

## Bloody Knives and Ghostly Wives: How American and Japanese Horror Cinema Has Demonized Womanhood

Anyone who considers his or herself a fan of the genre is probably familiar with the difference between the American and Japanese schools of horror film. American horror is visceral and physical, as best represented by the masked killer driving his knife into the abdomen of a scantily clad teenaged girl. Japanese horror has a reputation for being more reserved, tends to focus more on supernatural elements, and features numerous female ghosts in white dresses with long, black hair. At first glance, these approaches to the genre may seem totally different, but on a closer examination, one may realize that both American and Japanese horror contain deeply problematic portrayals of womanhood and of female sexuality. Globalization has done nothing to change this -- in fact, recent films on opposite sides of the Pacific have borrowed themes and motifs from each other, finding new ways to demonize the feminine.

To understand these films, we must first understand their roots. Much of modern Japanese horror media owes a great debt to a single legend perhaps best known for its portrayal in the 1825 kabuki play *Yotsuya Kaidan*. In her book, *Edo Kabuki in Transition: from the Worlds of the Samurai to the Vengeful Female Ghost*, Satoko Shimazaki examines the play's influence on later Japanese ghost legends. *Yotsuya Kaidan* begins with a housewife named Oiwa making

plans to leave her husband, Iemon, who is a liar and a thief. Iemon coerces Oiwa into staying, but their union is far from a happy one. Oiwa becomes gravely ill after giving birth to their son, and Iemon attracts the attention of his neighbor's beautiful young granddaughter, Oume. Oume's family poisons Oiwa, horribly disfiguring her, in the hopes of making her unattractive to her husband. Iemon, for his part, hires a man to rape Oiwa so that he can divorce her on the grounds of infidelity. The would-be-rapist is unable to go through with the act after seeing Oiwa's face, and it is only after his horrified reaction that Oiwa realizes what has happened. In her despair, Oiwa commits suicide and returns as a *yurei*, a vengeful spirit, who drives Iemon mad and causes him to murder his new wife and father-in-law. (Shimazaki, 116-118.)

While to modern Western readers this legend may seem like a simple tale of supernatural revenge, its original audience likely would not have viewed it that way. In her essay, "Haunting Gaps: Gender, Modernity, Film and the Ghosts of Yotsuya Kaidan," Dr. Elisabeth Scherer examines Oiwa's story within its historical and cultural context. As Scherer points out, women in Edo-era Japan were of very low social status and had no legal rights. In the beginning of the play, Oiwa must appeal to her father to help her leave her marriage, as she cannot file for divorce on her own. Furthermore, women were seen as "impulsive, irrational, and unclean beings" (Scherer) and were believed to have a greater capacity than men to become demons upon their deaths. Many ghost stories from the Edo era use female spirits to embody cultural fears of women as the "other" sex. It is no coincidence that all of Japan's most widely circulated *kaidan*, or ghost stories, feature female ghosts who prey on men.

Oiwa would become the archetype of the *yurei*, or vengeful spirit, that Japanese storytellers would use as a model for centuries. She is an *ubume*, a specific type of *yurei* normally created when a woman dies during childbirth -- despite the fact that Oiwa committed

suicide long after her son's birth. As Nicky Mandiola points out on her guest episode of the podcast *Feminist Folklore*, in most versions of the legend Oiwa's physical appearance is not brought up until after she is disfigured -- Oume, however, is explicitly described as being beautiful, perhaps to highlight her desirability as an alternative wife for Iemon.

Oiwa represents a failure to perform womanhood "correctly." The play begins with her attempting to divorce her husband, who later decides to leave her for another woman, indicating her failure as a wife. She grows sickly after giving birth and is resurrected as an *ubume*, a testament to her failure as a mother. The man who is contracted to rape her cannot even go through with the act because of how hideous she is -- she fails even as a sexual object. Oiwa's physical appearance as a spirit reflects this failed femininity: her hair, which she would have worn pinned up as a respectable Edo-era noble woman, hangs loose and tangled around her face; her feet are bare; she wears a plain white dress in lieu of her elaborate kimono. Even in death, she is horrible to behold.

This description could just as easily fit Sadako from *Ring* (1998) or Kayako from *Ju-On: The Grudge* (2002), the modern faces of Japanese horror cinema. Like Oiwa, both Kayako and Sadako are *yurei*, and like Oiwa they have both failed in their gendered social roles. Kayako is unfaithful to her husband, at least emotionally -- like Oiwa, she fails as a wife. She also fails to prevent her son's murder, leading to him also becoming a ghost -- she fails as a mother. Sadako's femininity (or lack thereof) is even more pronounced. She is implied to be the product of a sexual tryst between her mother and a demon, cementing her as an especially potent example of the demonic nature of womanhood. Furthermore in *Rasen* (1998), Sadako is revealed into be intersex.

