

Strange Women:  
The Evaluation and Comparison of Female Characters in Akira Kurosawa's Films

A Senior Project  
presented to  
the Faculty of the History Department  
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Bachelor of Art

by

Alice Jang

December, 2017

© 2017 Alice Jang

### Strange Women:

#### The Evaluation and Comparison of Female Characters in Akira Kurosawa's Films

My mother was a typical woman of the Meiji era, Japan's age of swift modernization, during which women were still expected to make extreme sacrifices so that their fathers, husbands, brothers, or sons could advance. Beyond that, she was the wife of a military man. (Years later when I read the historical novelist Yamamoto Shugoro's *Nihon fudoki* [An Account of the Duties of the Japanese Woman]. I recognized my mother in these impossibly heroic creatures, and I was deeply moved.) In such a way as to escape my father's notice, she would listen to all my complaints. Writing about her like this makes it sound as if I am trying to set her up as a model for some moral tale. But that is not the case. She simply had such a gentle soul that she did these things naturally.

-Akira Kurosawa, 1982<sup>1</sup>

Akira Kurosawa uses these words to describe his mother in his memoir, *Something Like an Autobiography*. Throughout this memoir, his mother is depicted as a hero with stoic expressions and strong self-endurance. He portrays his mother as a "gentle soul"<sup>2</sup> who is under constant pressure from the demands of her military husband. To Kurosawa, his father was also a strong individual from a military background, a trait that would later show in Kurosawa's films. However, his mother was the backbone of the family. Even with life-changing events like World War II and the suicide of his brother, it is Kurosawa's mother who endures through with silence and provides Kurosawa with strength. He was inspired by her courage and fortitude to depict various types of women in his films. It is evident that many of the female leads in Kurosawa's films have been influenced by his mother's powerful presence and character.

As an acclaimed and successful filmmaker, Akira Kurosawa's earlier films focused on the reconstruction of Japan after World War II and the emergence of a new society influenced by the US Occupation forces. The majority of Kurosawa's films portray a male character struggling

---

<sup>1</sup> Akira Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, 21.

to create a new identity for himself or to break free from the current existence that hinder his full potential. However, while the female characters in Kurosawa's films support the main male lead and his inner battles, they are also a reflection of the changes women have undergone from prewar to postwar Japan.

Many historians agree that Akira Kurosawa's films have been androcentric as they focus on the development of identity and character of male protagonists. Film critic Sato Tadao has stated that there is "an established notion that Kurosawa is bad at depicting women. It is needless to cite such numerous statements, since [Kurosawa] has been broadly criticized in this manner."<sup>3</sup> In fact, the only films that feature women in leading roles are *The Most Beautiful* (1944) and *No Regrets for Our Youth* (1946), two films that were produced during the early stages of Kurosawa's filmmaking career. However, Asaumi Wakaba argues that these films were produced during and directly after World War II, a time in which male actors were short in supply and women comprised the bulk of the entertainment industry.<sup>4</sup> The focus of this paper is not to argue whether Kurosawa's films have been centered on male protagonists and their endeavors with life. Rather, the focus of this paper is to target the female characters in Kurosawa's films and how he has brought them to life in his films.

While the male characters in Kurosawa's films have been analyzed extensively, there is a focus on the subservience of this female characters. With the growing number of independent working women in a seemingly patriarchal society, it is important to study what has caused these women to break free from their traditional roles as housewife and mother. With historical roots that date back to the times of samurai, women were often regarded as property and their sole

---

<sup>3</sup> Sato Tadao, *Kurosawa Akira no Sekai* [The World of Kurosawa Akira], cited in Asaumi Wakaba, "Reclaiming Kurosawa Akira's Shakespearean Women" (Master's Thesis, San Jose State University, 1997), pg. 319

<sup>4</sup> Wakaba, 3.

purpose was to fulfill the wishes of their “master”, their husband. William R. Lindsey’s studies on gender and sexuality during the Tokugawa period reveal that women found themselves cast into roles of courtesan or housewife.<sup>5</sup> Women were expected to bear heirs to continue their husband’s bloodlines and a great amount of detail and attention were put into the fertility cycles of women. This notion about the roles of women in the structure of Japanese households carried on for many decades. Critics like Joan Mellen claim that Japanese women have “internalized the degrading cultural assessment of their value.”<sup>6</sup> In regard to their historical positions as subservient to their masters and husbands, it provided Kurosawa with the ideal foundation to portray women as more than an accessory to their husbands.

The life and work of Akira Kurosawa has inspired several works in both literature and film. In his biography of Kurosawa, Paul Anderer describes the events in Kurosawa’s life that caused him to build “narratives of ambition, destruction, survival, and rebirth.”<sup>7</sup> The cycle of ambition, destruction, survival, and rebirth are reflections of postwar Japan and their attempts at reconstructing their broken society and economy. Yet, Anderer explains that producers often prevented Kurosawa from creating films that expressed his views on postwar Japan. They objected to “sudden eccentricity, a leap across genre boundaries, excesses in the acting, a start/stop/start up again progression of the plot, the veering off into unforeseen direction.”<sup>8</sup> Kurosawa used real-life calamities and tragedies to make films that would make a statement to his audience and critics. Following these tragedies, many artists and producers were prepared to

---

<sup>5</sup> William R. Lindsey, *Fertility and Pleasure: Ritual and Sexual Values in Tokugawa Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 40.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Anne Lloyd, “Women in the Films of Kurosawa, 1940-1970,” *Pop Matters*, October 8, 2010, <http://www.popmatters.com/feature/131923-defining-the-most-beautiful/P0/2> (accessed May 25, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Paul Anderer, *Kurosawa’s Rashomon: A Vanished City, a Lost Brother, and the Voice Inside His Iconic Films* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Anderer, *Kurosawa’s Rashomon*, 5.

use what Arthur Danto termed “abuse beauty”<sup>9</sup>, a term that described artists’ use of expressive effects in their films to mask the catastrophes at hand. Unlike these artists, Kurosawa was prepared to test and exceed the predetermined rules of spreading awareness through narratives. Instead of producing films that offered comfort and nostalgia, Kurosawa’s aim was to create stories that would “make people shudder,”<sup>10</sup> much like how silent films affected him during his adolescence and childhood. Understanding Kurosawa’s childhood and upbringing is essential to comprehending the narratives to be produced throughout his lifetime and the depiction of his characters in his films.

The successes of Kurosawa’s films shaped and influenced Western views on Japan after World War II. In his work *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto interprets the relationship between Japan and the United States and how Kurosawa’s films have changed the relations between the two countries. He claims that Kurosawa is “regarded as the most Westernized Japanese director.”<sup>11</sup> Kurosawa is distinctly more Westernized than other producers when it comes to issues regarding the female stance in contemporary Japan. Through many of his films, Kurosawa used women to show that they were capable of being independent and self-sufficient. In fact, it corresponded with the growing role of women in the household after postwar Japan. This contradicted the Western belief that Japanese women were dependent on the male figures in their household. Kurosawa used his films to bring forward a new image of Japanese women during the Showa and Heisei Era. Through these female characters, Kurosawa set the foundation for women to grow a larger presence in Japanese society in both East Asian and Western views.

---

<sup>9</sup> Anderer, *Kurosawa’s Rashomon*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Anderer, *Kurosawa’s Rashomon*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 2.

