**Victims to Villains**

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**Introduction**

I wasn’t sure if I should be fearing or be sympathetic towards her. It was as if she was reaching for help. She inched closer to me pulling herself along the floor by her hands like an animal. I covered my eyes hoping it was all a dream. Expecting the touch of those mangled hands, I peeked through my fingers to discover something even more frightening. There she was right in front of me staring with hollowed eyes covered in blood. It was the face of a woman not a ghost. Under that blood ridden tarp, behind a nest of mangy hair, beyond the grudge, lied just a woman.

This excerpt is a personal interpretation from the perspective of Rika, a character from the popular horror movie Ju-on (2000) by director Takashi Shimizu. The antagonist in Ju-on is a female ghost named Kayako. She was sadistically murdered by her husband Takeo, who also killed their young son Toshio. Due to the grotesque nature of Kayako’s death, her soul fused with the home; from that moment forward, it would forever be plagued with curse. The slightest encounter with the property in any manner left those unfortunate enough to wander there not only susceptible to this terrible curse. From this curse, they would face certain death brought on by her insatiable hunger for revenge. This need for revenge, was satisfied only by bloodshed, was not a testament of power, nor did she kill without reason. Danny Boey so appropriately suggests, “… She kills to enlighten people about her grievance.”[[1]](#footnote-1) What exactly are her grievances? The cycle of revenge that was spawned and the supernatural entity that she transformed into is a recurring theme in contemporary Japanese horror, or as it has been dubbed by pop-culture standards as J-horror. In order to understand this phenomenon, further analysis of the circumstances surrounding Kayako’s death reveal the connections it shares to other films, a vengeful ghost theme and imagery of femininity. It is what these connections symbolize and their relation beyond cinematic arts that is the most significant. Kayako, as well the yūrei in other J-horror films, are fictional characters that share more in common with the modern Japanese woman that meets the eye. The yūrei have broken free from the world of the living, left victimhood behind, and are now free to pursue their dreams in the most terrifying ways. Their living sisters in Japan are still being held down, struggling to overcome and prevail against the patriarchal dominance that still is the reality in contemporary Japan.

        In order to exemplify the significance of this theme and their relation to societal woes of Japan, referring back to the brief synopsis of Ju-on and analyzing Kayako’s circumstances more abstractly provides further clarification. Ju-on’s first scene is intense, exposing the husband in the midst of a murderous rampage; the scene is short-lived, leaving more questions than answers. It reveals just enough for audiences to classify his actions as a crime of passion. As the plot continues to unfold the motive that drove him to act so violently appears trivial in comparison. This is a point of interest because the excessive nature of his crime implies that his character was already stressed and suffered a break of his sanity indicating that there were other forces at fault that pushed him over the edge. The motive was a perceived infidelity with Takeo discovering that his wife was in love with another man. In reality there was never an affair taking place. The feelings were not mutual and was an obsessive crush that Kayako had. Murdering her can be seen as an extreme response in this particular situation. His motive based off a perceived marital betrayal can be interpreted as succumbing to the pressure of societal and culture expectations that lead him to feel disgraced and ashamed. Kayako’s longing to be with another person can be illustrated as her unhappiness with the role of wife and mother. These are both deeply ingrained into Japanese society and are strongly enforced by traditional beliefs and contemporary gender relations. From Takeo’s perspective, the punishment fit the crime.

Besides the motive of her killer, the way in which she died is critical in her transition from a victim to villain. The horrible manner of death not only cursed the home, but transformed Kayako into a supernatural entity hell bent on revenge. This curse caused anyone that came in contact with Kayako or the home to also become ghosts stuck in an endless cycle. This cycle and curse continued to be reborn due to the spiritual pollution that Kayako herself had as well as that she had imposed on others. Regardless of how innocent those that encountered the curse were, no one was immune from her wrath. Referring back to the use of the word *grievance* by Boey brings about a pattern in her merciless method of revenge. According to the Oxford University Press online dictionary, they define grievance as “A real or imagined *wrong* or other cause for complaint or protest, especially unfair treatment,” and continues on to say, “A feeling of *resentment* over something believed to be wrong or unfair.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Kayako’s grief was not satisfied even after the passing of the man who had murdered her. The husband was simply a pawn of the real perpetrator. In life, the society in which she left was responsible. She was victimized long before her demise, suppressed by expectations and roles that were upheld by traditional ideologies. By killing all those that encounter her or the curse, she receives a type of spiritual restitution by seeking retribution on everyone that helped in maintaining this oppressive society. Kayako’s transition into vengeful female ghost is the premise of many contemporary J-horror movies. Though their circumstances may vary the connection they share, the lives they left behind. In Kayako’s case, she was perceived to have betrayed her role as housewife and mother. In being resurrected as a spirit after death she is free from those expectations and the society that had bound her to them. Though the actions are viewed as evil, in all actuality these female entities are free and untouchable. The female imagery in the genre are symbolic of women and the situation they face in contemporary Japan.

