



Japan's Perception of Women: The Case of Kurosawa's Rashomon

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Received: 07 Dec 2023; Received in revised form: 09 Jan 2024; Accepted: 18 Jan 2024; Available online: 29 Jan 2024
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Abstract— This essay examines gender representation in Akira Kurosawa's film "Rashomon," specifically focusing on the film's portrayal of women within the socio-cultural context of 1950s Japan. "Rashomon" presents a narrative that reflects the entrenched patriarchal norms of the era, depicting women as submissive and victimized while men are shown as dominant figures. The essay argues that, despite the ostensibly masculine spirit of Kurosawa's films, the female characters in "Rashomon" offer a nuanced view that transcends simple categorization. The film's narrative structure, which offers multiple perspectives on a single incident but predominantly from male viewpoints, reinforces traditional gender norms, with the female character's autonomy and agency being notably disregarded. This representation aligns with the contemporary societal views which saw women as domestic and dependent. The essay critically explores the complexities of Masago's character, countering arguments that she is manipulative, instead suggesting that within the patriarchal constraints of her society, a woman's sexuality may be her only perceived power. The essay concludes that "Rashomon" serves as a powerful commentary on the gender inequalities of the time, reminding us of the continuous need for gender equality and the empowerment of women.



Keywords— *Autonomy, Gender Inequality, Patriarchal Norms, Rashomon, Socio-cultural Context*

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant directors in the history of movies and cinematography is the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. He has actively contributed to the making of his movies on numerous levels, including acting as a screenwriter and editor. In his films, Kurosawa explored a wide range of themes, such as socioeconomic disparities, human identity and the sense of self and heroism amongst many others. The focus of this essay will be on gender depiction in the movie Rashomon, one of Kurosawa's films' most contentious themes. His films frequently feature male protagonists who exhibit traits that are normally associated with masculinity, such as strength, aggression, and bravery, while the opposite is true for women, who typically play roles that are traditionally feminine, such as becoming mothers and wives and are also given far less screen time. Despite the fact that Kurosawa's films can be regarded as wholly masculine in spirit, the women depicted are far more

nuanced than they might appear at first. The film "Rashomon" highlights the repressive and dominant role of men in traditional Japanese culture by depicting the plight of women as sad and tragic. The film serves as a commentary on the social reality of its time by reinforcing traditional gender norms and patriarchy by depicting women as weak, submissive, and objectified.

Rashomon, for those unfamiliar, revolves around an unpleasant episode in the woods between a notorious robber, a samurai, and his wife, Masako, which was witnessed by a woodcutter. The bandit rapes the samurai's wife, and the samurai dies, although it is unclear how; we hear four distinct accounts, each describing a different story of how the samurai died, and each conflicting as to the degree of blame the woman bore for her husband's death. It is unclear who is on trial for what, but the honour of samurai and Masako, as well as the credibility of each narrator, are at stake.

II. SOCIO CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Since perceptions of sex and gender are always changing and highly culturally distinctive, how sex is portrayed on film depends on the production's setting as a social and cultural artefact, which is why it is important to analyze the cultural context before looking at the female characters in Kurosawa's films. The arguments made in this essay will be with respect to the time period in which *Rashomon* is set, the 1950s. The perception of females as the center of households, carrying out domestic and mothering responsibilities, is what defines the traditional perspective of Japanese women. Reynolds claims that Japanese people long adhered to the notion that men are superior to women, which only started to change after World War Two, which is the time period in which *Rashomon* is set. The average person's perception of women, however, did not dramatically change, and women were still expected to behave respectfully and submissively. In this aspect, Japanese culture was accustomed to viewing women as domestic helpers and dependent on males.

Rashomon was produced just four years after the Japanese government established a revised constitution, Article 14 of which purportedly guarantees equal rights for all citizens (Lofgren 2015). Article 14 states, "All people are equal before the law, and there shall be no discrimination in political, economic, or social relations based on race, religion, sex, social status, or origin of the family." So, it is not surprising that the struggle for women's rights is shown in *Rashomon*.

The film *Rashomon* depicts a disturbing scene in which the character of Masago is raped by the bandit, yet the other characters in the film seem to show little concern for her well-being. Rather than prioritizing Masago's victimization, the focus instead shifts towards identifying the murderer. This lack of attention to Masago's trauma underscores the deeply entrenched gender inequalities and power imbalances present in the society depicted in the film.