When analyzing and interpreting Kurosawa's films, Stephen Prince's work *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* has been significant in my approach to breaking down his narratives. Kurosawa's reluctance to verbally describe the context of his films is well-known. He has always insisted that the underlying messages in his films can be interpreted through visual thinking.<sup>12</sup> Prince focuses on the diversity of Kurosawa's work and the logic of internal development, narrowing in on the social problems around which it is organized. While Prince touches upon many of Kurosawa's methodology and techniques used in his filmmaking, his work revolves around dissecting the methods Kurosawa used to construct political cinema pieces that gained recognition internationally. Prince claims that many have viewed Japanese society as "rigidly hierarchical"<sup>13</sup> and attributes this to a tradition of rebellion throughout Japanese history. However, Prince explains that Kurosawa's films, with their strong, rebellious protagonists transcends this hierarchical society. Prince's work is also integral to understanding the order of Japanese society and how Kurosawa's films have stimulated change from this order.

During my research on Kurosawa's female characters, Asaumi Wakaba's master's thesis on Kurosawa's "Shakespearean women" has been an invaluable piece of work. In her thesis, she analyzes the female characters from *The Throne of Blood* (1957) and *Ran* (1985) and how they have bridged the cultural gaps between the West and Japan. Her extensive research on the art of Noh supports her thesis as she breaks down the appropriation of the female characters in both films. She addresses the obstacles that Kurosawa had to face in the making of his films: cultural differences, period differences, and differences in film versus stage techniques.<sup>14</sup> While her

---

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Prince, *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), xviii.

<sup>13</sup> Prince, *The Warrior's Camera*, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Wakaba, "Reclaiming Kurosawa Akira's Shakespearean Women", 11.

thesis provides a thorough break down of the female characters from *The Throne of Blood* and *Ran*, her work is limited in that she does not go beyond these two films.

This paper will concentrate on the life of Akira Kurosawa and how the events in his life have influenced the development of his films. With a focus on the female characters in his films, I will analyze how his films have catalyzed the changing roles of Japanese women from traditional housewives and mothers to modern and independent working women in the contemporary era. I will also examine Kurosawa's views on World War II and the US Occupation of Japan after the war. When faced with censorship guidelines that promoted devotion to Japan during World War II, Kurosawa used individualism and self-reliance to represent the Japan that was suffering through the blows of devastation and desolation during wartime. His views of wartime censorship have inspired several works that dissect his attitudes towards the developing political and social environment of postwar Japan. Stephen Prince claims that "Kurosawa welcomed the changed political climate and sought to fashion films that would be responsive to it."<sup>15</sup>

Kurosawa's views on wartime censorship and policies tie in with his ever-changing female characters. While some of them are designed to be powerful and independent, other characters are submissive and obedient. The events that occur in postwar Japan have a significant influence on the way these women are fashioned in his films and how they provide support to the male protagonists. I will discuss the various types of women that are illustrated through Kurosawa's female characters and their roles in both the film and Japanese culture. I will outline the traits of every "strange woman" and how their characteristics reflect the various types on

---

<sup>15</sup> Prince, *The Warrior's Camera*, 28.

women in Japan. This paper will argue that Kurosawa's "strange women" left a legacy for females in contemporary Japan and fashioned a new role for women in a patriarchal society.

### **The Changing Roles of Women in Japanese Society**

The role of women in contemporary and ancient Japan can be divided into private and public spheres. In the private sphere, women are crucial to the upbringing of the children who will represent the country in the future. In contrast, the public sphere depicts Japanese women as secondary to their husbands and fathers due to the fact that they could not vote or hold equal rights until 1945. During the Edo Period (1608-1868), women were inferior to men. They could not own property and were subject to abuse from their fathers and husbands.<sup>16</sup> The Meiji Restoration had brought forth democratic reform in 19<sup>th</sup> century Japan. It officially called for the Japanese government to listen to public opinion and to terminate the hierarchical system. While this affected Japanese men greatly, there was little to no improvement on the status of Japanese women. There had been no attempts to define the position of women in the social structure of Japan. This was an exception to the other Meiji ideas that involved equal treatment for all citizens under the emperor. Instead, women during the Meiji Restoration were encouraged to become "wise mothers."<sup>17</sup> The Meiji wife's role in the home was to raise intelligent children and to obey the demands of her husband, the master of the household. At home, women were in charge of cooking, cleaning and taking care of her family.

During World War II, the status of women in Japanese society changed immensely. At the start of the war, almost 2 million men served in the Japanese forces. Towards the end, this

---

<sup>16</sup> Mikiso Hane, *Modern Japan: A Historical Perspective* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986), 36.

<sup>17</sup> Takashi Koyama, *The Changing Social Position of Women in Japan* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1961), 11



number had grown to 7 million.<sup>18</sup> With the majority of men removed from the industry, Japanese women found themselves working in factories and fields as well as taking care of household matters. As the men continued to fight the war, women were forced to take on the roles of both father and mother for their children. During this time, women were exposed to life outside of caretaking. This exposure brought forward new ways of thinking as women began to construct an attitude towards life that was not centered around men. However, this only affected the lives of women in their private spheres and did nothing to change the public notion that women were still dependent on the men in their lives.

Although World War II brought new opportunities for Japanese women, Western visitors could not recognize these changes. While the role of women in households had gradually begun to change, their statuses were still limited in legal rights. After the fall of the Axis Powers, the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers (SCAP), General Douglas MacArthur announced reforms for the country of Japan. These reforms included granting equal rights to women and minority groups.<sup>19</sup> For the first time in Japan's history, women were granted universal suffrage. As this reform was implemented and publicized, it only reinforced Western views on the submissive role of women in comparison to men in Japanese society. Within months of his arrival, the West believed that General MacArthur was able to abolish centuries of feudalistic oppression and samurai influences. To the West, Japan was a country that could not implement change for women without the help of the United States.

Western views and stereotypes have capitalized on the subservient personalities of Japanese women and positions as mere housewives and mothers. In contemporary Japanese society, the maternal role is seen as crucial to the development of moral character. The mother is

---

<sup>18</sup> Hane, *Modern Japan*, 36.

<sup>19</sup> Chris Goto-Jones, *Modern Japan: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 95.

seen as the “central figure in the child-rearing process while the father is nonexistent.”<sup>20</sup> The Japanese father is given very little credit for the development of the child and is often perceived as someone who provides financial assistance to the family. However, this power is only exerted within the domestic and private sphere: affairs that are not disclosed to the public. In Japanese families, it is the mother and child relationship versus the father, while in the West, the key relationship is the husband and wife versus the child. Less emphasis is placed on the role of the mother, as the father is expected to support the family through material needs. While the postwar era brought legal changes for Japanese women, there was still the expectation for women to stay out of the workforce and the public sphere. Witnessing the changes of the roles in women throughout the Meiji and Showa Period, Kurosawa used his female characters to advance the position of women in the public sphere of Japanese society.

### **Kurosawa’s Life from Adolescence**

Akira Kurosawa was born in Tokyo on March 23, 1910,<sup>21</sup> the last of eight children. His father had been part of a former samurai family while his mother had come from a merchant family in Osaka. His father was a stern and strict man who would implement traditions from his samurai upbringing onto his children. He would push Kurosawa towards vigorous activities, like judo and swimming, to build a strong external character. In contrast to his samurai father, Kurosawa’s mother was a character of internal strength. Throughout the difficult times in Kurosawa’s life, she was the resilient figure that Kurosawa looked up to. Kurosawa’s father was adamant and voiced his demands while his mother supported the family silently. However, both figures were the opposite of the character they expressed superficially. Kurosawa claimed his

---

<sup>20</sup> Ryoko Kato, “Japanese Women: Subordination or Domination?” *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 50.