The current atmosphere of Japan is intriguing because it highlights the conflict of trying to juggle deep-rooted traditional ideologies and culture with modern expectations. In the case of Post-war Japan, the roles of women have shifted beyond the confines of home and their priorities have expanded to include more than just the family. Necessary to assimilate, Japanese women are presented with a complex situation of reforming their identity to that of the quintessential ideal of a modern liberal woman; at the same time, when following the lead of other members of society they are chastised for breaking the conservative traditional norms. The transition from a conservative to an almost hybrid-like culture in modern Japan has had and continues to have a negative impact on gender relations. Transforming the female image into the vengeful ghost visualizes the growing anxieties and tensions in Japanese society, as the women challenge the patriarchal order that many have become accustomed to. Jay McRoy explains how the popularity of this theme reflects the societal woes of contemporary Japan describing these ghostly females as, “…culturally-coded entities in that they function allegorically, their demise inextricably linked with social transformations and anxieties that often accompany such changes.”[[3]](#footnote-3) These J-horror villains reflect this dilemma occurring in contemporary Japan. It chronicles the struggle as well as the break from social bondage, thus with their supernatural depictions become a symbol of the liberated woman.

The cinematic interpretation of reality embodies the traditional cultural influences that reflect ideologies. In the case of the genre of Japanese horror, they support the roles from which women are abandoning and those they hope to achieve. Using a variety of contemporary J-horror films as the primary sources for my research, I will focus on their portrayal of the female form as the villain and their connotations to the negative state of gender relations in Japan. Looking at the visual motifs, theatrical elements, and inspirations will help in gaining a better understanding of their relationship to the tensions and role shifting of women.

With the female essence becoming the norm for evil ghostly characters in contemporary J-horror, the directors are using the medium of visual media as means to narrate the societal issues they are witnessing. “Horror, as a theme/genre, is a manifestation of the society’s consciousness that is often presence via media such as film.”[[4]](#footnote-4) The consistency of the vilification of the female form indicate that the struggle of Japanese women is still a very real problem. Scholarly articles provide a more in-depth look into the state of gender roles in Japan, progress, as well as the factors that are preventing women from playing a larger role. Sumiko Iwao author of *The Japanese Women Traditional image and Changing Reality* addresses the changing face of Japan and the transformation of the female identity caused by the shifting of role expectations.  Iwao states that:

Although women in Japan have been relatively content as backstage shaper and observers of the unfolding events of history, they are nevertheless changing rapidly in the face of new developments and international influence, faster, it would seem, than them laboring out in the limelight. The uneven pace of which male and female attitudes and behavior are changing is a current source of stress in Japanese society.[[5]](#footnote-5)

 Her statement paints an accurate picture of the current state of Japanese society. Even though women have traditionally always been low on the social hierarchy, they were respected for their overall contributions to society overall by being the foundation of the Japanese family. They are the heart of the household and are responsible for the upbringing of the children. The coining of such phrases like, “good wives, wise mothers” reflects the traditional Japanese mentality of where the woman’s priorities were expected. The shifting of gender expectations began in Post-war Japan where women gained an enormous amount of independence and opportunities in comparison to the past. Forces such as modernization, economic boom, foreign influences, etc. constructed an interesting hybrid of traditional Japanese culture. Some choose to grab the chance at pursuing higher education, holding off marriage, seeking employment full or part-time, or attempt to balance all of these along with a family life. Others are content with going the more traditional route or choose to do so later in life. Regardless of which route they decide there tends to be some form of blame and criticism coming from other Japanese. Those who become more independent have faced criticism for inadvertently contributing to the deterioration of the Japanese family, which has been used as a basis for reasoning behind current affairs. Women who choose to stay at home are faced with criticism from other women for upholding the status quo and turning back progress on gender inequality; at the same time, staying at home are grounds for not helping contribute to the economic welfare of the nation. There have been attempts at structural reforms such as ‘womenomics’[[6]](#footnote-6), but the good intentions fall short due to traditional attitudes causing more hurdles. The stress is there, frustration is increasing, and tensions are growing between both women and men. All of these are evident and are projected on the big-screen. Women, victims in life transforming to villains of the afterlife. They are portrayed as evil, the curse they uphold affecting everyone. Their final form as ghosts bent on vengeance cannot be tamed and they are finally free to do as they wish. How have women become the molds for the supernatural imagery in Japanese culture? Looking more into the history of not only the Japanese strong belief in the supernatural is one small detail to understanding the contemporary imagery. The various cultural elements that helped shape the modern representation of the monstrous feminine reflect the patriarchal bondage and articulate the struggle of the Japanese woman.

**Birth of the Japanese spirit**

Japan has always had a fascination with the supernatural and ghosts especially. Beginning with the earliest folk lore and mythologies, ghosts continue to have consistent presence in literature, art, and film. The popularity of the supernatural goes beyond that of mere fascination, but stems from the strong belief that these entities do exists alongside the living. Although many cultures around the world tend to have their own versions of supernatural entities, Japans interpretation tends to be particularly frightening. The traditional influences behind these beings portray them as still being an active member of society rather than characters devised to invoke fear.

