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The Scars of War: The Demonic Mother as a Conduit for Expressing Victimization, Collective Guilt, and Forgiveness in Postwar Japanese Film, 1949-1964

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The Scars of War:
The Demonic Mother as a Conduit for ExpressingVictimization, Collective Guilt, and Forgiveness in Postwar Japanese Film, 1949-1964

An Honors Project for the Program of Asian Studies

By Sophia Walker

Bowdoin College, 2017

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This work is for my family. For being unafraid to be different, and for teaching me to do the same. This is especially for my mom and for my grandmother, my Baba.

I come from some tough Japanese women.
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Introduction
Revenant From the Past: The Longevity of the Demon Mother

Contemporary American viewers are familiar with the vengeful and terrifying ghost women of recent J-Horror films such as *Ringu* (Nakata Hideo, 1998) and *Ju-On* (Shimizu Takashi, 2002). Yet in Japanese theater and literature, the threatening ghost woman has a long history, beginning with the neglected Lady Rokujo in Lady Murasaki’s 11th century novel *The Tale of Genji*, who possesses and kills her rivals. Colette Balmain, in her book *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film*, even suggests that the threatening ghost woman trope can be traced back to Japan’s creation myth, which was first written down in Japan’s oldest text, the *Kojiki*, in 712 CE.¹ In the myth, the creation goddess, Izanami, dies in childbirth and her husband Izanagi goes down to the underworld to retrieve her. However, once there he breaks a promise, causing her to turn wrathful.² She is hideous and pitiful, worthy of fear as well as sympathy, traits of ghostly mothers that authors and filmmakers across the centuries in Japan have exploited. This project puts together four films that have never before been discussed together and discusses them as four different iterations of the demonic mother motif, presented as a projection of the Japanese collective’s postwar uncertainty over both the memory of suffering during World War II and the question of personal culpability.

As both motif and visual spectacle, the demonic woman was amplified by the kabuki stage, from where it easily moved to the screen. The kabuki-derived spectacular,

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² Ibid.
The Ghost of Yotsuya, for example, was filmed and re-filmed from the early 1900s until the 1930s. The resulting genre, known as *kaiki eiga*, “strange film,” remained popular until the 1930s. *Kaiki eiga* can most directly be equated to the western “gothic horror” genre; set in “an Othered time and place” and featuring ghosts and demons. However, while the aesthetic of *kaiki eiga* is comparable to gothic horror, a fundamental component of the *kaiki* genre is also the Buddhist concept of karmic vengeance, not typically found in Western gothic horror film and setting *kaiki* aside as a genre all its own.

These fundamental components of *kaiki* — ghosts and karmic vengeance — led to its censorship during the war years by both the Japanese military government, and later, the Allied Occupation. The *kaiki* genre remained popular until the 1930s, when the military government cracked down on the representation of “spooks and monsters” in film, preferring to produce nationalistic propaganda films. A combination of discouraging comments from the Cabinet Propaganda Office, a rationed supply of film stock, and a required quota of “national policy films” curbed *kaiki eiga* production almost completely for the duration of World War II. The postwar Occupation by the Supreme Command of Allied Powers (SCAP) discouraged *kaiki eiga* even further as the McArthur government attempted to scrub film of nationalist or militarist messages, going so far as to ban any and all revenge narratives. The theme of “karmic retribution” that so

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4 Ibid, 156.

5 Ibid., 52-3.

6 Ibid., 156.
permeated *kaiki eiga* was deemed too militaristic for the growth of a peaceful democratic ideology, and was thus censored until the end of the Occupation in 1952.7

Despite official discouragement, the *kaiki* genre remained popular, and surged back into theaters soon after the Occupation ended. Though a few *kaiki*-derived films managed to be produced prior to 1952 — most notably Kinoshita Keisuke’s 1949 *Ghost Story of Yotsuya: A New Interpretation (Shinsaku Yotsuya Kaidan)* — the “genuine ghosts and monsters” and “narrative themes of karmic retribution” of *kaiki* only truly returned after the restrictions of Occupation were lifted.8 Kinoshita Keisuke’s *Shinsaku Yotsuya Kaidan* is unique in that it both carefully mutes the vengeance theme under the watchful eyes of the Occupation, and explores justice in the form of the torment produced by a guilty psyche rather than karmic forces. Hence, the title of the film foregrounds this “new interpretation.”