<sup>21</sup> Anderer, *Kurosawa’s Rashomon*, 35.

mother to be the realist while his father was the sentimentalist.<sup>22</sup> His mother's secure and steady nature would shape the strong personalities of the female characters he portrayed in his films.

Born during the Meiji Period, Kurosawa had been exposed to the traditions and customs of a stern samurai father and a traditional housewife mother. He portrays his mother as a woman of wifely virtue and an "impossibly heroic creature"<sup>23</sup> who would not waver during tragic events or under the harsh commands of her husband. His perception of strong women can be attributed to his mother's inner courage and mental tenacity. In his autobiography, Kurosawa rarely mentions episodes of physical courage. Yet, his most significant childhood memory lies with his mother during an event in which she burned her hands while making tempura:

It happened when she was deep-frying tempura in the kitchen one day. The oil in the pot caught fire. Before it could ignite anything else, she proceeded to pick up the pot with both hands—while her eyebrows and eyelashes were singed to crinkled wisps—walk calmly across the tatami-mat room, properly put on her clogs at the garden door and carry the flaming pot out to the center of the garden to set it down. Afterward the doctor arrived, used pincers to peel away the blackened skin and applied medication to her charred hands. I could hardly bear to watch. But my mother's facial expression never betrayed the slightest tremor. Nearly a month passed before she was able to grasp something in her bandaged hands. Holding them in front of her chest, she never uttered a word about pain; she just sat quietly. No matter how I might try, I could never do the same.<sup>24</sup>

The physical strength and bravery that Kurosawa's mother demonstrated would leave a lasting influence on Kurosawa's perception of women. Through his recollections, it is evident that Kurosawa learned to value emotional and mental courage over physical courage based on the events he witnessed his mother endure.

In contrast to his mother, Kurosawa's father was someone who desired external strength from his children, especially his sons. Throughout his childhood, Kurosawa would be subjected to kendo lessons while his brother would be faced with academic pressures from his father. In his

---

<sup>22</sup> Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Anderer, *Kurosawa's Rashomon*, 48.

<sup>24</sup> Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, 21.

autobiography, Kurosawa recalls his father reprimanding him for running around without his shoes on in the aftermath of the earthquake.<sup>25</sup> His mother would stand strong next to her father as if the earthquake had never happened. Even through this tragedy and devastation, Kurosawa's father would exhibit an exterior of harshness while his mother would display mental stability. Overwhelmed by this constant insistence to become the strongest version of himself, Kurosawa began to show hostility towards the military and the required military training he would receive in middle school. His resentment towards military training would lead him to fail his classes and be deferred from military enlistment. However, it was his military deferment and mother's physical bravery that would manifest on screen through his screenplays. Kurosawa's high regard for his mother's strength would become the driving force behind the development of his female characters. His bitterness towards the military and his father's strict upbringing would influence his mockery of the violent fighting man.

### **Japan in Despair: The Changing Social and Economic Structure of Japan in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

During the peak of his film career, Kurosawa had been receiving accolades for being able to portray dark and beautiful films that would lead to a brighter future and outlook on life. Many of Kurosawa's films mirrored his views on the beautiful calamity of Japan and the country's desire to rebuild their torn nation. Two distinct events would influence the hollow beauty that would be portrayed in Kurosawa's films. During his adolescence, Kurosawa would experience the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and its aftereffects on his city. A few decades later, in 1945, he would witness the firebombings in Tokyo as they ripped apart the streets of his hometown.

---

<sup>25</sup> Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, 40.

After experiencing these events, Kurosawa would be inclined to create films that would show “his city in ruins, frozen by trauma.”<sup>26</sup> Through the shadows of destruction and devastation, his artistic flair and moral will would be forged. These events would ultimately lead to his views on Japan and its government.

On September 1, 1923, the Great Kanto Earthquake would strike the rapidly modernizing cities of Yokohama and Tokyo. Fires from the aftereffects of the earthquake would claim the lives of over 100,000 people and burn down over half of Kanto’s buildings. At a young age, Kurosawa was exposed to a catastrophe that would destroy his surroundings. After the disaster, Kurosawa recalls an event in which his brother Heigo led him to the ruins of the fire. Horrified by the scattered and burnt corpses, Kurosawa tried to look away. Yet, Heigo encouraged his younger brother to take in the aftermath of the catastrophe and to face his fears.<sup>27</sup> It was this event that Kurosawa was forced to endure through that would allow him to touch upon controversial and difficult subjects in his future films. While the Great Kanto Earthquake would influence his stories of destruction and despair, World War II would change Kurosawa’s perception of the Japanese government and the country’s devotion to their emperor.

Throughout World War II, the Japanese citizens had been referred to as “deaf-mutes.”<sup>28</sup> Japan and the Axis Powers had been hurtling down a road of defeat at a breakneck speed. While the country as a whole had foreseen defeat, they were unable to their express sorrow and fear without consequences from the Japanese government. They had seen self-assertion as immoral and self-sacrifice as sensible. When the Axis Powers had lost World War II, the emperor of Japan, Hirohito, had accepted defeat on behalf of the country. This unconditional surrender had brought about a collective sense of embarrassment and defeat. Their “once proud empire had

---

<sup>26</sup> Anderer, *Kurosawa’s Rashomon*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, 45.

<sup>28</sup> Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, 109.

been humbled into dust” and Japan’s “national hopes and aspirations were at an end.”<sup>29</sup> Yet, this surrender had also broken through the tensions that the citizens of Japan had experienced throughout the war.

The fall of the Japanese empire brought about the collapse of imperial authority. There was a national condemnation of the emperor who had misled the country into a disastrous war. Japan was left in ruins as a consequence of the war that had been waged in his name. The end of the war had brought about poverty and despair to the people who had been indirectly involved. As a Japanese citizen who had pledged allegiance to the emperor and then witnessed his downfall, Kurosawa used his films to depict the tragedy that had befallen his country. He was able to detect that the sheer force of the military was not enough to win the war. Therefore, his postwar films were centered around the issues that Japanese militarists and government had created through their attempts at winning an international battle through aggressive and combative power. Kurosawa’s attempts to identify the meaning of true strength were displayed through his female characters. He used women to demonstrate stability because they had served as victims to the war who supported the household while the military men were fighting a battle that had already been lost.

### **Origins of the “Strange Woman”**

Kurosawa once stated that all of the women in his films were “rather strange.”<sup>30</sup> The female characters that Kurosawa portrayed in his films were radically different from the women of the Meiji era in that they sought to pursue different ways of life. During the period in which Kurosawa was producing films, there was a universal assumption that the position of women in

---

<sup>29</sup> John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1999): 43.

<sup>30</sup> Donald, Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa, Third Edition, Expanded and Updated* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 40.

Japanese society was so deeply rooted in the patriarchal family system that their roles could not be altered from their cultural background. However, after World War II, Japanese women had established dominance within their domestic sphere and had autonomy within the household. Kurosawa's female characters were a true reflection of the women in Japanese society: strong and silent supporters. The majority of his female characters are seen aiding the male protagonist through their struggles. Kurosawa's male protagonists are remarkably flawed. Ridden with faults and failures, they seem to cause problems for themselves to overcome. Compared to these men, Kurosawa's female characters play a crucial role in stimulating these flawed male characters to move forward.