When evaluating the numerous cultural influences responsible for this, Shinto plays a large role. Shinto is the indigenous belief system of Japan and while some consider it a religion, others say it’s more of a philosophy; regardless of what it is, it is the essence to the Japanese way of life. According to Shinto, everything has a spirit. This includes elements of nature, animals, inanimate objects, and humans. Furthermore, two important principles that are stressed is that of clean and unclean. As mentioned previously about what exactly Shinto is, when it comes to viewing it from the religious perspective it lacks the concept of life after death, or heaven as understood in the Judeo-Christian faiths. In regards to becoming a spirit after death, it is important to live lifestyle that is ‘clean’ in nature to ward off spiritual pollution. Clean can be considered anything from physically cleanliness, living morally, and practicing spiritual devotions. If one lives a life of uncleanliness they will have the possibility of living a spiritually polluted life that will in turn affect their spiritual after-life. Unclean can be anything that might be physically dirty, to living an impure lifestyle, lacking morals, etc. The acknowledgment of spirts are an important part of the Shinto faith, even more so is that of evil spirits.

Like the rigid role system of Japanese society, the spiritual realm has it much the same way. When it comes to ghosts, it is a complex system filled with hundreds of different types. The type of ghost depends on various factors such as manner of death, unfinished business, intentions after death etc. and every one is unique. In looking at the vengeful female in contemporary Japanese horror films, there is two different names that is important to keep in mind. First is the *yūrei* (幽霊), which is the most commonly used term. In an extensive book about Japanese ghosts, author Zach Davisson explains “Yūrei 幽 (dim) +霊(spirit). The most common Japanese term for ghost…The kanji splits into two distinct halves- 幽 (yu; dim, hard to see) +霊 (rei; spirit) – translating directly as ‘dim spirit.’ The second kanji in the pair, 霊, is the cornerstone for almost all Japanese words dealing with ghosts and the realms of the dead.”[[7]](#footnote-7) *Onryō* (怨霊) is a more specific type of spirit that fits the characters in many J-horror films with the first kanji of the word even translating to “grudge”[[8]](#footnote-8).

From the Western perspective these supernatural creatures would easily be categorized as ghosts. Deconstructing them through the Japanese understanding reveals that they are more spirits that continue to cling onto many of their human characteristics as well as their form. This is part of why even though these individuals have passed on they still have a profound impact in the living world. Shinto is the origin of the ghost lore in Japan and explains their strong relevance even in contemporary culture. Imagery of ghosts have evolved through different periods in Japanese history due to other influences beyond Shinto. These other influences are key for examining the modern symbolism. Even though there are both male and female spirits documented through a variety of mediums including in contemporary film, why is the image of the female become so iconic of the spirit realm?

The patriarchal atmosphere is indeed a contributing factor that pushed the female form as the norm when it came to spiritual representation. Shinto reinforced patriarchy and widened the gender divide. It was responsible for spreading ideology that made their feminine nature the grounds for vileness and evil. This made the female body seem as a vessel that could prove dangerous. They were labeled as unclean by Shinto standards. Writer Rebecca Copeland further explains the fear of the feminine form exclaiming:

Given that her body was the site of discharges and emissions, miraculous change and transformation, she has become suspect of harboring all that is dangerous and threatening. Her power was most apparent during her menses or at childbirth, when her body demonstrated the amazing capacity to reproduce itself. Women in these states were thus labeled unclean and defiled. The labeling was in itself sufficient to yoke women to feelings of shame.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Besides Shinto, the migration of Buddhism and Confucianism into Japan upheld existing beliefs as well as increased the popularity of the supernatural through cultural products; not only that, they reinforced the evil stigma placed on women and supported the oppressive mindset in an already patriarchal land. Buddhism introduced foreign ideas such as afterlife and karma. Stories began to appear during the Edo period that took existing ghost imagery and tales and added a Buddhist flare. Buddhism’s ghost tales became extremely popular during this period. These tales are called *kaidan-shū*.[[10]](#footnote-10) They created a new sub-culture of ghosts that were sent to punish those who did wrong. Looking at the trend of the themes of vengeance and the relationship to Buddhist philosophy, Sara L. Sumpter states:

Themes of the tales were intended to convey Buddhist moral values and the punishments and rewards inhere in carious deeds. These moralistic qualities were shared by many ghost stories and folktales, particularly those involving avenging spirits, whose act of punishing the people who had harmed them could be said to be an implementation of the Buddhist belief that those who commit crimes will suffer for their misdeeds. This theme is suffering for misdeeds is integral to the narratives surrounding the vengeful spirits and can be seen in some of Japan’s earliest literature.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Kaidan-shū was one of many popular literary genres that embraced the supernatural trend. Even one of Japan’s must celebrated literary pieces, *The Tale of Genji*, featured a female supernatural entity who killed people out of rage after her death. Besides literary works, there were many traditional *ukiyo-e* prints, scrolls, etc. dating all the way back to the Edo period (1603-1868). In taking these tales and transforming those into a more tangible medium only increased their appeal. Each piece was a testament to the artist’s creative imagination in their unique renditions of the supernatural. As the number of these print increased overtime so did the occurrence of visual motifs, that of the female being more frequently portrayed as the supernatural entities. So began the iconography of ghosts, putting the female face of yūrei.[[12]](#footnote-12)

