The One-Armed Witness: The Dialectics of Memory and National History in Shigeru Mizuki's *Showa*

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Abstract: Shigeru Mizuki's four, volume series *Showa: A History of Japan (Komikku Shwa shi)* stands as a monumental synthesis of personal memoir and rigorous historiography. This paper contends that Mizuki employs his autobiography not only as a narrative frame but also as a disruptive instrument to break down the "official" sanitized history of the Showa era (1926-1989). By a formal analysis of his "Dialectics of Realism" the contrast of cartoonish self, caricature with hyper, realistic historical backgrounds and a thematic investigation of his wartime trauma, this study discovers how Mizuki makes the "cancer" of militarism human. Pushing forward the viewpoint of the "lazy layabout, " the disabled veteran, and the struggling post, war artist, Mizuki constructs a counter, memorial that acknowledges lived experience rather than state, mandated ideology.

Keywords**: Japan, World Wars, Shigeru Mizuki, Dialectics, memoir**

Introduction

The era of Showa continues to be the most complicated and debated period of Japanese history. It lasted for 63 years and saw Japan change from a young democracy to a totalitarian military regime, go down the road of World War II, and later rise from the ashes like a phoenix to become an economic superpower. In general, people learn these events in Japanese schools through the perspective of "unavoidable" tragedy or economic triumph, which usually do not reveal the brutal side of the institutions much. Nevertheless, Shigeru Mizuki (1922-2015) does not abide by this. In Showa, the two histories, the nation's and the individual's, are one and the same. Mizuki's memoir is a "living heartbeat" which runs under the cold lines of dates, treaties, and battles. By making his imperfect, and often humorous, character a part of the big story, Mizuki turns the history lesson into a real, life event which you can actually feel. This article focuses on the autobiographical elements of Mizuki, such as childhood folklore, military abuse, loss of his arm, and post, war struggle, through which he not only opposes but also undermines the showa regime.

Formal Subversion: The Dialectics of Realism

Mizuki's visual style does more than just tell his story—it is his most powerful autobiographical tool. In Showa, he leans into what critics call the Dialectics of Realism, a method that throws together two clashing artistic languages. This clash echoes the tension between the single person and the vast machinery of the state. First, there is the Caricatured "I." Mizuki draws himself, his family, and his friends as simple, exaggerated cartoons. His alter ego, "Gege," pops up with big round eyes and a constant look of confusion. There is nothing heroic here. Instead, you see vulnerability and flaws—he looks like anyone, not some war hero. This isn't just for show. The cartoonish style strips away pretense. Readers can step right into his shoes, feeling his hunger, anxiety, and exhaustion. It is a trick that makes his emotions open and accessible. At the same time, Mizuki uses these caricatures to poke fun at his younger self. He does not

hide his naiveté during the rise of fascism. There is a sense of honesty—almost self-mockery—that keeps things real.

Then, against this, comes the Hyper-Realistic "World." The settings—the Diet building, warships, cities on fire—look uncannily real. Mizuki based many of these backgrounds on archival photos, layering on dense cross-hatching and careful shading. The detail feels almost photographic. This sharp contrast is the heart of Mizuki's critique. When his cartoon self stumbles through a battlefield rendered in painstaking detail, it is jarring. The ordinary person looks lost and out of place next to the cold machinery of war. The realistic background stands in for official, unfeeling history. The cartoon figure, meanwhile, is the beating heart—messy, scared, alive. Put together, the contrast forces you to see just how overwhelming and indifferent history can be, and how easily it crushes the individual trying to survive inside it.

Pre-War Life: Folklore as Philosophical Resistance

The first volumes of Showa drop us right into Mizuki's early days in Sakaiminato, a coastal town where his story begins to split from the mainstream. Instead of letting Imperial ideology define him, Mizuki builds a different sense of self—one grounded in local tradition and the supernatural.

1. Nonnonba, Yōkai, and an Alternative Imagination

Mizuki's childhood really orbited around Nonnonba, the old woman next door who opened the world of yōkai—Japanese spirits and monsters—for him. This was not just kid stuff. Through her stories, he learned a whole different way of seeing things: a "counter-aesthetic." The yōkai are wild, irrational, and ancient, tangled up with the natural world in a way that is messy and alive.

At the same time, Japan was marching toward a strict, modern nationalism, obsessed with discipline and rationality. But Mizuki found refuge in his fascination with spirits. He points out, "you only see yōkai in times of peace," suggesting the supernatural and the militaristic cannot exist side by side. By focusing on this otherworldly obsession, Mizuki paints his young self as a born outsider—someone whose imagination could not be boxed in by state propaganda.

2. The "Lazy Layabout" Stands Apart from the Machine

Mizuki does not sugarcoat his struggles with the so-called real world. He admits he was a bad student, a "lazy layabout," much happier with food and daydreams than work. But he is not just poking fun at himself—there is a purpose to the honesty. In 1930s Japan, everyone was supposed to become a "human resource" for the military-industrial system. By openly embracing his "uselessness," Mizuki pushes back. He insists that it is okay not to be another gear in the empire's endless machine.

