



## ROMANTICIZATION OF ISLANDS IN MODERN JAPAN: A STUDY OF IZU OSHIMA IN 1933 MODERN JAPONYA'DA ADALARIN ROMANTİKLEŞTİRİLMESİ: 1933'TE IZU OSHIMA'NIN BİR ÇALIŞMASI

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Sayı 5, ss., 12-15.

Makale Türü: Araştırma Makalesi

Geliş Tarihi: 30.03.2024

Kabul Tarihi: 16.06.2024

Değerlendirme: Çift Taraflı Kör Hakemlik

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İntihal Denetimi: Yapıldı. (İntihalnet)

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Issue 5, pp., 12-15.

Article Type: Research Article

Submitted: 30.03.2024

Accepted: 16.06.2024

Evaluation: Double-Blind Review

Ethics Declaration: lisaniyatstudies@gmail.com

Plagiarism Check: Done. (İntihalnet)

Ethics Statement: This study does not require ethics committee approval, and the data used was obtained through a literature review/published sources. It is hereby declared that scientific and ethical principles were adhered to throughout the preparation, and all references are cited in the bibliography.

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Atıf Bilgisi / Reference Information:

MATSUDA, Y. (2025) ROMANTICIZATION OF ISLANDS IN MODERN JAPAN: A STUDY OF IZU OSHIMA IN 1933, *Lisaniyat Studies Uluslararası Filoloji Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 5, 12-15.

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### Abstract

This paper explores the romantic image of islands in modern Japan through the lens of two female writers, Akiko Yosano and Fumiko Hayashi, and their essays on Izu Oshima in 1933. The focus is on how the island of Izu Oshima, characterized by its volcanic landscape and social context, emerged as a site of both tourism and tragedy, following a surge in suicides at Mt. Mihara. The research highlights the contrasting perceptions of isolation and subjectivity that islands held in Japanese culture and examines the emotional and cultural projections placed upon the island by its visitors. By analyzing the works of Yosano and Hayashi, this study seeks to understand the island's dual role as a space of both nostalgia and death, and how these themes resonate with broader cultural and historical contexts in Japan.

**Keywords:** Izu Oshima, Romanticization of islands, Isolation, Nostalgia and death, Mt. Mihara

### Özet

Bu makale, modern Japonya'da adaların romantik imgesini, 1933'te Izu Oshima hakkında yazan iki kadın yazar, Akiko Yosano ve Fumiko Hayashi'nin eserleri üzerinden incelemektedir. Çalışmada, volkanik manzarası ve sosyal bağlamıyla öne çıkan Izu Oshima adasının, Mt. Mihara'daki intihar dalgasının ardından nasıl hem turizm hem de trajedi mekânı olarak ortaya çıktığı ele alınmaktadır. Araştırma, Japon kültüründe adaların yalnızlık ve bağımlılık açısından nasıl algılandığını ve ziyaretçilerin adaya yüklediği duygusal ve kültürel yansımaları vurgular. Yosano ve Hayashi'nin eserlerini analiz ederek, bu çalışmada adanın hem nostalji hem de ölümle ilişkilendirilen bir mekân olarak nasıl iki yönlü bir rol oynadığı ve bu temaların Japonya'nın daha geniş kültürel ve tarihi bağlamlarıyla nasıl örtüştüğü incelenmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Izu Oshima, Adaların romantizasyonu, İzolasyon, Nostalji ve ölüm, Mt. Mihara



## Introduction

This research began with a personal fascination with islands, which are often depicted in literature and popular culture as exotic, romanticized spaces. Japan, with its 14,125 islands, offers a unique cultural lens through which the concept of islands can be explored. This paper investigates the construction of romanticized island imagery in modern Japan, focusing on the essays of two female writers, Akiko Yosano and Fumiko Hayashi, who traveled to Izu Oshima in 1933. These essays provide insight into how islands are imagined as isolated yet culturally rich spaces, and how this isolation simultaneously preserves traditional culture while reinforcing their dependency on the mainland. Through the analysis of Yosano and Hayashi's works, this study aims to understand the emotional and cultural projections that these women placed upon the island, particularly in relation to the tourism boom and the tragic wave of suicides at Mt. Mihara in 1933.

Islands have long captivated the human imagination, often serving as the setting for adventure, fantasy, and exoticism in literature and art. In Japan, this fascination with islands is deeply rooted in the nation's geography and cultural history. The country comprises 14,125 islands, as officially announced by the Geospatial Information Authority of Japan in 2022, although the previously accepted number was 6,852, based on earlier surveys by the Japan Coast Guard. This paper seeks to explore how modern Japan constructed the romanticized image of islands, particularly in the context of Izu Oshima during the early 20th century.

The image of islands in Japanese culture is dualistic: on the one hand, they are seen as isolated, remote places, often associated with backwardness, conservativeness, and exclusivity; on the other hand, they are viewed as treasuries of cultural heritage, preserving traditions that have been lost on the mainland. This dichotomy is explored through the lens of two female writers, Akiko Yosano and Fumiko Hayashi, who visited Izu Oshima in 1933 during a tourism boom and at a time when the island had gained notoriety as a site for suicides, particularly at Mt. Mihara, its active volcano.

## Literature Review

The geographical and cultural significance of islands in Japan has been the subject of much academic inquiry. Satoru Tanabe, an ethnologist, emphasizes the "isolated stance" of islands, pointing out their "closedness, conservativeness, backwardness, and exclusivity" (Tanabe, 2015, p. 9). These characteristics are not purely negative, as islands are also seen as repositories of cultural elements that have been forgotten or lost on the mainland. Due to their isolation, islands preserve aspects of traditional culture, making them valuable from a historical and anthropological perspective. However, this notion of islands as cultural treasuries is contingent upon their relationship with the mainland, which is more developed and often exerts socio-economic influence over the islands.