As with Buddhism, Confucianism is another philosophical school that is not indigenous to Japan that had become a permanent fixture of the Japanese religious landscape. Coming from China, Confucian teachings strived for sociopolitical order and structure. To attain this order and maintain a balance many Confucian principles focused on filial piety, education, and a strict hierarchical system. To understand the impact that Confucian virtues had in further suppressing women, Xinyan Jiang analyzes the social context of Confucianism stating:

What has been taken for granted by early Confucianism is the existent sexual division of labor and patriarchal criteria for morality according to which the proper role that women should play is only that of mothers and wives who out to stay home and serve their husbands and parents-in-law, and take care of children and housework. Given such an understanding of the proper role of women in society, to justify and emphasize the moral significance of appropriately playing one’s role is to justify and intensify the oppression of women.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Confucian virtues and principles complemented those of Shinto. Shinto made it very clear that the female body was unclean thus putting them below men on the social hierarchy. Welcoming Confucianism into Japan pushed even more favor upon the males upholding their status as the dominate sex.

The very foundation of Japanese society was a breeding ground for stories of the supernatural. Shinto made it very clear to the Japanese that spirits were not only all around them, but that even after death the human spirit continues to coexist among the living. This along with the other mentioned beliefs put elements of the supernatural as a popular choice for folklore and literature. The introduction of Confucian virtues into Japanese society helped in maintaining as well as strengthening patriarchal ideals. Women were pushed even farther down to a subordinate role being left to do only domesticated positions. Buddhism contributed the idea of life after death and moral standards to adhere by that could either benefit the individual or take them down an unfortunate path of terror. Buddhism role in heightening the popularity of yūrei, especially codifying the female yūrei in the genre, which can be seen in contemporary J-horror films. Further examining the cultural and artistic components behind the imagery of yūrei, both traditional and contemporary, will aid in analyzing the films.

**Image of yūrei**

Since the first images of yūrei surfaced during the Edo period through ukiyo-e, various aspects of Japanese culture such as traditional theatre and dance have greatly influenced the character that audiences have come to know in contemporary J-horror films. The embracement of the visual medium can be accredited to the Edo period. Beside the artistic motif of many of these period pieces consistently portraying the yūrei as female, the appearance of them at this time is far from their contemporary renditions. The lack of defining characteristics can be attributed to Shinto beliefs that spirits coexist among the living along and is reflected in the earliest prints. The need to separate the human form from that of the spirit was not really necessary. Becoming a spirit was more of a transition into the next stage of ones existence rather than the indefinite end. When looking at the influence of the Heian period, the hair style of the court is often shared with yūrei.

One of the most recognizable and symbolic aspects to yūrei is the long unkempt black hair. Prints depicting and originating from this period document the lavish styles of the court women, but are most notable for the long flowing black hair worn in the paintings. By Heian beauty standards, wearing ones hair long and unbound conveys concepts associated with sexuality as well as enhanced the desirability of a woman.[[14]](#footnote-14) The incorporation of the Heian hair style in ghostly imagery is an interesting choice. The hairstyle was no longer a symbol of beauty as it was when worn by courtesans, Sumpter adds that it was “…far from conveying the frightening revenant it would eventually come to represent…”[[15]](#footnote-15) The unbound hair eventually became typical of all yūrei imagery and was no longer used when depicting the living in scroll prints, it became a symbol of psychological and spiritual turmoil.[[16]](#footnote-16) Refining the looks of yūrei is only one part to creating an image of terror and vengeance. Every detail is important, and the manner in which one moves can expresses messages and feelings that words cannot.

When looking at the genre of horror in its entirety, the evil apparitions in J-horror are quite different than the imagery of ghosts in Western culture that many have become accustomed. Yūrei in comparison to other supernatural beings of other genres can be perceived as simplistic in their appearance. This doesn’t indicate lack of creativity on behalf of those who produce these visuals, but rather demonstrates the concepts of fear and death in Japanese society. The aspects of yūrei that are considered so horrifying originate from Japanese aesthetics and philosophy, which stress that horror is not based on what is seen but comes from what is suggested.[[17]](#footnote-17) With ukiyo-e scrolls providing the framework for codifying the female as the face of the yūrei, performing arts like *kabuki* and the more modern dance style of *butoh* animated them adding another dimension of fear.

Kabuki is one of the most celebrated forms of theater in Japan, it emerged during the seventeenth century, but it wasn’t until the later parts of the Edo period that it really flourished.[[18]](#footnote-18) The costumes and characters were exaggerated, colorful, and captivated the audiences of the time. As the supernatural eventually transitioned into a new genre of storytelling kaidan-shū, theater actors intensified the supernatural folk-lore. The popularity of ghost tales in Kabuki Theater helped set the stage for the big screen.