Each of Kurosawa's male characters possess similar personalities and traits as they attempt to conquer their internal battles. While many of his films focus on the androcentric ego and a man's journey to become a physically stronger individual, his female characters possess a trait that is unique to every one of them. In his first film, *Sanshiro Sugata*, Kurosawa introduces the filial daughter to his audience. Sayo Murai, the daughter of Hansuke Murai, is the embodiment of the "Meiji woman" and the Meiji ideals that Kurosawa had grown up around. Being his first film, *Sanshiro Sugata*, features two minor female characters who play important roles in supporting their fathers, another trait of the Meiji woman. Following the aftermath of World War II, Kurosawa had reconstructed his views on the traditional Japanese woman. Deviating away from his previous female characters, Kurosawa was able to create the character of Yukie Yagihara, a young woman who steps away from the long-established conditions of marriage that have been set for her. As Yukie is expected to marry a respected husband and into a good family, she abandons this expectation and moves away from her family to detach herself from the traditional housewife role that is expected of young women her age. The differences

between these two filial daughters reflect Kurosawa's reformed views on Japanese women. The obedient and devoted daughter, Sayo served as a role model for girls in Meiji Japan. The resolute and independent Yukie symbolized the changes in attitudes of the Japanese women who had experienced power and control in their household during World War II. The fall of Japanese imperialism had also brought about the decline of male authority, paving a way for women to emerge as a higher power in Japanese society.

Kurosawa's greatest breakthrough in depicting women is shown in the film *Rashomon*. The samurai's wife is a cunning and sly woman who puts on an innocent façade to protect her reputation and purity. Throughout the film, the samurai's wife, the sole female character in the limited cast, is shown to have the upper hand as all versions of the story show the wife manipulating two men, her husband and the bandit who abducts them, to either kill her or fight over her. She questions their manhood by claiming that only one man could have her. However, she does not state this directly in any of the accounts that are told in court. Through her claims that she must belong to only one man or be killed so that no man can have her, she has reversed the roles of men and women. During the feudal era, men had the advantage of being able to choose any woman he wanted as she was to be considered his property. By calling upon these men to kill her or fight over her, the samurai's wife has gained the advantage of being able to liberate herself from being tied down to one man.

After the defeat of the Axis Powers in World War II, the entire country was brought down to a state of despair. However, in the period before Japan's restoration period, Kurosawa was able to introduce the idea of hope and rebirth through his female characters. In his film *Drunken Angel*, the main male character, Matsunaga, is filled with fear and doubt over his tuberculosis. At the same time, a young girl with the same disease as Matsunaga displays



courage and hope for her future. Set during the aftermath of World War II, when black markets were gaining prominence, Matsunaga blends in with the dangerous *yakuza* and is immersed in their lifestyle of drinking and smoking. Despite being physically stronger than the young girl, Matsunaga hides his fear and anxiety through drinking and violence. Unlike Matsunaga, the young girl does not give into the subculture that the black markets have provided. She chooses to face her disease head on in order to overcome her weak health. Kurosawa uses the young girl to demonstrate the idea that power and bravery cannot be measured through physical strength, but rather mental strength. With this character, Kurosawa was able to convey the message that there was hope for Japan's restoration without the use of a militarist regime.

Kurosawa's "strange women" are not bizarre or peculiar. Rather, they are considered "strange" because they represented a category of women that had not been seen in the public sphere of Japan. As a country that had been built upon the patriarchal system of feudalism, Japan had constructed the ideal woman to be someone who took care of household affairs under the orders of her husband or father. With his "strange women," Kurosawa was able to portray a new perception of the ideal woman. The fortitude and mental endurance of Japanese women that had been kept hidden within the domestic sphere had been exposed to his audience through his female characters. Through them, Kurosawa was able to prove that these "strange women" were in fact, not strange, but normal females who had been restricted from participating on equal grounds with Japanese men.

### **The Filial Daughter: Obedient and Dutiful Females**

Kurosawa portrays his first filial character in his first film: *Sanshiro Sugata*. Like his later films, *Sanshiro Sugata* focuses on a male individual who must overcome his personal

obstacles in order to become stronger. The titular character Sugata struggles with the meaning of true strength. To Sugata, strength means being able to defeat as many people as possible in battle. However, as he becomes a disciple of Yano, a Shudokan Judo wrestler, he is able to learn the difference between true strength and violence. In this film, Kurosawa's views on the "strong man" are first revealed. Having his own experiences in fighting through kendo<sup>31</sup>, Kurosawa started training in order to appease his stern father who had always placed important emphasis on fighting and military strength. Kurosawa uses Sugata to mock his idea of the violent fighting man. Through this character, Kurosawa seems to be fighting back against the ideals and ethics of the powerful samurai man that his father had driven into him as a child.

In *Sanshiro Sugata*, there are two prominent female characters: Sayo Murai and Monma's unnamed daughter. Both Hansuke Murai, Sayo's father, and Monma challenge Sugata to a battle. In the days before the battle, both daughters are confident that their fathers will win. They place complete faith in them that they will win to uphold their pride and name. However, the differences between the two female characters end here. Sayo continuously visits the temple to pray for her father's victory while Monma's daughter passes her days idly until the battle. When visiting the temple, Sayo comes across Sugata and he helps her with her broken slipper. The film shows the frequent encounters between Sayo and Sugata and their growing relationship. The day before the battle, Sugata reveals that he is to fight Sayo's father. Torn by her admiration towards Sugata and her duty to her father, Sayo is conflicted on who to encourage during the battle. However, she remains strong before and during the battle as she is seen in the crowd constantly reminding herself that "Father will surely win."<sup>32</sup> Hansuke Murai eventually

---

<sup>31</sup> Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, 92.

<sup>32</sup> *Sanshiro Sugata*, directed by Akira Kurosawa (1943; Tokyo: Toho Company, Ltd., 2000), DVD.

surrenders the fight and his pride, bowing down to Sugata. Even after her father's defeat, Sayo fights her feelings towards Sugata and remains by Hansuke's side.

Unlike Sayo and her internal confidence in her father, Monma's daughter is more assertive and arrogant. Her role in the film is of less importance than that of Sayo. Monma's daughter is seen going around and partaking in conversations about Sugata and her father, always asserting that her father will be the one to win. She emphasizes her father's strength and the victory he will bring to the Shin-mei School of Judo. During the battle, Monma's daughter watches from within the crowd as her father dies from the injuries inflicted by Sugata. Instead of expressing shock or sorrow, her first reaction is anger. She is angry that Sugata has killed her father and defamed the reputation that he has built among the Judo community. There is an immense contrast between Sayo, who reveals agony and disappointment in her father's defeat and Monma's daughter, who is more preoccupied with upholding her father's stable name.

While both filial in their own rights, the ways that both females react towards their fathers' defeat are explicitly different. After witnessing the death of her father, Monma's vows to avenge her father by killing Sugata. She visits the judo school that Sugata belongs to with an attempt to kill him. Monma's daughter's devotion to her father and her violent acts of revenge are contradictory. While she remains filial to her father by seeking redemption, she risks tarnishing his name by conducting an immoral act. On the other hand, Sayo can be seen as more respectful. After her father's defeat, she is tempted to stay away from Sugata in order to keep her allegiance to her father. Sayo does not seek revenge for her father's defeat in order not to embarrass him further. Sayo embraces the idea of the filial daughter by showing respect towards Sugata and engaging in good conduct to bring respect towards her household name.