The Descent: Militarism as an Internal Cancer

As the story shifts into the late 1930s and early 1940s, you can feel the bigger storms of politics and war creeping into Mizuki's family life. There is this growing clash between his family's struggle to make ends meet and the country's drive toward militarization.

1. The Corruption of the Ordinary

Look at Mizuki's father. He is not chasing after imperial dreams—he just wants to put food on the table during Japan's economic slump. So, he tries his luck in Java. Mizuki tells this family story to show how regular people, who are not motivated by some grand ideology, still get pulled into the empire's web because they are desperate for a way out. The promise of opportunity overseas makes ordinary citizens complicit in Japan's expansion, even if that is not what they wanted.

2. Conscription and the Breaking of the Body

Then comes 1942. Mizuki gets drafted, and he says it is the moment his life splits in two. He does not paint the Imperial Army as a place for honour—he shows it as a place where something inside you breaks.

He describes the "slapping culture," this almost ritualized violence where superiors beat recruits repeatedly.

This is not just a personal story—it is Mizuki pushing back against the official version of history. Instead of tales about brave soldiers fighting enemies overseas, he looks at the violence the army turned inward, on its own men. This brutality was supposed to build warriors for the Emperor, but Mizuki shows it only stripped them of their humanity. The trauma he suffered in training—the slap that took his hearing in one ear, the endless hunger—was just the beginning. It set him up for even greater dehumanization in the Pacific.

Rabaul: The Trauma of the Pacific War

Showa's story finds its core in Rabaul, Papua New Guinea. Here, the autobiography stops being just a war chronicle and turns into something raw—survival, disability, and a kind of cross-cultural humanity you don't see in most war stories.

Mizuki does not just recount the gyokusai—the so-called "shattered jewel" suicide charges—he tears them apart. He tells you point-blank: these were not acts of honour, but the outcome of bad leadership, of commanders who valued their own pride over their men's lives. Mizuki makes no secret of it—he wanted to live. Even when officers expected him to die, he clung to life, dodging malaria and bombardment. With every breath, he rejects the military's obsession with death.

Losing his left arm in an Allied air raid—this moment cuts through everything. In the manga, it is depicted without sentiment or gloss, just the brutal fact of it. That missing arm is a scar you cannot ignore; it's proof the war happened, that it didn't just ruin nations but marked real bodies.

This disability changes the story's direction. The Imperial Army wanted bodies that were whole, ready for sacrifice. So once Mizuki becomes disabled, he does not fit their narrative. The army discards him, and in that rejection, he finds his way back to himself. The missing arm becomes more than a wound—it is his argument, always there, silently challenging the system that sent him to die.

While he is piecing himself back together in a field hospital, Mizuki meets the Tolai people. Suddenly, he is not seen as some instrument of the Emperor, but as another human being who needs help. That changes everything.

He admits, honestly, that he thought about staying in Rabaul, marrying into the Tolai community. It is possibly the boldest move in the autobiography. For Mizuki, real belonging is not tied to a nation or an empire—it is found in the people around you. This moment does not just poke at Japan's colonial ambitions; it blows a hole in them by showing a real, equal relationship between the supposed colonizer and the colonized.

The Post-War Years: From Military to Economic Dehumanization

Mizuki's story shifts dramatically when he moves from the chaos of the Pacific theater to postwar Japan. The bombs stopped falling, but survival took on a new, quieter cruelty. Instead of dodging air raids, he faced the grind of daily hunger and the emptiness that came after defeat. Here, Mizuki doesn't just tell his own story—he calls out the so-called "Economic Miracle" for what it really was: a time when people felt just as drained, in body and spirit, as they had under the old military regime.

1. The Black-Market Era and the Hunger of Peace

When Mizuki came back to Japan in 1946, he found a country shattered. Hunger dominated everything. He paints a vivid picture of life in the black markets, where people fought over scraps—a single sweet potato could mean the difference between hope and despair, just like rations in the jungle. His old "lazy layabout" image changes too. During the war, not working hard was his quiet rebellion against authority. Now, in a ruined Japan, refusing to chase a "normal" job and choosing instead to become a kamishibai artist turned into another kind of resistance. He shows himself as a misfit, someone out of step with a society desperate

to rebuild and impress its American occupiers. His struggle as a "one-armed" man in a world obsessed with productivity and wholeness runs through the heart of his story—it is raw, and it hurts.

2. Kamishibai and Rental Manga: The Proletariat Artist

Mizuki's path through show business and manga is a living record of Japan's pop culture upheaval. He watched kamishibai fade out and rental manga rise. For him, these years are not just about art—they're about grinding labour. Even with just one arm, he worked himself ragged. He talks about those endless nights, his hand locking up from the strain, all while publishers demanded more, treating artists like factory parts. Manga was dismissed as junk in the 1950s—grown-ups called it poison for kids. Mizuki does not hide his poverty. He lived in a house that leaked, sometimes could not afford medicine for his kids. This is not just a sob story—it's a sharp look at the yawning gap between the country's shiny image of economic progress and the harsh reality for working artists.