Unlike the other cultural influences that refined the yūrei image, the cryptic dance of butoh is one of the very few contemporary sources. Butoh emerged in 1950’s Japan and was developed by Tatsumi Hijikata.[[19]](#footnote-19) Butoh has caused much debate with arguments about what category of dance it is, its inspirations, and the message that is being conveyed through its unique and sometimes grotesque movements. Other styles of dance are appreciated for their beauty and skill. Dancers tend to practice to insure perfection of their art by focusing on their form, grace, and routine. On the contrary, butoh embodies the imperfections that other styles shy away from. Toshiharu Kasai and Kate Parsons describe the movements as, “not ordinary ones: certain parts of the dancer’s body may tremble, stiffen, or jerk with distortions or twists. All sorts of disorganized movements, both abrupt and gradual, can emerge.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The movements are both natural and unnatural. Many dance aficionados and experts spanning many disciplines have come up with various interpretations to what exactly is being conveyed in butoh. General consensus appears to be that it depends on the butoh dancer, what they are trying to express through their movements, and how society perceives those movements. It’s about expressing and discovering the relationship between the mind and body, the natural flow of the body representing the dancer’s internal feelings out.[[21]](#footnote-21) Toshiharu and Parsons argue that to an extent that this is true but that it falls more along the line of emerging from suppressive circumstances and propose that, “Suppressed impulses or buried emotions are often released during Butoh dance or performance, and movements that are authentic to the dancer (ones which should be been experienced or released when they were instead suppressed) emerge.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

**Bound to domesticity**

When looking at gender inequality and tension in contemporary Japan it is necessary to look at how values and beliefs are at fault for social stratifying Japanese society. Besides acknowledging that inequality exists, it is even more important to look at how these values and beliefs continue to be maintained and applied in modern day in order to respect the struggle of the Japanese woman. The inequality between men and women can only be understood by examining the values, beliefs, and history of Japan.

The role of mother and wife in Japan has always been highly regarded and respected. The popular Japanese phrase *ryōsai kenbo* which translates to “good wives, wise mothers” was coined during the Meiji Restoration. This saying reflects the domestic destiny expected of Japanese women into what was perceived as the only acceptable role at the time. The origins of the term symbolize the systemic maintenance of gender inequality in Japan. During this time Japan underwent major structural and social reforms. The government hoped to create a stronger and modern nation that could be compared and rival their Western neighbors. In order to achieve this it was necessary to focuses on improving the educational opportunities of the population. Before this time, the opportunity for women to get an education were extremely limited and due to societal expectations it was sometimes frowned upon for those who attempted to pursue one. During the restoration it was important to include *every* citizen. This is the moment when the push for women’s education began. Though it appeared to be a breakdown of the gender inequality in Japan it was really not the intent. The focus of studies and the basis of the curriculum was vastly different for woman than it was for men. In order to build a stronger nation the government stressed the importance of the Japanese family. With the Japanese family as the focus, the role that women played was crucial as they were considered the heart of the home. They were also responsible for the upbringing of the next generation.

The educational reforms during the Meiji restoration gave the role of housewife and mother more importance than ever. Family dynamics are extremely important in Japanese culture and society and without women leading in the home it was perceived as a perversion of tradition. This perversion was straying away from womanly expectations. This caused much anxiety and panic among the population. Unfortunately some viewed that the modernization brought too much independence and opportunities for the female population. Did these fears become reality? Did Japanese society come crumbling down? The panic was not completely unfounded but did cause a confusion of women’s expectations and an increase in tension between men and women. Looking at the horror of reality will create a better understanding of the current social issues that are pushing such vilified supernatural manifestations of women in the J-horror genre.

**The horror of reality**

Horrific deaths, vengeful spirits, and powerful curses are only a few of the reoccurring themes in J-horror. What do they symbolize? How do female yūrei in contemporary film relate to the modern Japanese woman? The monstrous characters and themes in these films are manifestations of very real issues. Behind the exaggerated imagery in these films lies the oppressed woman, the tension of gender relations in Japan, and the struggle to build a stronger female identity. In his book discussing the social implications behind contemporary horror cinema McRoy claims, “… Japanese horror cinema provides valuable insights into the assorted perspective constellating around the morphing sex and gender roles that accompany a period of economic, social, and cultural transition.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Japan’s history has been filled with numerous instances where these transitions have taken place due to foreign influences, social reforms, and strengthening the country. Those instances fail in comparison to the drastic changes to culture and the Japanese way of life that took place in Post-war Japan. The Japanese people were rebuilding their national identity, modernizing, and becoming more westernized. In a very short time the face of traditional Japan was transformed. Keeping a cultural identity is important and it is always beneficial for a society to honor their cultural heritage and tradition. The issue though lies at the Japanese mind-set that continues to uphold traditional values and ideologies. In doing so the progress that women have made in the roles they play in contemporary society tend to be judged unfairly. Their decisions then become associated with issues plaguing Japan such as declining birth rate, the break-down of the Japanese family, marriage, etc.