## **The Strong and Independent Woman: The Transformation of Women Who Have Broken Free from the Traditional Japanese Housewife**

During World War II, Kurosawa had received a request from the Information Section of the Japanese Navy to create a propaganda film to fan the war spirit.<sup>33</sup> Through this request, Kurosawa had become aware that the Axis Powers were going to lose the battle. Yet, he used this as an opportunity to create a documentary-style film that would portray the struggles of the Japanese citizens who had continued to support the war front. The resulting film, *The Most Beautiful*, features an all-female cast who must support the warfront through supply production. The main character, Tsuru Watanabe, is the section production leader who must take responsibility for dozens of female workers.<sup>34</sup> Watanabe is the ideal Japanese citizen. Being a propaganda film, *The Most Beautiful*, features Watanabe speaking to male factory directors to increase their production quota to match the men's quota. Watanabe and the rest of the female workers believe that they can contribute more to the war by producing more lenses for the fighter planes.

The film is an indirect jab at the general consensus of women during World War II. Because there is a collective belief that women cannot work as hard as men, the factory directors initially refuse to allow the women's production quota to increase. By displaying the tenacity and stubbornness of the female workers, Kurosawa goes against the public opinion that women cannot work as hard as men. While the tasks prove to be extremely difficult for the female workers, their determination does not waver and they continue to power on through their tasks. Throughout this entire process, Watanabe is in charge of making sure all of the workers are healthy and working hard. Halfway through the film, it is revealed that Watanabe's mother is

---

<sup>33</sup> Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, 99.

<sup>34</sup> *The Most Beautiful*, directed by Akira Kurosawa (1944; Tokyo: Toho Company, Ltd., 2006), DVD.

suffering from a deadly illness. While the dormitory mother and the factory directors urge Watanabe to visit home, she declines and states that the factory needs her guidance more than ever.

Watanabe is reminiscent of Kurosawa's mother. In the film that is considered most dear to him,<sup>35</sup> Kurosawa first displays the internal strength that his later female characters would possess. Watanabe is a divergence from Kurosawa's previous female characters that embodied the filial daughter. Unlike Sayo, Watanabe cannot be considered filial or devoted to her parents as she chooses to stay at the factory instead of visiting her sick mother. However, this may also be seen as a progressive breakthrough for women and their role in Japanese society. As filial piety was tied to Confucian ideals, this meant that the daughter was to be dutiful to the men in her life. For young women, this would mean their fathers, and then eventually, their husbands. By refusing to visit her parents, Watanabe was able to assert independence away from filial piety and the dependence on male figures.

After World War II and Japan's unconditional surrender, the US Occupational Forces began to implement censors on all works of art and entertainment that were to be released in Japan. While many Japanese citizens resented this movement, Kurosawa embraced this new idea of freedom. He claimed that "democracy was glorified" and "the freedom of speech was recovered."<sup>36</sup> As the censors implemented by the Japanese government were dissolved, the film industry in postwar Japan was able to flourish and come to life. Japan's unconditional surrender had brought a sense of united resentment among the citizens of Japan, Kurosawa included. In his eyes, the Japanese government had treated filmmakers like criminals if they were to express their thoughts and opinions in a way that seemed to criticize the government and the emperor. While

---

<sup>35</sup> Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, 119.

<sup>36</sup> Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, 107.

the US Occupation Forces had also implemented censors, they have behaved in a much more “gentlemanly fashion.”<sup>37</sup> Without any restrictions barring him, Kurosawa was able to create a film that expressed his true attitudes towards the war and Japan’s role in their defeat.

In his first film in the postwar era, *No Regrets for Our Youth*, Kurosawa had been able to convey all the emotions and remorse he could not voice when the Japanese government had been in charge of the censors. The film is essentially an anti-propaganda film. It discloses the undeclared viewpoint of Japanese citizens towards their militarist government. The story is based on the Takigawa Incident, an event during 1932 in which Yukitoki Takigawa, a professor from Kyoto Imperial University, lectured his students on the importance of understanding the social roots of crime when dealing with the criminal. Kyoto University superiors claimed that Takigawa had been advocating Marxist ideas and had banned him from teaching. In the film, Professor Yagihara speaks out against the Japanese government and their imperialist ways and is banned from Kyoto University as a result of opposing the emperor and the government. Kurosawa uses Yagihara to express his own personal opinions on the Japanese government and their militarist tactics that led to the country’s demise. During the war, artists had to be careful of scenery and portraying youth. The Japanese censors believed that love was indecent and claimed that the “keen sensibilities of youth were a psychological state of British-American weakness.”<sup>38</sup> *No Regrets for Our Youth* focuses the youth of Japan and chronicles the lifestyles of students who partook in riots against the Japanese government. Kurosawa used his first postwar production to retaliate against the Japanese censors that had prevented him from voicing his sentiments on the war.

---

<sup>37</sup> Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, 107.

<sup>38</sup> Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, 112.

In *No Regrets for Our Youth*, Kurosawa provides the audience with a new type of female character. Unlike the filial daughter and diligent workers that he had previously displayed in his films, Yukie is a headstrong and boisterous young woman who is struggling to find the meaning of being a “true human.”<sup>39</sup> She is a privileged young woman who is expected to marry a respected man and assume the socially accustomed role of a housewife, as her mother did before her. Yukie is torn between the affections of two men, Itokawa and Noge. Itokawa is a proper gentleman who is diligently going to university in order to support his mother. He refrains from student protests and riots to avoid getting kicked out from the university. Noge is the polar opposite of Itokawa. He participates in the student riots and gets arrested several times. Yet, it is Noge she is attracted to and constantly pines for him after he is taken away by the police. Yukie’s parents push her to marry Itokawa as he is able to provide a stable future for her, but she declines claiming that her married life to Itokawa would be “peaceful and calm, yet boring.”<sup>40</sup> Yukie casts away the idea of the “Meiji woman” by leaving her parents to start a new life in Tokyo. By asserting her financial and spiritual independence, Yukie has taken the first step towards her liberation from the static norms imposed on Japanese women.

In Tokyo, Yukie struggles to support herself through small and menial jobs. Although she is struggling to find a place for herself in Tokyo, she refuses to return to the comfort of her parents’ home. While in Tokyo, Yukie finds Noge, who has been released from prison, and marries him. Noge has not cast away his beliefs and continues to write slander about the Japanese militarist regime and is constantly being tracked down by the police. Knowing this, Yukie continues to support Noge and his radical ways. When Noge is arrested by the police, Yukie must serve time in prison because of their relations. Even after Noge dies alone in his jail

---

<sup>39</sup> *No Regrets for Our Youth*, directed by Akira Kurosawa (1946; Tokyo: Toho Company Ltd., 2008), DVD.

<sup>40</sup> *No Regrets for Our Youth*, directed by Akira Kurosawa.

cell, Yukie abandons all her possibilities for marriage and works to become a filial daughter-in-law for Noge's parents. In this film, the imprisonments of marriage are implied to be a denial of a woman's independence and humanity. Through the main character, Kurosawa breaks the unspoken rule that all women must be married in order to be supported by their husbands.