3. The Economic Miracle as a Second War

When the 1960s rolled around, Japan's "Economic Miracle" kicked into gear. Mizuki was not impressed. He draws a straight line from the Imperial Army's suicide charges to the new world of overworked salarymen. The war ended, but the pressure did not. Instead of rifles, workers carried briefcases. Instead of army officers, they answered to CEOs. As Japan modernizes in his manga, Mizuki's life gets more hectic and cluttered. He is always on the run, hunted by "the ghosts of deadlines." He draws them with the same edge as the bombers over Rabaul. The way he draws changes too—backgrounds fill up with neon signs, consumer gadgets, endless city sprawl. Mizuki's cartoon self, though, just looks more drained and out of place with every page.

4. Marriage to Nunoe Mura: Survival Together

In the later volumes, Mizuki's marriage to Nunoe Mura adds a new layer to the Showa story. Through their relationship, he digs into the hidden costs women paid during this era. While the men rebuilt the economy, women held families together, absorbing all the leftover pain and poverty. Nunoe becomes the one who witnesses his nightmares—he often woke up shouting, trapped in memories of New Britain. Through her, Mizuki makes it clear: the war did not stop in 1945. It kept echoing through their home, haunting their nights.

The Return of the Spirits: Success and its Discontents

Mizuki's breakthrough with GeGeGe no Kitaro in the mid-1960s does more than make him famous—it quietly pokes at the spirit of the Showa era.

1. The Commercialization of the Yokai

Mizuki can't help but notice the irony: Once he is in the spotlight, the yokai he adored as a child turn into toys and merchandise. He calls his own celebrity a mask. Sure, fame solves his worries about finding his next meal—something he is always cared about—but at the same time, it pulls him away from the quiet, mysterious world of Nonnonba's stories.

In his autobiography, Mizuki insists that Japan's rush to modernize wiped out the "spiritual space" that yokai need to survive. As cities grew brighter and more concrete, the shadows—where spirits once hid—vanished. It is a sharp criticism: the so-called "Economic Miracle" built up bodies and cities, but left the imagination starving.

2. The "Souls of the War" (Sen'yū)

Even while Mizuki enjoys his popularity, he keeps returning to memories of his friends lost in war. He interrupts the upbeat narrative of his successful decades repeatedly to revisit the ghosts of Rabaul.

The Pilgrimages: Mizuki describes his journeys back to Papua New Guinea. These are not vacations. He treats them as sacred duties. In his writing, he talks with the spirits of old friends, apologizing for making it out alive when they did not—when they became, in his words, "shattered jewels."

The Responsibility of the Survivor: Mizuki does not see his career or his fame as something he earned alone. He calls it a "gift" from those who died. That gift comes with weight. He believes he must use his public

voice to tell the real story of Showa—one much grimmer and more honest than the one the government tries to broadcast.

The Narrator's Final Bow: Rat Man and the End of an Era

As the story moves into 1989—the year Emperor Hirohito dies and the Showa era closes—Mizuki finally ties his two threads together. First, there's Hirohito's death. Mizuki does not settle for easy answers. He paints the funeral in sharp, realistic strokes, letting us feel the weight of national mourning. Then he interrupts that quiet with his own voice, questioning what Hirohito really meant. For the state, Hirohito stood as a god. For Mizuki, he was the reason he lost his arm, the man whose name marked so many of his friends for death.

Then comes the ending, and Mizuki refuses to wrap things up neatly. He does not offer comfort. Instead, as Nezumi Otoko (Rat Man) quietly exits the story, we are left with Mizuki himself—older now, still sketching with his one good hand, refusing to let go. That "unvarnished perspective" he promised at the start? It is still there, raw and honest. The Showa years, he says, were a "grand madness." Japan survived, but the price—who can really measure it? His memoir becomes the final reckoning for that entire era.

So, what makes Showa hit harder than ordinary history books? Mizuki's graphic memoir does something prose rarely pulls off: it makes you feel time in your body. Manga lets him set the fragile, sometimes ridiculous shape of human life right next to the cold, brutal facts of history. The result is part archive, part confession—detailed, unsparing, and deeply personal.

Conclusion

Mizuki's autobiography stands out as the sharpest tool for critique because it refuses to play nice. He does not just talk about big ideas; he focuses on hunger, the missing arm, the slap, the lurking ghost. By doing this, he gives voice to the millions of regular people chewed up by the twentieth century's machinery. Mizuki was not just a chronicler of his times—he was the conscience of Showa Japan, using every scar and every memory to make sure the heartbeat of the past keeps echoing, no matter how much the powerful try to smooth it away.

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