura* (religious performances with the purpose of cleansing and purifying the land by appeasing the gods) occasionally used the mask as a receptacle that helped immaterial deities manifest themselves tangibly.[3] Solrun Hoaas argues that in these forms of proto-theater, the mask was an embodiment of a "wholly other" – "when an

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[2] Robert Ezra Park, *Race and Culture*, Glencoe: The Free Press, 1950, p. 249.

[3] Solrun Hoaas, "Noh Masks: The Legacy of Possession" in *The Drama Review: TDR*, no. 4, vol. 26, 1982, pp. 82-86, p. 82.

actor put on a demon mask, he became a demon. When he put on the mask of a god, he became a god."[4] The performers seem to temporarily lose themselves in the roles they embody. Similarly, when explaining the team dynamics of the social performance, Goffman gives the example of the middle-class traditional couple which, when interacting with new people, might revert to a more conservative, socially accepted dynamic (submissive wife, dominant husband) even if the roles are reversed behind closed doors.[5] He also gives the example of business etiquette, the informality that builds between colleagues reverting to cold professionalism when dealing with a newcomer or an outsider.[6] These examples serve to demonstrate the fact that during the social performance, much like in theater, one may be expected to temporarily embody a complete otherness (and might even do it unconsciously). As such, the presentation of the self is highly contextual. The usually laid-back and funny friend is expected to become a serious and hard-working person while on the job, the same way a shrine priest could temporarily become a demon or a god during the *Kagura* ritual. Problems emerge when the individual is unable to fully embody their role, failing to meet the expectations that come with the given context.

Japanese historian and philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji's study of ethics bases itself on this highly contextual construction of the self. According to him, ethical issues cannot relate to the individual in isolation, but only to "the in-betweenness of person and person (*hito to hito no aida*)."[7] Because of this, he argues that "ethics is the study of *ningen (*human/person).*"[8] The use of the Japanese word *ningen* (人間) is very important in this context. Its Japanese spelling is comprised of two *kanji* characters - 人 (*hito*) meaning "individual" and 間 (*aida*) meaning "relationship, interval, between". Language, at its core, has much to reveal about a society's overall worldview. The construction of the word *ningen* paints the picture of a collectivist society, in which, as Watsuji points out, social expectations define individual ethics. As we will analyze in the following sections, this social dynamic causes individuals to

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[4] *Ibidem*, p. 82.

[5] Erving Goffman, *Op. cit.* p. 48.

[6] *Ibidem*, p. 48.

[7] Tetsuro Watsuji, *Watsuji Tetsuro's Rinrigaku*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 10

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 10.

undertake certain sacrifices in order to "fit in" and meet expectations to avoid "loss of face" – an expression that underlines the correlation between one's face and the social mask they display outwardly.

Honne and *Tatemae*, Confucianist Roots

The careful balancing act between *honne* and *tatemae* sits at the center of our analysis of Japanese social behaviors. Yutaka Yamamoto gives two very comprehensive definitions for the terms – *tatemae* represents "the tendency to present a proper appearance in order, for example, to avoid offending another; or, acting in accordance with expectations (…) one represses real feelings and acts according to expectations in order to avoid confrontation or causing offense and loss of face".[9] The real feelings that are repressed when showing *tatemae* is what we refer to as *honne* or, as Yamamoto puts it, "*honne* refers to real feelings as opposed to what is expressed but not necessarily felt."[10] These definitions help us to see the vast cultural importance of *tatemae* when it comes to interpersonal relationships.

However, the social expectations that a culture of *tatemae* encompasses are, as psychotherapist Susan Hall Vogel states, severely damaging to an individual's psychological well-being. She refers to a "*samurai*-type cultural standard of maintaining a perfect *tatemae*".[11] As she implies, this cultural staple seems to lead back to the Edo period (1603-1868), during which Confucianism gained popularity among the *samurai* and evolved as a value system whose core dominant principles were loyalty and bravery.[12] Japan was, at this point, a feudal society. The *samurai* could not own land independently as they were vassals to their lord. Unconditional and unquestioning loyalty towards authority figures was the only way one could achieve success during this era, encouraging men to prove themselves in battle to win the favor of their

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[9] Yutaka Yamamoto, "A Morality Based on Trust: Some Reflections on Japanese Morality" in *Philosophy East and West*, no. 4, vol. 40, 1990, pp. 451-469.