### **The Cunning and Sly: Reconstructing Japanese Women Through Deception and Furtiveness**

Kurosawa's *Rashomon* is considered to be one of the greatest films to be produced in Japanese entertainment. This film became the gateway for Kurosawa's entry into the international film industry. While regarded as Kurosawa's most important film, *Rashomon* did not achieve critical acclaim until it was entered in the prestigious Venice Film Festival. During that time, Daei Studios, the management company that Kurosawa had belonged to, disagreed with *Rashomon* as a proposed production. Management believed that the content was too difficult to express through entertainment and was reluctant to let Kurosawa start filming.<sup>41</sup> *Rashomon* was released in Japan to mixed reviews. Kurosawa's next project, *The Idiot*, also proved to be disastrous as he clashed with management and received mediocre reviews from his audience. Unbeknownst to Kurosawa, *Rashomon* had been submitted to the Venice Film Festival and went on to receive the American Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.<sup>42</sup>

Set in the Kamakura period, *Rashomon* is a film that recounts four contradictory versions of the same story.<sup>43</sup> The film opens to a woodcutter, who claims to have discovered the body of a samurai in the woods. Hearing the story, a priest explains that he had seen the samurai and his wife traveling the same day the murder happened. An infamous bandit named Tajomaru claims

---

<sup>41</sup> Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, 133.

<sup>42</sup> Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, 138.

<sup>43</sup> *Rashomon*, directed by Akira Kurosawa (1950; Tokyo, Japan: Toho Company, Ltd., 2006), DVD.



to have raped the samurai's wife. The samurai was either killed or died in the woods and both the bandit and wife are called to testify in court. A medium is called to recount the samurai's side of the story through his dead spirit. The woodcutter, who has also witnessed this event, is called to tell his version of the story as well. All four versions of the story vary detail while three reports of the story claim the bandit Tajomaru killed the samurai. However, in none of these versions, including the samurai's wife, is the woman granted respect and dignity. Each rendition has the samurai's wife degrading herself for the sake of her husband or the bandit.

Tajomaru's story is told first. In his version, Tajomaru is struck away by the samurai's wife's beauty and attempts to rape her. In Joan Mellen's analysis of Kurosawa's women, she claims that "woman is angel outside and demon within,"<sup>44</sup> asserting that men are offered the choice between the "good" woman – the faithful wife – or the "bad" woman – the woman who is engrossed in fulfilling her own sexual desires. Men are advised to stay away from the "bad" woman as only monogamy and faithfulness to her husband will ensure the man with respectable heirs. In *Rashomon*, Kurosawa conveys the stereotypes that continue to define the lives of Japanese women. While men are free to choose their own pick of women, women must follow society's rules and remain pure and faithful to appear enticing in front of men.

In Tajomaru's story, he recalls that the samurai's wife involuntarily responded to his rape attempt and claims that while she is a wife on the outside, she is a harlot and demon within. In all accounts, the samurai's wife is filled with shame, either from having two men fight over her or having been claimed by two men. In *Rashomon*, the one character who wields a blade with "conviction and lethal authority."<sup>45</sup> The woman is the one who spurs the two men to fight over her. Yet, in order to recover from her shame and guilt, it is also the woman who sacrifices herself

---

<sup>44</sup> Joan Mellen, *The Waves at Genji's Door: Japan Through its Cinema* (New York City: Pantheon, 1976), 47.

<sup>45</sup> Anderer, *Kurosawa's Rashomon*, 50.

for her husband, another characteristic of the Japanese women during the feudal period of Japan. By lowering herself, she enters the male psyche as she manipulates her way into tricking the court and audience that she is pure and responsible enough to accept the mistakes she has made. The devious woman displays extreme sharpness and Kurosawa depicts the samurai's wife to be the most intelligent out of the otherwise all-male cast. The two men who cross swords to fight over the wife are depicted as fools who use physical strength to settle issues.

### **The Hopeful Dreamer: Women Affected by Postwar Japan Who Continue to Seek Hope for Restoration**

Following World War II, there was a rise in alcoholism, drug addiction, violence, and violence in crimes. Named after a potent alcoholic mixture called *Katsutori shochu*, an entire culture known as “*katsutori* culture” emerged during this time.<sup>46</sup> While the black market had existed long before World War II, it was only during the postwar era that it started to gain prominence in this broken society. The black market became a source for illicit drugs and alcohol. The *katsutori* culture was also attributed to the rise of *yakuza* (organized Japanese crime syndicates) members and prostitutes in Japan. Kurosawa had wanted to produce a film that displayed the aftereffects from the destruction and devastation from World War II. The screenplay for *Drunken Angel* came to Kurosawa after he witnessed a peculiar freighter ship sunken offshore. The ship was made out of concrete as the Japanese war industries had been running out of iron towards their defeat. In what he called a “parody of defeated Japan,”<sup>47</sup> the concrete ship led him to create a story that would depict the conditions that the Japanese had to endure through chaotic times.

---

<sup>46</sup> Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 107.

<sup>47</sup> Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, 116.

*Drunken Angel* tells the story of Doctor Sanada, an alcoholic doctor who works in a deteriorating neighborhood that has been affected by World War II and the *katsutori* culture. One day, a man named Matsunaga comes to visit Doctor Sanada to be treated for his hand. Matsunaga is the classic *yakuza* member who drinks and smokes all day long. What Matsunaga mistakes to be the common cold, Doctor Sanada believes is tuberculosis. Yet, Matsunaga refuses to believe in his diagnosis and leaves his hospital in a hurry while Doctor Sanada orders him to receive an x-ray to be sure. With his tuberculosis diagnosis weighing in the back of his mind, Matsunaga continues his *yakuza* lifestyle, not refraining from drinking and smoking. However, he continues to visit Doctor Sanada as his health begins to break down.

Matsunaga is emblematic of the physical strength that Kurosawa seemed to mock throughout his autobiography and previous films. He refuses to believe Doctor Sanada, brushing him off as a “quack” and a “fraud.” Although it is clear that Matsunaga’s health is failing due to the tuberculosis, he refuses to admit his fear as he believes it will make him a weaker man. Just like Kurosawa’s previous male characters, Matsunaga shows off an exterior toughness and is quick to resort to violence when his manhood is threatened. Whenever Doctor Sanada threatens his pride by bringing up his disease, Matsunaga throws his entire body at Sanada in an attempt to keep him from talking. However, Kurosawa introduces another character to his audience that is the complete opposite of Matsunaga. An unnamed female patient of Sanada suffers from the same diagnosis as Matsunaga. Yet, unlike Matsunaga, the female student is hopeful that she will overcome the disease and continues to follow the treatment set for her.

The young girl is an embodiment of everything that Kurosawa had wanted to portray through *Drunken Angel*. She represents Japan’s hope for restoration as well as a manifestation of the emotional and mental courage that Kurosawa had come to witness through his mother.

Kurosawa's mother's influence is unmistakable in this film. The young girl displays great courage and inner strength even as her body deteriorates. Matsunaga is the complete opposite of the young girl. His tattoos, tough talk, and struts exude a tough guy confidence and exterior. He fights an internal battle with himself by refusing to admit that he is scared of being sick and dying. The fighting man can symbolize the militarist regime of Japan during World War II, in which violence and physical strength were used to attempt to resolve conflicts. The resolute and courageous young girl embodies the Japan that Kurosawa wishes to see in the future; a country that focuses on rebuilding itself rather than overtaking other countries. By showing the contrasts between the two patients, Kurosawa ridicules the violent fighting man while promoting the strong female who is able to overcome her inner fears.