It’s always easy when dealing with serious problems to come up with a variety of explanations in order to understand and cope with them. When examining the state of inequality between the sexes in contemporary Japan, how has the past and the idea of imagery in films really reflect the attitudes of the Japanese people? Do the Japanese think that inequality is a problem to begin with? Or is the imagery of women in J-horror films inspired more by cultural elements favored by a director rather than being cinematic metaphors for societal affairs? A paper written by ハンナ・シャジニナ titled *Historical Study on the Social Statuses of Japanese Women*, シャジニナ details the changing statuses of women through Japan’s history and the factors behind them. The forces deemed responsible for the changes addressed in these historical periods are then used to analyze the dilemma of gender equality in modern Japan. To support these points シャジニナ provided percentage results on polls completed by Japanese citizens by the Cabinet Office conducted in 2004. The participants consisted of both Japanese men and women who were asked a series of questions regarding gender equality in society[[24]](#footnote-24). The results of the poll questions disclosed that:

According to ‘poll of gender equality in society’, in the matter of societies ‘preferential treatment towards men’ the percentage of participants who answered in agreement to this statement exceeded 70%, participants who replied ‘equality’ remained at a low level of about 20%. Looking at the Post-war era, the way of life for men and women have changed significantly; on the other hand, despite this it is safe to say that gender discrimination continues to exist and prevail.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Over a thousand Japanese citizens participated in these polls conducted by the Cabinet Office. The provided analysis of these polls give a fair assumption of the attitudes held by the Japanese public. The high percentage of those who responded in agreement that not only inequality exists, but that society tends to favor men more, indicate that there are current issues of gender discrimination occurring. These issues reflect the anxiety of the Japanese people due to the changing roles of both men and women and the struggle for balance and equality.

A declining birth rate is a grave concern that has been causing anxiety among government officials and the public. Japan’s population has been on a decreasing slope since the late 1950’s. As the aging population grows and the birth rate dwindles, the possible future outcome if the issue is not addressed will have a negative impact on both a social and economic level. A recent article in the Washington Post online discusses statistics from the census bureau of Japan states that over the last five years alone that the population has dropped by a staggering one million people.[[26]](#footnote-26) As of now the birth rate is 1.4 children per woman but in order to keep an increase in the population it needs to be more around 2.1.[[27]](#footnote-27) The projected population count as of 2015 was estimated at around 127,110,000, but if the decline in birth rate continues the U.N estimates that Japan will lose 34% of their population by the end of the century.[[28]](#footnote-28) Why don’t Japanese women just have more babies? It might seem like the most logical and easiest solution to a very threatening problem. Though there are fair amount of women who don’t mind the prospects of settling down and having children the younger generation of Japanese women have mixed feelings. Increased opportunities for higher education and careers outside the domestic sphere are becoming more appealing. Many have become content with being single, casual dating, and being active consumers. “However, by the mid-1980’s, the post baby boom demographic shift began to appear as a labor shortage, and in 1990 and 1991, government officials began to express concern at the shrinking birthrate, a product, they said, of women’s ambitions outside the home.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

Stating that the shrinking birthrate is indeed a product of ‘ambitions outside the home’ can be interpreted as one that demonizes the behavior and life-style choices of women in the Post-war Japan. These ambitions that Japanese government officials are referring to aren’t extravagant or ridiculous in any way in comparison to the serious subject matter of a shrinking birthrate might suggest. Ambitions include what any individual would want to ensure a stable future and a stronger personal identity. Better education, taking time before making important life changing decisions, getting a high-paying job, etc. Japanese culture has always prized itself on maintaining a strong sense of family values and preserving the traditional nuclear family. The agenda has switched directions towards suspending the prospects of marriage and family life and focusing on forming a stronger female identity. The sheer volume of women who are putting off marriage and family until they are older are extreme, but when viewed alongside the rapid transformation of gender and social expectations in Post-war Japan it isn’t at all surprising. Is there really any correlation or statistical proof that give any merit to the statements made by the Japanese government?

Marriage is an important part to constructing the Japanese household and is viewed as necessary in order to be regarded as a true adult in some circumstances.[[30]](#footnote-30) With expectations for Japanese women always being more constraining than that of men marriage is no exception. There is even a special term in Japanese that defines the right time for women to marry. The word is *tekireiki* and can be translated as ‘marriageable age’ and is defined as being between the ages of 22-25 years.[[31]](#footnote-31) Many Japanese women of the younger generation are fulfilling higher education, careers, or simply enjoy living at home and are beginning to become unconcerned with tekireiki. This new-age attitude of freedom is beginning to bother older generation and more conservative Japanese. These two groups link those attitudes to the other social issues such as the birth rate decline. In 2004 the Economic and Social Research institute of the Japanese Cabinet Office in Tokyo released a study inspecting the decline in the Japanese birthrate and whether or not it had any relationship to the fluctuation of the crude marriage rate of individuals in Post-war Japan.

…After the 1980’s, there has been a decline in the rate of marriage. Furthermore, since the 1970’s the marriage rate of the wives first marriage as also rapidly been decreasing and is connected to the current changes in marriage rate. This change is due to the rate of women marrying between the ages of 20-24 has been declining steadily…[[32]](#footnote-32)

More opportunities were available to women during the 1970’s as well as the Japanese economy picking up in the 1980’s. Women were ready to become more involved outside the home and take part of the new capitalist atmosphere. When they ventured outside the confines of the home they began to leave the bounds of domesticity behind.