She fails to perform womanhood even in the most basic, biological sense.

This “gender confusion” is a trait Sadako shares with many iconic American slasher villains. As Carol J. Clover points out in her essay, “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” though these masked men are typically large and physically strong, most slasher films call their masculinity into question in some way. In Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) Norman Bates takes on the persona of his abusive mother, dressing in her clothes when he kills women by whom he is aroused. *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), which many credit as the first true slasher film, features a killer who wears a mask made of human skin, decorated with garish makeup. The implication is that these men kill women because of this gender confusion, using violence as a substitute for sex. Just as Sadako and Kayako are made horrifying by their failure to succeed as women, Norman and Leatherface are made horrifying by their failure to succeed as men.

In movies in which the killer is not ambiguously gendered, there exists instead a sexual disturbance, often caused by an unhealthy relationship with a female relative. In *Halloween* (1978), six-year-old Michael Myers’s first kill is his teenaged sister, whom he murders after watching her have sex with her boyfriend. In the *Friday the 13th* franchise, Jason Voorhees is so unable to let go of his dead mother he literally builds a shrine around her mummified head. Thus, even though these killers are male, there is a distinctly female cause to their madness.

If the killer in a slasher film is a feminized man, it is no surprise that his downfall is a masculinized woman. Clover notes that the slasher formula, which was originally marketed to an overwhelmingly male audience, is a modification of the classic hero’s journey. Here, instead of a male adolescent, the helpless victim is portrayed as a boyish woman, as indicated by her name (Laurie, Sidney, Stretch) and conservative or unisex clothing. In a coming of age of sorts, this boyish woman can only survive the film by taking up the killer’s conspicuously phallic weapon

(a knife, a machete, a chainsaw) -- it is through this masculinization that she becomes an autonomous adult. This masculine aspect to what Clover dubs the "Final Girl" is further cemented when we examine the subgenre's precursors. In *Psycho*, the character who unravels the mystery and eventually defeats Norman Bates is Sam Loomis, boyfriend to Norman's most recent victim. The Final Girl is both victim and investigator, often making a clear jump from one role to the other at some point in the film.

Unlike their Japanese counterparts, American slasher films deal with explicitly sexual themes. Much of the violence in these films is directed towards women, especially women who have engaged in promiscuous sexual activity. Sex, especially casual sex, is always punished by death. The sole survivor of the slasher is always a woman and, at least in the subgenre's early years, always a virgin. Though the men who take part also die, Clover is quick to point out that the terror is always explicitly feminized. The lingering screams, the extreme close-ups of tearful, terrified faces, and the prolonged chase scenes are nearly always focused on female characters. "Boys die... not because they are boys, but because they make mistakes," Clover claims. "Some girls die for the same mistakes. Others, however, and always the main one, die... because they are female." She goes on to note how these movies make a point of differentiating the Final Girl from her female companions -- not only is she not interested in sex, but she is intelligent and resourceful where her friends are often vapid or airheaded. The message, though subtextual, is clear: it is only by distancing herself from the negative aspects of femininity (promiscuity, vanity, etc.) that this young woman is able to prevail. As an extension of this message, we can only infer that it is because of these feminine flaws that her female companions had to die.

As Clover notes, the moment in which the Final Girl takes upon herself masculine power is also the moment in which the killer loses his masculinity once and for all. Often, this is

accomplished by the Final Girl literally taking up the killer's weapon and attacking him with it. This exchange of power is a reversal of everything that has come before. Whereas up until now the villain has asserted his masculinity by murdering promiscuous women as a form of punishment, here a woman turns his own phallic weapon against him, mentally castrating him and effectively emasculating him. Her sexual purity combined with her masculine personality traits allow her to overcome the effeminate killer.

In her essay, "Monstrous schoolgirls: Casual sex in the twenty-first-century horror film," Karen J. Renner demonstrates how the harsh sexual morality of the slasher film has carried over into a new subgenre with what she dubs the "monstrous schoolgirl" trope. Renner claims that these late-2000's films, while no longer condemning all premarital sex, differentiate between "good" and "bad" sex and revolve around young girls who have engaged in the "wrong" kind of sex being supernaturally punished.