Kurosawa brings us back to the *katsutori* culture of postwar Japan through the actions of Matsunaga's girlfriend and Sanada's nurse Miyo. Both women hold strong feelings for Okada, a *yakuza* leader who has been released from prison after 3 years. Nurse Miyo, is Okada's former lover who has been abused and abandoned by him. Even through this abuse, Miyo gets emotional after hearing news that Okada is set to be released from prison. She believes prison has changed him and asks Sanada if she can visit him. Furious, Sanada screams at Miyo "Don't act like a slave!"<sup>48</sup> Through this exclamation, Kurosawa directs a message to Japanese women as a whole, urging them to break free from the expectations that women must be dependent on a man. Okada has also affected Matsunaga's girlfriend. Before the arrival of Okada, she was attracted to Matsunaga and his tough exterior. However, after she witnesses Matsunaga coughing up blood, she realizes that he has fallen from power and does not hesitate to abandon him. Both Matsunaga's girlfriend and Miyo serve as reminders that there were still women during the

---

<sup>48</sup> *Drunken Angel*, directed by Akira Kurosawa.

postwar era that were solely dependent on men, further reinforcing the idea that changes to Japan's patriarchal society cannot happen overnight.

### **The Force of Kurosawa's Films and How They Served as a Catalyst to Challenging Gender Roles in Postwar Japan**

Western publications on the structure of Japanese society have focused on the traditional role of women in such an industrialized country. Ryoko Kato explains the paradox in Japanese society as "a country which is both industrialized and traditional at the same time."<sup>49</sup> Foreign observers often point out the low status of women in Japan compared to their counterparts in other industrialized countries. The lasting role of the "traditional mother" leads other countries to perceive Japanese women as unequal to their male counterparts. However, the role of women in the household and private sphere are often concealed from Japanese society. Even after Japanese women gained equality, there was still the belief that the "wise mother" should stay within the household and take care of domestic affairs. The "strange women" in Kurosawa's films have played a role in initiating change in Japan's patriarchal social sphere. His films feature unique and headstrong women who go against the conventional "wise mother" by breaking free from the unspoken limits that have been placed on women by Japanese society. In almost every major motion picture he has released, Kurosawa has introduced a new type of Japanese women to his audience. From filial daughters to sly and cunning women, Kurosawa has explored the diverse variations of the complex female persona. His female characters served as a role model for women in the Showa Era. During a period in which women were expected to stay home and only have control within the house, Kurosawa capitalized these characteristics and brought them to

---

<sup>49</sup> Kato, "Japanese Women," 49.

life in his films. The exposure of these unique female characters has influenced the social strata of Japanese society as well as influence other types of mass media productions.

During the 1980s, Japan had undergone a period of industrialization and rebirth. Hoping to gain the same glory that they had once experienced before the world war, Japanese citizens had hoped to reconstruct their country into a superpower. With this reconstruction came the reemergence of the modern working girl. The modern working girl was a subculture that had emerged during the Taisho period (1912-1926), in which the development of a new middle class gave rise to flashy and fashionable girls who worked as office ladies or shop attendants.<sup>50</sup> They adopted Western views of democracy and independence and worked to become self-sufficient. Following the Great Kanto Earthquake and the collapse of the New York Stock Market in 1929,<sup>51</sup> Japan experienced economic depression. The chic modern girl came to represent the falls of democracy and a need to return to the Meiji ideals of a wise mother. During the Meiji era, women had comprised over 87% of the textile industry. However, they had been subjected to rough conditions and low wages.<sup>52</sup> Meiji women were subject to unfair wages and treatment from the Japanese government in attempts to keep them within their households. However, Kurosawa displayed a new form of the modern working girl through his character, Yukie Yagihara. By leaving the comfort of her parents' home and moving to Tokyo, Yukie can be considered one of the pioneers of the reformed modern working girl.

The new modern girl was different from the women that had been present in the past, not only through their independence, but through their personalities as well. Throughout the history of Japan, women had been submissive subjects who catered to their husbands' demands. Their

---

<sup>50</sup> Goto-Jones, *Modern Japan*, 71.

<sup>51</sup> Goto-Jones, *Modern Japan*, 76.

<sup>52</sup> Saraang Narayan, "Women in Meiji Japan: Exploring the Underclass of Japanese Industrialization," *Inquiries/Student Pulse* 8, No. 2 (2016), 1.

sole responsibility was to bear heirs and to raise children into respectable people. Even with the legal changes that occurred after World War II, women were still expected to stay at home with the children. The country's reconstruction brought forth a new modern girl,<sup>53</sup> where women were no longer obligated to follow the expectations of their fathers and husbands. The stark contrast in personalities between the submissive housewife and the progressive modern girl is shown best in Kurosawa's films that are set during the feudal period. In *Rashomon*, the samurai's wife is completely different from the women who were to be represented during the Kamakura period. She is conniving and shows superiority over both the bandit and her husband. Her personality and demeanor are dynamic and paved the way for the modern working girl.

Akira Kurosawa's films and storylines impacted the film industry, and introduced a path for future female characters in the entertainment industry. In the 1980s, during the period of Japan's reconstruction, the rise of anime swept through the entertainment industry and came to symbolize the future of Japan: a technological powerhouse rebuilt from the dead.<sup>54</sup> The reconstruction of Japan after World War II helped propel a fantasy construction that Anne Allison refers to as polymorphous perversity<sup>55</sup>: unstable and unshifting worlds where characters who have been wounded by violence reemerge with reconstituted selves. While postwar productions featured male protagonists, modern anime and manga series have adopted polymorphous perversity to include female protagonists as well.

Many of the strong characteristics in Kurosawa's females can be seen in the leading characters of the magical girl genre. The magical girl story ties in polymorphous perversity to tell stories about normal girls who gain power and abilities and use them to fight evil in their cities

---

<sup>53</sup> Goto-Jones, *Modern Japan*, 118.

<sup>54</sup> Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (California: University of California Press, 2006): 11.

<sup>55</sup> Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, 12.

that have been destructed. The magical girl genre emphasizes on cleansing, rather than defeating, their opponents as fantasy weapons are used to save the souls of their enemies. Widely established the most prominent magical girl series, *Sailor Moon* tells the story of a young and clumsy girl named Usagi who transforms to fight evil from another world. Despite having gained superpowers, Usagi fights under an alias, Sailor Moon. This hidden identity can refer to the Japanese housewife and how they fight silently behind the strong presence of their husbands. The individuality that Usagi possesses as both a normal girl and a hero of justice is evocative of Kurosawa's mockery of the violent fighting man. Unlike the violent fighting man, who depicts a foolishly hardy character inside and outside the battlefield, Usagi is a typical schoolgirl who struggles with natural human struggles, such as exams, friendships, and love. The idea that such a "normal girl" can become a "champion of justice"<sup>56</sup> provides a more balanced portrayal of heroism than the traditional male scenario, in which the hero centers his entire existence over the conflicts he has encountered.

Among postwar animators, Hayao Miyazaki rose to prominence with his captivating stories and animated films. Influenced by Kurosawa, Miyazaki would also strive to convey more modern issues in Japanese society through his films. Miyazaki recalls seeing *Rashomon* as a child and being struck with terror when he was first shown the rain-soaked ruins of Japan in the film.<sup>57</sup> In an interview with Kurosawa, Miyazaki claimed that the movies that leave an impression "aren't the uplifting ones, but rather the ones that depict the realities of survival."<sup>58</sup> Inspired by Kurosawa's stories of survival and restoration, Miyazaki uses his films to depict the success of this restoration. Contrary to Kurosawa's films that were produced before and during

---

<sup>56</sup> Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, 135.