**Analyzing J-horror**

The three most critically acclaimed and popular contemporary films with the theme of female yūrei are The Ring *リング*、Dark Water  *仄暗い水の底から,* and Ju-on. Analyzing and inspecting key elements in each of these J-horror films creates a better understanding of the reality of gender relations. It highlights the female struggle in modern Japan and how these have manifested in the cinematic arts.

The Ring by Nakata Hideo was released in Japan in 1998. It is most iconic for setting the stage for future films that vilified the female form. Nakata is the mastermind behind some of the most terrifying films in the J-horror genre. The plot for this film is actually an adaption of the book by Suzuki Koji also called The Ring released in 1991. The film focuses on an urban legend about a cursed video tape. The tape is full of mentally disturbing and abstract imagery. Towards the end of the video a woman slowly climbs out of a well. After someone finishes watching the cursed tape they receive a phone call in which a voice tells them that they will die in seven days. There was a sudden surge of mysterious deaths among high school students that could not be explained. This caught the interest of the films protagonist Reiko. Reiko is a single divorced mother of a young boy named Yoichi. Reiko is also not only a mother but is dedicated to her career as a reporter. After one of her family members mysteriously dies at a young age (which she later discovers is caused by the video tape), along with hearing the myth of the cursed video tape, Reiko decides to investigate the matter by traveling to the island of Izu. Izu is where it is rumored that the cursed tape resides. Traveling to Izu and finding the tape, Reiko hesitantly watches it and ends up receiving the notorious phone call that confirms her fears. She is thrusted into the curse and goes into action to discover the history behind the tape. Her research reveals that the girl climbing out of the well on the tape is Sadako who was murdered by her own father. Her father viewed her as a monster because she had unexplainable psychic powers. These powers she inherited from her mother who also met a similar fate. Feeling that she can end the curse she recruits the help of her ex-husband Ryuji to save her life. Much is revealed throughout the film, her son Yoichi watches the tape, Ryuji dies at the hands of Sadako, but ultimately Reiko and her son survive. Their survival is indebted to spiritual intervention by Ryuji. They were saved even though Reiko went as far as to find Sadako’s corpse in the well and give it a final resting place.

Sadako is of course the main person of interest in this case being the vengeful yūrei, but it is the directorial changes made on Nakata’s behalf that speak louder than the grotesque appearance of Sadako herself. Though the film is not that far off from its original two major changes were done dealing with the main characters of the film Reiko and Sadako. The main protagonist in the film is female but in Suzuki’s novel the protagonist was a male reporter named Asakawa Kazuyuki. Switching the gender and the rather ‘non-traditional’ lifestyle that Reiko leads embodies the struggle of the Japanese women. Reiko’s life-style is still perceived as a controversial in accordance to the still highly regarded traditional norms in Japanese society.

The yūrei Sadako was also changed, though not as drastic as in the case of Reiko. Sadako’s behavior, demeanor, and attitude do not reflect those of her character in the original novel. In both versions Sadako was killed by her father, but in the novel her attitude and behaviors were typical of the subordinate and dutiful daughter. She was written to appear more of a victim before being transformed into a vengeful entity, but in the film she is portrayed as originally being inherently evil and testing the patriarchal structure. When contemplating the change Nakata made to Sadako when looking at her father’s motives to brutally murder her, Wee claims that, “ Such representation can be interpreted as an indictment of an uncontrollable, empowered female who must be punished and contained for her rejection of social norms, values, and moralities.[[33]](#footnote-33)"

Looking at the female characters in The Ring reveal not only the reality of the modern Japanese woman with Reiko but the struggles and lengths she must go to avoid stigma and patriarchal bondage through Sadako. The film demonstrates a male dominated world with both female protagonist and antagonist trying to navigate through the hurdles. The plot of both film and novel are saturated in narrative preaching traditional ideologies putting women in a subordinate role. Sadako death was horrible and by her own father. He should have been the one person to always protect her. For Reiko and her son despite all of the attempts to end the curse on their own it was ultimately the spirit of her deceased ex-husband Ryuji that saved them from Sadako’s wrath. Inarguably the most memorable aspect of the film is the vengeful yūrei Sadako. Though the narrative really does support the dependency upon man and patriarchal structure, the lasting impression she leaves signifies liberation and casts the film as more of an ode to the rise of the modern Japanese woman.

In the spirit of scaring audiences across the globe, Nakata Hideo released another J-horror classic in 2002, Dark Water. It is very similar to the other films but has one major difference that sets it apart, the yūrei is a young female child. Like Nakata’s previous film The Ring, the protagonist of Dark Water is also a female, Yoshimi. She shares much in common with other female characters in Nakata’s other horror flicks. The beginning of the film leaves audiences to bear witness to a tense situation in Yoshimi’s life. She is currently in the midst of a divorce with her husband. It is not faring well for her because they are fighting for custody of their young daughter Ikuko. Yoshimi previously had a job proof-reading horror novels which caused her to have a mental breakdown. Her breakdown is brought up by her husband during custodial negotiations. It is a very big sign that even though it was not Yoshimi’s fault that she suffered mental anguish, that it is more of her attempts at juggling her domestic life with pursuing a career outside the home.