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 459.

[11] Suzanne Hall Vogel, "Japanese Society under Stress" in *Asian Survey*, no. 4, vol. 52, 2012, pp. 687-713.

[12] Chen Lai, "Historical and Cultural Features of Confucianism in East Asia" in Roger T. Ames, Peter D. Hershock (ed.) *Confucianisms for a Changing World Cultural Order*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018, pp. 102-111.

lord. This caused Japanese Confucianism to develop separately from its Chinese origins, founded on benevolence, wisdom and appropriateness.

This cultural development still has ramifications today. As Vogel aptly points out, the tendency to suppress personal values, opinions and interests as to display *tatemae* and appease authority (be it a parent, teacher, *senpai or* boss, the contemporary "lord") is culturally ingrained in Japanese social behavior. Submission to superiors is, however, often taken for granted and not mutually beneficial leading to a severe dissatisfaction in those required to permanently maintain *tatemae*, sidelining personal opinions and interests hoping for a reward that might never come.

The Postwar Identity Crisis

The severe repercussions of maintaining this outdated "*samurai-style*" cultural dynamic seem to mostly emerge after Japan's defeat at the end of the Second World War. With Japan's surrender and subsequent American occupation until 1952, the country underwent serious military, political, cultural and social reforms. The figure of the emperor falls from grace and, as such, Japanese imperialism loses its pillar of stability. The implementation of new American values creates a radical cultural shift, the result being a two-faced, hybrid and often clashing contemporary Japan in which conservative tradition meets accelerated progress and globalization - a country in which decentralized capitalism is sometimes filtered through a conservative, feudal worldview in which the boss is lord and the company is a "clan" to which one fully submits.

Japan was rebuilt following a Fordist capitalist framework, the economic acceleration brought with it turning the country into a superpower by the late 1970s.[13] This unexpected economic prosperity brought with it new personal and social ideals, starting from family life. Fordist Japan functioned following a home–school–work pipeline. The family unit is purpose was rearing children for them to be admitted to good schools which then turned into good career prospects. During the height of the bubble economy, employment was often a lifelong commitment to a singular company.[14] At this point, the feudal framework of the Edo period could be functionally

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[13] Anne Allison, "Ordinary Refugees: Social Precarity and Soul in 21st Century Japan" in *Anthropological Quarterly*, no. 2, vol. 85, 2012, pp. 345-370.

[14] Anne Allison, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

observed in the workplace. Men were loyal to their employers in exchange for financial stability which allowed their families to thrive on a single income. Needless to say, however, the cultural shift from an imperialist, militant culture to one which seeks economic development and the accumulation of capital above all else was quite drastic, plunging many people into a sense of confusion about their country's (and most importantly, their own) identity.

As such, before analyzing contemporary issues caused by the widening gap between social expectations and individual social performance, it is important to witness the crumbling of imperial Japan's long-standing stability and the effects it has on how individuals view themselves concerning the ever-changing surrounding world. In this sense, Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima stand out as two contrasting yet surprisingly similar figures in Japanese literary culture, who perfectly illustrate the country's identity crisis in their works *No Longer Human* (*Ningen Shikkaku*, 1948) and *Confessions of a Mask* (*Kamen no Kokuhaku*, 1949).

Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human* follows the life of Oba Yozo, a man who, from his very childhood, struggles to fit in with his peers. The novel's main theme is severe alienation and despair. It is a semi-autobiographical work that mirrors Dazai's internal struggle. The very first lines of Yozo's journal set the tone for the entire novel: "Mine has been a life of much shame. I cannot even guess myself what it must be to live the life of a human being".[15] The Japanese title, *Ningen Shikkaku*, which has proven difficult to translate over the years, has the literal meaning of "disqualified from humanity". As we have analyzed before, the word *ningen* bears a nuance unique to the Japanese language. By viewing this title through the lens of Watsuji's ethics of interpersonal relationships, we can understand that Oba Yozo is not just "no longer human", but entirely barred from the social interaction that contributes to the creation of the self. In a sense, the protagonist is empty, his *tatemae* does not mask anything because the *honne* does not exist (as in, he does not understand it himself). From early childhood, Oba Yozo creates a mask of buffoonery to fit in with those around him, be it within the family or at school, a technique he calls "clowning".[16] This is Yozo's *tatemae*, an agreeable façade created to distract others from the utter emptiness and weakness that lies

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[15] Osamu Dazai, *No Longer Human*, New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1958, p. 21.

[16] Osamu Dazai, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

behind it. Keeping up perfect *tatemae* is taxing for the boy, who has a complete mental breakdown at the thought of being discovered by one of his classmates who accuses him of merely pretending. Later in life, the mask of the buffoon becomes ineffective, as it is a form of *tatemae* mainly adopted by children who are expected to be clownish by those around them. Once the social expectations of serious adulthood start weighing down on the young man, he becomes a social outcast. His only coping mechanisms are promiscuity, substance abuse and the longing to end his own life, an escape which he is denied time and time again. In the end, Oba Yozo is confined to a mental institution in which he languishes for the rest of his life, stuck in a disconnected limbo created specifically for social rejects such as him – as Michel Foucault puts it in his study *Madness and Civilization*, the asylum is "a world of judgment that envelops him on all sides".[17]

Oba Yozo illustrates a feeling of placelessness that permeates post-war Japan. Dazai's character is an example of disenfranchised youth, damned to wander aimlessly in a society that rejects him. Without a war that feeds on the lives of these young men, they are instead forced to attempt to find a place for themselves in a new, radically different culture. Dazai himself was excused from the draft upon being diagnosed with tuberculosis, contributing to his real-life isolation and detachment from Japan's cultural ideals. Several of Dazai's suicide attempts are mirrored in *No Longer Human*, a novel that could be considered a lengthy, veiled suicide note, as the author ended his own life in the same year it was published.

Yukio Mishima is a significantly controversial figure in Japan's literary history. Known for his highly introspective and poetic body of work, Mishima is probably more well known for his failed coup attempt and subsequent suicide by *seppuku* in 1970. Mishima lives on in the minds of many as an undeniably *macho* man, an excentric imperialist who was idealistic to a fault. However, as his novel *Confession of a Mask* reveals, this outward image might have been a constructed coping mechanism, a mask hiding weakness, regrets and insecurities.

The novel follows the life of a boy named Kochan in an autobiographical style. Reflecting Mishima's childhood, the narrator reveals the struggles of being physically sickly and weak during the war. Unable to fit in alongside

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[17] Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization – A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, New York: Vintage Books, 1988, p. 267

his peers, Kochan is withdrawn and lonely, developing an obsession with violence, death and the male body. Mishima uses this character to explore his own homosexual tendencies, which are masked throughout the book under the guise of masculinity. Kochan strives to explain his attraction towards members of the same sex as an aesthetic appreciation of the strong male form and the ideal of power it expresses. Throughout his life, Kochan (just as the author did) strives to encompass this male ideal. Here we discover a fundamental disconnect between *honne* and *tatemae*. While the protagonist's homosexuality is undeniable to the reader, his endless attempts to justify this attraction as anything but sexual in nature prove that, outwardly, the character is permanently trying to portray himself as heterosexual following the societal expectations of that time. His failed attempts at a genuine relationship with the girl named Sonoko also serve as a sort of cover for the truth – Kochan would never feel truly fulfilled in a heterosexual relationship.

After reading *Confessions*, Mishima's explosive masculinity and imperialist antics strike us as clear attempts to compensate for hidden insecurities. The artist had chiseled his mind and body into a perfect mask, what he perceived as the pinnacle of Japanese masculinity. However, by the 1970s that ideal was long gone. American Fordist influence created a new ideal for the Japanese man – the salaryman, father, provider and productive asset for his company. As such, at the time of his failed coup, Mishima's *tatemae* resembled a specter of the past, the figure of a man left behind by a society that had already undergone a radical identity shift. Mishima's alienation was twofold and, as such the only option seemed to be suicide, as was the case for many.