<sup>57</sup> Anderer, *Kurosawa's Rashomon*, 18.

<sup>58</sup> Colin Marshall, "Hayao Miyazaki Meets Akira Kurosawa: Watch the Titans of Japanese Film in Conversation," *Open Culture*, February 16, 2017, <http://www.openculture.com/2017/02/miyazaki-meets-kurosawa.html> (accessed November 26, 2017).



Japan's postwar reconstruction, Miyazaki's films were produced after the rebirth of Japan as a technological powerhouse. By this time, the role of women in the public sphere had advanced immensely. The majority of Miyazaki's films feature female protagonists who are aided by males in minor roles.

Kurosawa's greatest influence can be seen in Miyazaki's film *Princess Mononoke*. Set during the Warring States Era, *Princess Mononoke* tells the story of the last Emishi prince, Ashitaka who cursed by a demon after killing it.<sup>59</sup> While the curse gives him superhuman strength, it will eventually spread throughout his entire body and kill him. This is reminiscent of Kurosawa's male characters in which they all possess a flaw and are presented with a situation they have caused. On a journey to find a cure, Ashitaka meets San, a human girl living among a pack of wolves. San is courageous and protective with her primary concern being to protect the forest and the animals she lives with. Much like Kurosawa's female characters, San displays fortitude by risking her life to save the forest she has grown up in, a far cry from Ashitaka who only travels to find a cure for himself. Miyazaki's later films are seen as a foil to Kurosawa's. A strong female protagonist is often encouraged by a supporting male character who resolves his inner conflicts by traveling with the female protagonist.

Kurosawa's depictions of women have left an imprint on the portrayal of headstrong and gutsy women in contemporary Japanese film and anime. His unprecedented reflections of the strong Japanese woman have been the influence behind many other female protagonists and supporting roles. His mockery of the violent fighting man has influenced animators and artists to recreate scenarios that portray the female figure to be just as strong as the violent fighting man, but without bloodshed or fighting. Modern anime and manga promote the female protagonist and

---

<sup>59</sup> *Princess Mononoke*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki (1997; Tokyo, Japan: Toho Company, Ltd., 2006), DVD.

their ability to live normal lives while serving as heroes of justice. These stories of double lives remind us of the women during World War II who had to support their household while taking on the responsibilities of the men who had left to fight. By using his films to unmask the valuable traits of the domestic Japanese woman, Kurosawa has inspired the film and entertainment industry to feature female protagonists with these characteristics.

### **Conclusion**

Akira Kurosawa was able to live through the tragedies of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Japan. After being exposed to the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and World War II, he was able to produce films that spoke out against the Japanese government and military. Through his films, Kurosawa built upon the theme of destruction and reconstruction and broke free from the barriers that had been set by the Japanese censors. He challenged societal norms by producing controversial films that other directors had feared to approach. The women in his films are not glorified or exalted in any way. Instead, Kurosawa takes the characteristics of the capable Japanese housewife and places them in situations that demonstrate women's potential in the public sphere of Japanese society. By doing so, Kurosawa was able to create unique female characters that helped women break free from the classical role that centuries of patriarchal hierarchies had molded for them.

Many critics have argued that Kurosawa was not able to depict women in his films. While Kurosawa's main characters are usually male, the supporting cast is filled with individual female characters. In his films, Kurosawa does not blatantly display the message of the strong and progressive women. Instead, he does so by mocking the tough male characters in his stories. Many of Kurosawa's male characters have been depicted as parodies of the violent samurai man through excessive fighting and boasting. Most of Kurosawa's male characters are comparable to each other. They all struggle with an internal problem while hiding their fears with external

energy. As the insecurities surrounding their dilemmas eat away at them, their impatience and resentment are manifested into passion and vigor. Yet, the passion and vigor that these male characters exhibit are merely attempts to exaggerate their brute physical capabilities.

Through his female characters, Kurosawa explores the complex female personality by manifesting them into various characters with varying characteristics. Many of his female characters are able to overcome their struggles without sheer strength or power. Through their indirect actions and roles, they are able to convey the concept of a central stability that does not have to be expressed through physical power and violence. Instead, their passion and vigor are shown through their thoughts and attitudes. The filial daughter, Sayo is a reminder of the women who were inferior to male figures. Watanabe and her devotion to her duties, along with the girl fighting tuberculosis is a representation of the women who are able to battle against their personal problems. Yukie who refuses to become a traditional housewife and the samurai's wife who illustrates herself as moral and honest, are examples of women who use their demeanor and words to fight against the violent and rough man. They convey a tenacious and fierce internal character that does not have to be masked by brawn and virility. Kurosawa's "strange women" helped catalyze the role of women to expand beyond their private sphere and into Japanese society.

## Bibliography

- Allison, Anne. *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- Anderer, Paul. *Kurosawa's Rashomon: A Vanished City, a Lost Brother, and the Voice Inside His Iconic Films*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2016.
- Dower, John. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. New York: W.W Norton & Company, 2000.
- Drunken Angel*. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. 1948. Tokyo, Japan: Toho Company Ltd., 2007. DVD.
- Goto-Jones, Chris. *Modern Japan: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Hane, Mikiso. *Modern Japan: A Historical Perspective*. Boulder: Westview Press. 1986.
- Kato, Ryoko. "Japanese Women: Subordination or Domination?" *International Journal of Sociology* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 49-57.
- Koyama, Takashi. *The Changing Social Position of Women in Japan*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. 1961.
- Kurosawa, Akira. *Something Like an Autobiography*. Translated by Audie E. Bock. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982.
- Lindsey, William R. *Fertility and Pleasure: Ritual and Sexual Values in Tokugawa Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 2007.
- Lloyd, Sarah Anne. "Women in the Films of Kurosawa, 1940-1970." *Pop Matters*, October 8, 2010, <http://www.popmatters.com/feature/131923-defining-the-most-beautiful/P0/2>. Accessed May 25, 2017.

Marshall, Colin. "Hayao Miyazaki Meets Akira Kurosawa: Watch the Titans of Japanese Film in Conversation." *Open Culture*, February 16, 2017.

<http://www.openculture.com/2017/02/miyazaki-meets-kurosawa.html>. Accessed November 26, 2017.

Mellen, Joan. *The Waves at Genji's Door: Japan Through its Cinema*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.

*The Most Beautiful*. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. 1944. Tokyo, Japan: Toho Company Ltd., 2006. DVD.

Narayan, Saraang. "Women in Meiji Japan: Exploring the Underclass of Japanese Industrialization." *Inquires/Student Pulse* 8, No. 2 (2016): 1-3.

*No Regrets for Our Youth*. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. 1946. Tokyo, Japan: Toho Company Ltd., 2008. DVD.

Prince, Stephen. *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

*Princess Mononoke*. Directed by Hayao Miyazaki. 1997. Tokyo, Japan: Toho Company Ltd., 2006. DVD.

*Rashomon*. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. 1950. Tokyo, Japan: Toho Company Ltd., 2006. DVD.

Richie, Donald. *The Films of Akira Kurosawa, Third Edition, Expanded and Updated*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

*Sanshiro Sugata*. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. 1943. Tokyo, Japan: Toho Company Ltd., 2000. DVD.

Wakaba, Asaumi A. "Reclaiming Kurosawa Akira's Shakespearean Women." Master's thesis, San Jose State University, 1997.

Yoshimoto, Mitsuhiro. *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.