Renner compares two films, *The New Daughter* and *Jennifer's Body*, both released in 2009. In both of these films, teenaged girls engage in either implied (in the case of *The New Daughter*) or explicit (in the case of *Jennifer's Body*) casual sex. In both films, the girls are supernaturally transformed into literal monsters as a direct consequence of their promiscuous activity. I would add several other early 2010's films to this list, such as *The Last Exorcism* (2010) and *The Possession* (2012). Both feature a pubescent girl falling victim to an otherworldly creature that seeks to exploit her body -- the protagonist of *The Last Exorcism* is even pregnant, and the film at different points implies that either her own father or a demon may be responsible for her condition. The sexual purity and potential exploitation of these young girls is a major theme in both narratives, and the drama of the plot revolves around whether they can be redeemed.

It is interesting that both of the films Renner mentions were released in 2009, *after* Japanese horror media had entered the American pop culture consciousness. *The Ring*, an American remake of *Ring*, was released in 2002 to huge success and *The Grudge*, a remake of *Ju-on*, was released in 2004. The Murderous Schoolgirl trope, as Renner defines it, employs the Japanese model of a woman who is made literally monstrous by her failure to correctly perform her gender, but combines it with the gendered violence and sexual morality of the slasher genre. The monstrous schoolgirl is a monster because she defies American society's ideals for what a "good" young woman is, just as the *yurei* is a monster because she defies Japanese culture's ideals of what a "good" woman is.

This exchange of cultural ideals has manifested on the other side of the Pacific as well. Takashi Miike's 1999 film *Audition* may seem at surface level to merely be a traditional "evil woman" narrative with the supernatural elements removed. However, unlike Sadako, Kayako, and even Oiwa, Miike's Asami doesn't just cause the death of others as a consequence of her own violent nature -- she explicitly takes pleasure in torturing men, specifically those she has chosen as lovers. Not only are her relationships with her victims explicitly romantic (and, by extension, erotic), but many of the film's torture scenes have a marked sexual undertone. *Audition*, like the slasher genre, reflects a fear of emasculation. But whereas slasher films typically begin with the male killer on top before being stripped of his masculinity by the Final Girl, *Audition* is about a sadistic woman who preys on men. Unlike the victims in classic slasher films, Miike's protagonist doesn't do anything to deserve punishment. It is Asami who is the film's aggressor, from beginning to end.

Asami's violent nature reflects the same vengeful feminine spirit that manifests in Sadako and Kayako. The film implies that she suffered abuse as a child, and that this abuse has left her

unable to have a normal romantic relationship. In another film, this might make Asami a sympathetic heroine or antiheroine but instead, like other Japanese horror icons, she is made monstrous by her failure to love her male partners. This perversion is further clarified by the nature of the sexualized torture scenes, where it is Asami who assumes the penetrative role both metaphorically and literally.

Awareness of this cultural exchange allows us to better interpret what these films have to say about women. Without knowing the effect of Japanese films on American horror cinema and vice versa, we might fail to grasp their significance. For example, *Audition* has been praised by some Western critics as a feminist answer to the slasher subgenre -- these critics completely misunderstand the film. By viewing it in a cultural vacuum, they fail to realize that *Audition* actually borrows themes and motifs from the subgenre it is supposedly subverting and combines them with existing Japanese tropes. Likewise *Jennifer's Body* was written and directed by women, was marketed as a feminist film, and has often been read as a satire of misogynist horror tropes (and this does seem to have been the writer's and director's intent). However, when we take into account the huge popularity of *The Ring*, *The Grudge*, and other J-horror remakes during the time the film was in production, we discover another layer to the narrative. Jennifer, who was a "man eater" in life, is transformed into a creature that literally survives by killing and eating the men she seduces. When we further take into account the fact that the reason the story gives for Jennifer's transformation is her lack of virginity, the film hardly seems groundbreaking or empowering.

We like to tell ourselves that misogynist storytelling is a thing of the past or that it is exclusive to a single culture, and when we view media outside of its cultural context it is easy to project our wishful thinking onto its story. An American viewing *Ju-on* might interpret it as a



revenge fantasy in which a man who murders his wife is rightfully punished; likewise, a Japanese person viewing *Halloween* might see Laurie holding her own against Michael as empowering. But when we examine the cultural context, we know better. Kayako is monstrous in death because of her failure as a woman; Laurie is only able to overcome Michael by stripping him of his masculinity and becoming masculine herself in the process. These hidden prejudices are the ghosts that haunt our media, and it is only by understanding them and actively moving away from these tropes that we can exorcise them once and for all.

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