Suicide in Japan, the Poswar Period and the Lost Decade

In her study about the ongoing mental health crisis taking place in Japan, Suzanne Hall Vogel inserts a graph displaying the country's suicide statistics between 1947 and 2010.[18]

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[18] Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, *Jikou doutai toukei* (Vital Statistics) apud. Suzanne Hall Vogel, *op. cit.*, p. 694.
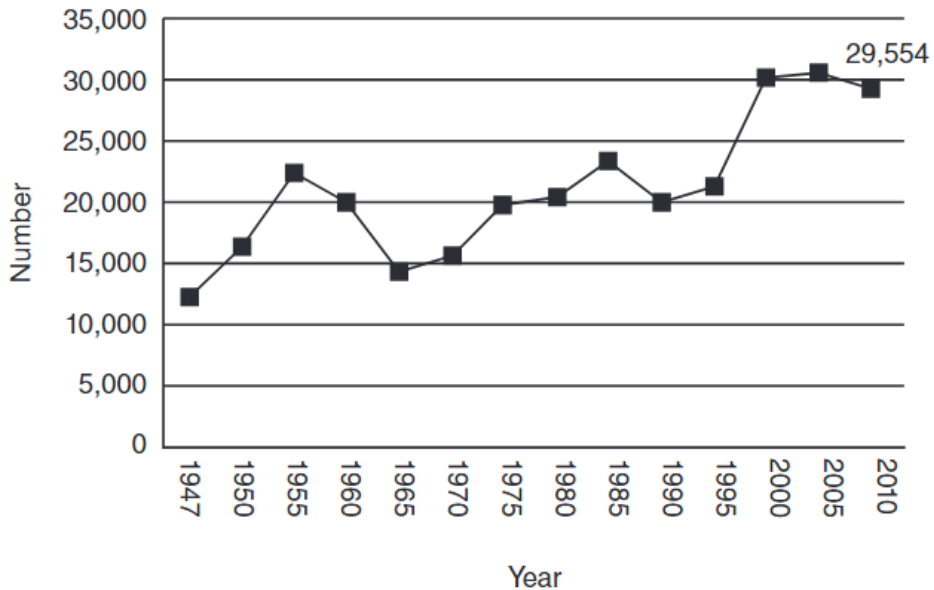
Figure 1: Japanese suicide statistics, 1947-2010