The breaking of Yoshimi’s family life is perceived by outsiders and ex-husband as her fault. The breakdown of the family unit is a key aspect when understanding the story as well as the yūrei Mitsuko. Mitsuko died abandoned and alone by falling into a water well on top of her apartment complex when trying to retrieve a small bag she dropped inside. As the story unfolds it is revealed that she was quite often neglected by her mother. A mother is supposed to be the one person a child can count on and rely on. Until Yoshimi begins to discover more of Mitsuko during their residency at the complex, Yoshimi finds out that Mitsuko is still considered missing not dead. It is also speculated that Mitsuko is from a single-parent household because there is absolutely no flashbacks of mention of her father.

Yoshimi is searching for a home to start a new life with Ikuko and her and ends up moving into a shabby apartment in Mitsuko’s old complex. Shortly after moving in Ikuko mysteriously keeps running into Mitsuko’s bag and despite her mother’s attempts to discard it the purse eventually finds its way into their home. This is seen as an invitation to Mitsuko to enter the home and fuse with the family. Yoshimi and Ikuko begin to witness a plethora of polluted water entering through the ceiling in the apartment. The more water that leaks into the home, the more Mitsuko begins to reveal herself. Mitsuko begins to threaten Ikuko, and Yoshimi is terrified that her daughter will become the spirits next victim. In reality Mitsuko wants Yoshimi. In the end Yoshimi sacrifices herself, embraces the corpse of young Mitsuko, and becomes her mother in the spirit world in order to save her own daughter.

At first glance it may appear that the motives of the yūrei in Dark Water as well as Yoshimi’s sacrifices sends a message supporting the traditional female roles. Mitsuko’s persistence and drive in the after-life is not desperate or crude but are characteristics of a leader. Though Yoshimi had to sacrifice her own life for the sake of Ikuko, by doing so she became the ultimate mother figure. Mitsuko is more of a teacher and regardless of whether or not if the lesson was patriarchal in nature. Her ability to make such a strong impact on Yoshimi and her daughter that makes her a liberating ghost. Yoshimi’s characters summarizes the struggle of the non-traditional Japanese woman to overcome the obstacles that come along with the single mother role. Her sacrifice signifies the freedom in recreating one’s self in order to be at peace. Unlike Mitsuko, Kayako’s ghost doesn’t leave any survivors.

Ju-on’s storyline and characters were appropriate to introduce the vilification of the female and patriarchal bondage. The brief synopsis of the film in the beginning only unpacked half of the issue of gender relations both cinematically and realistically speaking. The character of Kayako and her backstory is vaguely touched on. Shimizu focused mostly on her murder and the grudge that came from it. Throughout the other grudge films more comes to light. This first film is more applicable when exploring the monstrous supernatural imagery of women and societal oppression. Kayako’s character is always shrouded in mystery. At times it is hard to sympathize with her being murdered in such a sadistic manner after seeing how ruthless she is in her killing spree. As one of the last scenes reveals, viewers are reminded that underneath the grudge and all of the pent up hatred she is still only a woman, a victim of circumstance. Despite the vilification of her character, is her actions after death depict more of a ‘wronged woman’s’ agenda or is she a figure of liberation?

Her husband’s rage represents the manifestation of not only the masculine anxiety that is causing gender tensions in contemporary Japan but the state of Japan in its entirety. The shifting roles of a population, mixed expectations, and a fusion of traditional and modern culture. Leaving the domestic sphere is scary for outsiders but empowering for women. Their absence could possibly be detrimental to the future generations of Japan and crumble the foundation of the family system that is so highly regarded. These fears pushed Takeo to the edge and transformed him into a self-fulfilling prophecy, destroying his family before the inevitable threat of his wife’s dream of independence. His murderous actions was his last stance of projecting his male dominance onto the household.

Her yearning to be free from the home is what killed Kayako, but her quest for it didn’t fade along with her. Before she takes her victims she enlightens them on her struggle. The deeper one becomes intertwined with her curse they share her sufferings. She is not just a yūrei seeking vengeance and blood but an agent of liberation. Her victims become enlightened of much more than her grievances but to the horrors of society and what they are being subjected to. Through death they join her in continuing the curse and in turn continue to enlighten others.

**Conclusion**

Ghosts, murder, sacrifice, and the Japanese family are all elements present in these top three J-horror films. These films have captivated audiences beyond the shore of Japan. The surge in popularity among directors signifies not only a strong belief in the supernatural, but reveals the broken state of gender relations in contemporary Japan. The vilification of the female form isn’t a technique for the sake of film, but works as a messenger for societal issues and the changing expectations of women. The female yūrei aren’t exactly evil but they are more on a mission to enlighten and become free from the patriarchal bondage. The spirits are finally free from the society that tried to repress them. Women, victims of life and villains of the afterlife. The yūrei are leaders in liberating the Japanese women from traditional roles and expectations and setting her free upon the world to do as they please.

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