Furthermore, throughout the movie, Masago is portrayed as being treated as an object rather than as a human being with her own agency and desires. Her wishes and autonomy are consistently disregarded by the male characters in the film, reflecting the broader societal attitudes towards women during the time period in which the film is set.

The bandit who rapes the samurai's wife reflects conventional gender stereotypes and patriarchy through his behaviour. The bandit is portrayed as an overly macho man who resorts to violence and hostility to prove his superiority. He's painted as a sexual predator who looks at women with a predator's eye, viewing them as mere possessions to be taken by any means necessary. The bandit's acts reflect the patriarchal norms of traditional

Japanese society, which held that women should be subservient to men and were to be treated as property.¹

III. GENDER NORMS

In addition to reinforcing traditional gender roles and patriarchy, the narrative structure of the film, which gives many views on a single incident, encourages traditional gender norms. Individuals' subjective perceptions shape reality, according to the film's implication. Unfortunately, only male characters' opinions are provided in the film, and female characters are mainly excluded from the story. This supports the notion that men have the ability to shape reality, but women are powerless and insignificant in the larger scheme of things.

Masago is frequently shown through an orientaling male gaze throughout the film. Her face is concealed when we are first exposed to her through Tajomaru's perspective. As he studies her body, this presentation presents a distorted vision of her, emphasising her attire while hinting towards her beauty. As soon as we see her, we are prompted to identify her with the innocent and submissive Japanese woman stereotype, as she is dressed entirely in soft colours and whites. *Rashomon* makes the observation that Masago's beauty is precisely what led to the rape in the forest. Tajomaru wouldn't have desired Masago, leading to the rape and murder of her husband, if it weren't for a gentle wind blowing Masago's veil and revealing a hint of her attractiveness. Tajomaru said "It was just a glimpse. First I saw her, then she was gone – I thought I had seen an angel. Then I decided I would take her, that I'd have her even if I had to kill the man." Consequently, the film does not blame Tajomaru's acts for lack of consent, but rather for stealing what is not his, portraying his wife as property in the eyes of the men around her. Her husband views her as tainted regardless of whether she actively participated; he dismisses her when she is no longer the maiden we initially perceive her to be.

Furthermore, in the postwar Japanese culture, the depiction of a woman actively engaging in sexual activity, especially outside of marriage, was quite controversial. The Meiji Civil Code, which brought Western concepts of virginity and female purity, was generally in effect at the time the film was filmed, having been formed in the late 1800s. In post-war culture, sex was emphasised as a mechanism for reproduction for women, leading to the assumption that the idealised maiden lacked sexual desire. Women were once again consigned to the domestic sphere, while men were urged to engage in sexual activity because any restriction of men's inherent sexual impulses would induce bodily and mental debilitation (Mark McLelland, 2010).

Masako's statement illustrates how males view and utilise women. Her story begins after Tajōmaru had raped her and fled, leaving her sobbing and alone with her husband on the ground. In contrast to her appearance in Tajōmaru's story, in which she is depicted as pure white light, Masako is now dirty and no longer luminous, symbolising that a man has robbed her of her innocence and pushed her into a position of humiliation. She is assaulted again by a guy when she sees her husband's disgusted gaze and begs him to beat, murder, or otherwise physically injure her rather than look at her in this manner. This is the point at which the viewer has the clearest picture of Masako's face and is able to witness her psychological anguish brought on by her husband. Her statement perfectly exemplifies the concept of men in this film, particularly that they use and abuse women for their personal benefit without compassion.