The graph allows us to easily discern the periods of cultural, social and economic turmoil in the country's postwar history. The years immediately following the war and the American occupation presented a sudden spike in suicides, culminating in 1955. The shock of Japan's defeat, the poor conditions of a country in the process of recovery and the new cultural ideals imposed upon the population seem to be the leading factors behind the spike, alienation being at an all-time high. The suicide rate begins to plummet while the bubble economy persists, as Japan's miracle recovery brings with it prosperity for the population. An upward trend gradually emerges as instability forms in the new, unsustainable economic system and, as the bubble eventually pops, the suicide rate spikes dramatically during the 1990s and early 2000s, a period of unprecedented economic recession that shook Japan's newly created social expectations – a period dubbed The Lost Decade.
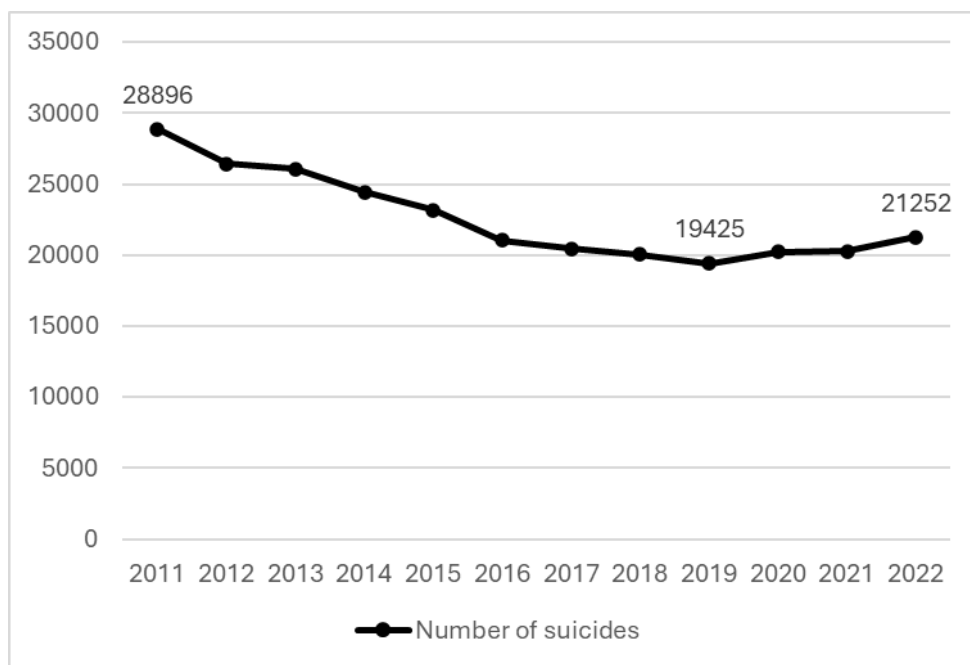
Figure 2: Japanese suicide statistics, 2011-2022[19]

In the past decade, Japan's suicide rate has shown a steady downward trend, while still being relatively high when compared to the period of economic prosperity. Beginning in 2020, a new upward trend emerged, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic and the loneliness epidemic it brought along with it. Nowadays, Japan is struggling to balance a relatively high suicide rate (when compared to the rest of the world), its aging population and a dwindling birthrate – issues with deep roots in a disconnect between social expectations from the generations that grew up in prosperity and the frustrating inability of new generations to replicate their success.

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[19] Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, *Jikou doutai toukei* (Vital Statistics) 2011-2022, [https://www.e-stat.go.jp/en/stat-search/files?page=1&layout=datalist&toukei=00450011&tstat=000001028897&cycle=7&tclass1=000001053058&tclass2=000001053061&tclass3=000001053065&tclass4val=0], 15 May 2024.

Placelessness and Precarity in Contemporary Japan

Anthropologist Anne Allison dedicates her study *Ordinary Refugees: Social Precarity and Soul in 21ˢᵗ Century Japan* to exposing the way that the socio-economic precarity that resulted from the bursting of the bubble and the pressure of outdated social expectations create and maintain unhealthy, lonely, marginalized groups of people that are unable or unwilling to become socially integrated in contemporary Japan. She uses the term "precariat", borrowed from social activist Amamiya Karin to refer to workers in precarious employment conditions under the ever-growing instability brought on by the rise of flexible labor and the deregulation of the market economy.[20] The lifelong employment that was taken for granted during the bubble economy is not guaranteed nowadays. A vast number of (mostly young) people in Japan work part-time or as contractors with inadequate wages and little to no benefits or healthcare. These market conditions force young people away from the expected (and often promised) path of stable employment that would allow them to start and maintain their own families, leading to one of Japan's most pressing issues – the dwindling birthrate and aging population.

2006 was the first year since 1945 in which deaths outnumbered births in Japan – not an outlier, mind you, but "the harbinger of a new national norm."[21] Japan is undergoing *shoushikoureika* (falling birthrate, aging population). Returning to Goffman's theory of social performance, it can be argued that the roles that society expects people to perform are becoming increasingly difficult (for some, even impossible) to do so. Nowadays, it is increasingly difficult for a man to be the sole breadwinner. Women also aren't constrained to being housewives and have the option to pursue a career if they so desire. The socio-economic landscape has undeniably shifted and, as such, the rules of the performance have changed along with it. However, the culturally ingrained conservative tendencies and the pressure from older peers (sometimes within the family) clash with Japan's new reality, leaving some to perceive themselves as disappointments for failing to meet impossible expectations, choosing instead to withdraw from the social "stage". Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro develops the