Hajime Omura, a geographer, defines islands in *Geography of Island: Introduction to Island Geography* (1959) as "lands environed by the sea" (p. 7), but he also argues that islands only exist in relation to a mainland that is larger than themselves. This suggests that islands are defined not only by their physical isolation but also by their connection to and dependence on the mainland. Tsuneichi Miyamoto, an ethnologist who was born on an island in the Seto Inland Sea, conducted extensive research on the islands of Japan in the 1950s, which he published in *Island in Japan* (1969). Miyamoto was critical of the romanticization of islands, arguing that people settled on islands out of necessity, not romanticism. He emphasized the socio-economic dependence of islands on the mainland, describing them as isolated yet inextricably linked to larger economic and social systems.

## Historical Context of Izu Oshima

Izu Oshima, the largest of the Izu Islands, is located off the coast of Tokyo. The island has a long history, with settlement dating back to the 7th century. However, from the medieval era to the 18th century, the island was primarily known as a place of exile. In the 19th century, with the advent of steamships, Izu Oshima became more accessible to tourists, particularly after the Tokyo Bay Steamship Company began offering



regular service between Tokyo and the island in 1906. This increased accessibility, coupled with the island's scenic beauty, led to a tourism boom in the early 20th century.

One of the main attractions on the island is Mt. Mihara, an active volcano that holds cultural and religious significance for the local population, who refer to it as "Gojinka-sama" or the God of Fire. In the 1920s, the island's tourism infrastructure was developed, with trails leading to the crater and camel rides introduced on the black sand surrounding the volcano. By 1932, the island had become a popular tourist destination, attracting over 82,000 visitors. In 1933, this number more than doubled to 194,293, marking the peak of what is now referred to as the "first island boom" in Japan.

However, the island's reputation took a dark turn in 1933 when a female student from Tokyo committed suicide by throwing herself into the crater of Mt. Mihara. This incident, sensationalized by the media, led to a wave of suicides, with 129 people taking their lives at the volcano that year. The phenomenon of suicide at Mt. Mihara became a subject of public fascination, particularly in women's magazines, which romanticized the idea of suicide in the crater as a feminine act of passion and despair. Sakimori Kon, a sociologist, argues that the media played a significant role in transforming Izu Oshima into an "island of death" by sensationalizing these tragic events (Kon, 1994, pp. 7-10).

#### **Akiko Yosano's Travel Essay on Izu Oshima**

Akiko Yosano, a prominent poet, visited Izu Oshima in 1933 with her family and documented her experience in an essay titled "Leisure in Oshima," published in *Fuyugashiwa*. Yosano's account of her visit reflects the dual nature of the island as both a romanticized and melancholic space. She describes the natural beauty of the island, particularly the camellias and cherry blossoms that were in full bloom during her visit. Yosano also notes the volcanic landscape, drawing comparisons between the black sand surrounding Mt. Mihara and the deserts of Mongolia, which she had visited the previous year.

Yosano's essay also touches on the tragic suicides at Mt. Mihara, particularly the death of the female student in February 1933. She writes a tanka poem that appears to be addressed to those who took their lives at the volcano: "Is there a god of Mihara in the fire? And did you become a flower of camellia?" (Yosano, 1933, p. 417). The imagery of the camellia, a flower known for its fragility, serves as a metaphor for the fleeting nature of life and beauty. Yosano's romanticization of the suicides at Mt. Mihara reflects a broader cultural trend of idealizing death, particularly in relation to young women. Despite this, Yosano concludes her essay by praising Izu Oshima as a unique and beautiful destination that should be more widely publicized as a tourist attraction.

#### **Fumiko Hayashi's Travel Essay on Izu Oshima**

Fumiko Hayashi, a novelist, also visited Izu Oshima in 1933. Unlike Yosano, Hayashi's initial impressions of the island were less favorable. In her essay, she describes her disappointment upon arriving at the island, noting that the harbor was "dreary" and that the camellias and island girls in traditional costume did not evoke the "fleeting beauty" she had anticipated (Hayashi, 1958, pp. 91-92). Hayashi visited Mt. Mihara but expressed little sentimentality about the suicides, stating that she did not feel the "urge to jump in" (p. 93).

Despite her initial detachment, Hayashi's emotional connection to the island grew over the course of her visit. She was particularly moved by her experience at Habu Harbor, which reminded her of her hometown in the Seto Inland Sea. Hayashi wrote a poem expressing her desire to die in a beautiful place like Habu rather than at Mt. Mihara: "Opening my lids and I became the fire / Feeling my tears burning myself" (p. 97). By the end of her trip, Hayashi had developed a deep emotional attachment to the island, describing it as an ideal place for death, where the beauty of nature provided a sense of peace and closure.

#### **Conclusion**

The essays of Akiko Yosano and Fumiko Hayashi offer contrasting yet complementary perspectives on Izu Oshima, reflecting the complex cultural and emotional significance of islands in modern Japan. For Yosano, the island represented both a romanticized space and a site of tragic beauty, where the fragility of life was symbolized by the camellias and the suicides at Mt. Mihara. In contrast, Hayashi's initially detached view of



the island gave way to a deeper emotional connection, particularly in her reflections on Habu Harbor. Both authors projected their personal emotions and cultural ideals onto the island, illustrating how islands serve as spaces for the projection of both nostalgia and death. This romanticization of islands, as both isolated and dependent on the mainland, continues to shape the cultural imagination of Japan's islands today.

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