The possible counter claim to these arguments would be that Masako was a shrewd and manipulative lady who exploited her sexuality to influence men; she was not as innocent as she appeared. Takehiro portrays Masako as using her sexuality to manipulate or hypnotise Tajōmaru by clinging to him while she yelled at him to murder her husband. This evidence demonstrates that, in the eyes of men, women utilise their sexual power and influence to push men to damage or even kill one another, causing them to act in ways they would not otherwise. From Takehiro's perspective, women's sexuality has a terrible and bewitching effect on men, causing men to suffer. After Tajōmaru permits Masako to flee, he releases Takehiro and the two do not fight, proving that men would not harm one another absent the influence of women. Takehiro's decision to allow Tajōmaru to leave in peace after setting him free following Masako's flight demonstrates that, in his view, males are capable of seeing reason if they are released from women's cravings and her sexual control over them. However, In a patriarchal society that strives to subjugate and objectify women, a woman's sexuality is her only line of defence and source of power. This is because patriarchal society views women as objects.ⁱⁱ

Some may also argue that the patriarchal nature of society in Japan during the 1950s was not unique to Japan and was prominent in many other nations during the same time period. While it is true that many 1950s societies were patriarchal, it is crucial to recognise Japan's unique cultural and historical backdrop. The modernization and industrialization of Japan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries resulted in substantial changes to the roles and social standing of women, which varied by area and social class. In Japan during the 1950s, however, the legacy of traditional gender roles and cultural expectations continued to impact the experiences of women. Moreover, the experiences of Japanese women during and after World War

Two, such as the rise of "factory girls" and the "comfort women" system, shaped their lives and chances in major ways.

The idea that *Rashomon*'s depiction of women is an incorrect picture of 1950s Japanese society is another potential counterargument but it is not necessarily valid. *Rashomon* is a work of fiction, and as such, its picture of 1950s Japanese culture may not be entirely true. Yet, this does not imply that the film's depiction of women is completely removed from the social and cultural environment of the time. In the 1950s, Japan was undergoing tremendous social and cultural changes as a result of World War II, a growing number of women were entering the workforce, and traditional gender roles and expectations were being questioned. It is crucial to highlight, however, that patriarchal traditions and attitudes continued to exercise a considerable effect on rural Japanese society. In addition, the film's director, Akira Kurosawa, has said that he was influenced by traditional Japanese literature, which frequently portrayed women as meek and passive. It is important to note, however, that Kurosawa's depiction of women in *Rashomon* was not wholly one-dimensional. For instance, the wife's role is intelligent and resourceful, and her actions eventually influence the film's conclusion.

Hence, while it is true that *Rashomon* is a work of fiction, it is equally essential to recognise that the film was produced during a time of significant social and cultural change in Japan. The portrayal of women in the film reflects the prevalent cultural attitudes and expectations of the time, which were shaped by both traditional gender roles and the shifting social landscape of post-war Japan.

Despite the fact that *Rashomon* depicts women as resilient and resourceful in the face of adversity, this does not necessarily imply that it is an empowering depiction. In fact, one could argue that the demand for these characteristics is a result of the patriarchal culture in which women exist. *Rashomon* depicts its female characters as perpetual victims and helpless in the face of male hostility and violence. The portrayal of these women as needing to rely on their own creativity and tenacity to live in this environment shows that they lack authority and agency within their culture. In addition, the fact that the women in *Rashomon* are reduced to pawns in the struggles of the men around them highlights their lack of autonomy and agency. The woman, for instance, does not have the option of rejecting the bandit's approaches or leaving her husband; she is forced to pick between two bad options supplied by the males in her life. In conclusion, while the depiction of women in *Rashomon* may emphasise their tenacity and inventiveness, it is essential to examine the environment in which these

qualities are required. The fact that the women in the film are portrayed as victims and helpless, and as pawns in the disputes of the males around them, shows that their agency and autonomy are severely constrained. Consequently, it is inaccurate to say that Rashomon's depiction of women is liberating.ⁱⁱⁱ

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the film Rashomon depicts the gender norms and expectations of 1950s Japan in a stark manner. With the film's representation of female characters, we observe how women were relegated to largely powerless and submissive roles in society. In Rashomon, women are portrayed as victims of a patriarchal society in which men control all power and decision-making authority. The film depicts how gender inequality was strongly engrained in Japanese culture at the time, perpetuating the notion that women were inferior to men and lacked agency. Overall, Rashomon is a potent reminder of the difficulties women experienced in Japan during the 1950s and how these difficulties were

perpetuated by cultural standards and expectations. The film emphasises the crucial necessity for continuing efforts towards gender equality and women's empowerment in all civilizations. By the film's representation of the terrible reality of life for women in a patriarchal culture, we may better appreciate the significance of advancing gender equality and women's empowerment today.

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