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[20] Anne Allison, *op. cit.*, p. 349.
[21] Nicholas Eberstadt, "Japan Shrinks" in *The Wilson Quarterly*, no. 2, vol. 36, 2012, pp. 30-37.

idea of *basho*, the "place" as a spatial context for interpersonal relationships in which Watsuji's "betweenness of person and person" takes place.[22] In her study, Anne Allison points out a sign of the times that shows the state of Japan's precarious youth – the phrase *ibasho ga nai* ("without a place to call home") has become a sort of slogan, a phrase that directly contradicts the typical framework of interpersonal relationships which requires interaction and a context, actors and a stage.[23] This cry for help shows that the stable Fordist social framework is crumbling in post-Fordist Japan, leaving many feeling disenfranchised and bereft of a sense of belonging.

Hikikomori (shut-ins) are people who withdraw in isolation to "avoid facing failure, rejection or social disapproval".[24] Faced with the pressure of public perception, *hikikomori* choose to completely avoid others. They do not construct *tatemae* as they do not need it. They mirror, in a sense, Osamu Dazai's character – people deprived of the social interaction implied by the word *ningen*. In their case, however, the withdrawal is, at least initially, voluntary. Suzanne Hall Vogel and many other psychologists acknowledge the phenomenon of *hikikomori* as a full-blown mental disorder resulting from an unhealthy cultural obsession with saving face. Vogel points out that many parents of *hikikomori* choose to allow them to live in isolation without attempting to seek help to "hide their shame".[25] In this aspect, willing parents of *hikikomori* wear a specific social mask – they present a false reality by essentially pretending their child does not exist. In their eyes, it is better to not engage with society at all than to be a disappointment, an overbearing pressure that causes many people to become *hikikomori* in the first place.

While *hikikomori* tend to be mostly male, Japanese women have their own issues in the current socio-cultural climate, mostly relating to the balance between marriage, a career and the social expectations brought on by both. Traditionally, Japan's marriages were predominantly arranged (*miai*) until 1970, when "love" marriages (*renai kekkon*) first overtook traditional matchmaking.[26] Proving a new cultural constant, by 2005 only 6%

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[22] Steve Odin, "Models of the Social Self in Modern Japanese Philosophy and G. H. Mead's American Pragmatism" in *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy*, no. 3, vol. 15, 1994, pp. 241-255.

[23] Anne Allison, *op. cit.* p. 352.

[24] Suzanne Hall Vogel, *op. cit*., p. 691.

[25] *Ibidem*.

[26] Nicholas Eberstadt, *op. cit*., p. 32.

of marriages were arranged. With a newfound independence, women became free to also pursue careers, allowing them to sit on a more even footing culturally, socially and economically with their male counterparts. However, this freedom also gave way to new anxieties, indecisiveness and self-doubts brought on by the ever-present social pressure of traditional gender roles. In the context of *shoushikoureika*, some women might even feel a sense of guilt or responsibility for the future of the country. These anxieties point to a mismatch between women's freedom of choice (*honne*) and the conservative social and cultural traditions they are often expected to follow (*tatemae*).

Not unlike how Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima's novels illustrate Japan's postwar identity crisis, a new wave of feminist literature that exposes the reality of being a woman in contemporary Japan has emerged in the past decades. Among a wide range of authors, Sayaka Murata's body of work stands out as funny, stern and unapologetic as she explores the grotesque depths of the Japanese female condition. Her most famous novel is *Convenience Store Woman* (*Konbini Ningen*, 2016), a work that perfectly illustrates the conflict between *honne* and *tatemae* and the problems it causes for individuals. The novel follows Keiko Furukura, a thirty-six-year-old woman who works part-time at a convenience store with no intention to quit. She is constantly pressured by her family, friends and colleagues to either seek a full-time job or to find a husband. The protagonist's uncommon age and occupation are making others uncomfortable, as she is choosing not to perform the role that is expected of her in contemporary society. Keiko eventually meets a man named Shiraha, a social outcast and deviant who is unable to hold down a job. They decide to move in together and pretend to date in order to appease those around them by creating an illusion of normalcy (*tatemae*). Shiraha becomes a *hikikomori*, fully supported by Keiko. The man eventually convinces her to quit her job at the convenience store to find a higher-paying full-time job. This causes Keiko to spiral into a deep depression, realizing that she feels purposeless unless she works at a *konbini*, which she returns to in the end. *Convenience Store Woman* is a biting commentary on the way that Japanese society treats those it deems "out of place". Murata's protagonist is the perfect outcast, a single woman in her late thirties working a dead-end part-time job usually done by high school or college students - what some might call a "parasite single". However, the

author shows that conforming to social norms and expectations while disregarding one's values and ideals is painful and pointless. It is not that Keiko does not want to fit in – she attempts to – but she quickly realizes that it is destroying her life. *Convenience Store Woman* makes a powerful statement - it is always better to pursue personal well-being, even if it means going "off-script" and disregarding the role that society expects of you.

Sayaka Murata's *Earthlings* (*Chikyuu Seijin*, 2018) is *Convenience Store Woman*'s darker counterpart. Murata approaches a similar topic, the alienation of the "atypical" woman in contemporary Japan through the story of Natsuki, a woman in her mid-thirties who is plagued by the childhood trauma of sexual abuse. She develops the delusion of being a witch from a distant planet (mimicking her cousin's childhood stories) as a coping mechanism for why she feels unable to fit in with the normal "earthlings". Much like Dazai's protagonist, Natsuki feels like a (literal) alien in human society. She also ties a loveless sham marriage with a man named Tomoya, whom she meets online. Fake marriage is a recurring theme in Murata's work proving that, even though nowadays women are free to remain single if they wish, the social pressure is often unbearable. Murata's protagonists feel the need to renounce their unapologetic authenticity and display a *tatemae* of traditional normalcy to escape the endless harassment of parents, siblings or colleagues. This phenomenon is undoubtedly common outside of Japan's literary fiction. Many people are unable to withstand the pressure of their peers and feel forced to play the role of someone they don't want to be, leading to a plethora of mental health issues.

Conclusions

Approaching the topic of Japan's ongoing identity crisis and the socio-cultural and economic ramifications it has through the lens of Erving Goffman's theory of social performance, we can observe that, historically, many of the country's severe mental health issues have been related to a fundamental disconnect between social expectations and the impossibility to live up to them. Going back to its Confucianist roots, Japan's cultural propensity for unyielding loyalty fails to function in today's post-Fordist socio-economic framework. However, considering the country's rapidly aging population, fundamental shifts in worldview prove difficult to

manifest. Japan's youth is struggling to fit into a conservative society that has certain demands and expectations that might be unattainable for some. A permanent internal conflict between the social roles one is expected to perform (*tatemae*) and their true circumstances, opinions and intentions (*honne*) create a culture of shame, in which people feel forced to act in an inauthentic manner to save face outwardly (while hurting on an individual level).

This begs the question, what happens when everyone is pretending to be someone they're not? Is the creation of the self, in Goffman and Watsuji's views, truly possible when the actor and the role are so fundamentally different? While the mask has traditionally allowed the performer to temporarily embody a "wholly other", social actors are not empty vessels to be possessed by gods or demons, but beings with their private sensibilities. While a certain level of inauthentic performativity is to be expected during day-to-day social interaction, the rigid rules and expectations of the Japanese workplace, schools or even family units create a fundamental disconnect that leaves the individual feeling alienated and empty. The *honne* is often viewed as something flawed and shameful, meant to be hidden away for fear of causing discomfort in others while upkeeping perfect *tatemae* is to be expected. As we have seen, one of the best outlets for *honne* is art such as confessional literature, which often plunges the reader into the murky and complex reality that hides behind Japan's orderly mask. One can only hope that younger generations can eventually overcome the past's conservative tendencies and create a new culture that's not based on appearances but on inclusivity and authenticity.

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