The *kaiki* narratives that emerged in postwar film are notable in that they draw upon these older narratives while simultaneously engaging with contemporary discourses of war guilt and victimization. As this project will suggest, a subset of these postwar films used that form to deal with and exorcise the horrors of war. These films revolve around the ghost, which is, by its very definition, a revenant, something returned from the past to haunt the present. Thus, in an important sense, the ghosts that haunt the screens of 1950s and 1960s film are the torments of war explored safely in the present.

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8 Ibid., 168.
The representation of these *kaiki* ghost women onscreen taps into national discussions of how to remember wartime. While the wartime government was guilty of atrocities overseas, throughout the 1950s and 60s Japanese people increasingly saw themselves as victims of a war and a system beyond their control. Antiwar narratives in the 1960s especially tended to dwell upon collective suffering experienced at home, especially the atomic bombs and firebombings. The victimization of the Japanese, rather than being any foreign power, was attributed to “the militarist state, or to the vaguely defined entity called ‘the system.’” By using the demonic mother to either depict the terror of the state or the horrors they themselves may have unleashed, the Japanese collective was able to displace responsibility for both personal suffering and the war as a whole.

The debate over war memory revolved around these two primary narratives: the Japanese people as either victim or oppressor during the war. These two ideas coexisted as “the victim experience arising from wartime suffering, and the victimizer experience as supporters of the war of aggression.” Social commentators called for the “need to remember Japan’s past as a perpetrator in World War II as well as one’s personal


10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

participation in it,” rejecting the urge to use the military government as scapegoat.\textsuperscript{13} However, though the narrative of guilt remained within public discourse, the most common and popular interpretation of war memory, especially by the 1960s, was one of the Japanese people as victim of an aggressive military government.

The victim narrative in the form of the ghostly or demonic mother likewise drew from popular images of mothers as symbols of collective suffering. As Jennifer Coates explains, “the female image function(ed) as an emotional screen in the retrospective war narrative, anchoring the affects and identifications of the viewer to the leading characters and hence to the political and national affiliations they represent(ed).”\textsuperscript{14} The woman in postwar film was culturally coded, as her likeness harkened back to historic images of Japanese women. These likenesses were “reworked for the post-war context, and attained great popularity in part because their historical repetition allowed the expression of popular anxieties through imagistic modes in which the audience was already well versed.”\textsuperscript{15} In other words, the ghost women of this genre were sorts of “emotional screens,” familiar icons through which Japanese audiences could work through postwar anxieties. The ghost woman was culturally coded to be both the “ideal” Japanese woman and terrifying “other,” allowing her to be both tragic and horrifying simultaneously.

The female image as discussed by Coates also appears in another genre, known as \textit{hahamono eiga}, or “mother film,” which postwar \textit{kaiki eiga} draws upon and imagistically

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\textsuperscript{13} Orr, \textit{The Victim as Hero}, 5.
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\textsuperscript{14} Jennifer Coates, “Victims and Bystanders: Women in the Japanese War-Retro Film,” \textit{Media, War & Conflict} 6, no. 3 (December 1, 2013): 234.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 30.
\end{flushright}
reworks. Hahamono films were very popular from the end of the 1940s through the mid-1950s. Kinoshita Keisuke, director of Shinsaku Yotsuya Kaidan, was one well-known director of hahamono melodramas, which typically showed the mother as the tragic victim of war. In Kinoshita’s melodramas, the mother is both a symbol of the family unit — and collectively the Japanese nation — and the victim of wartime atrocities as she patiently waits for her son or husband’s return. The mother made the perfect “lacking subject,” or one who bravely suffers the hardships of war whilst remaining free of responsibility. The hahamono eiga, by both idealizing the mother and representing her suffering at the forefront of the film, “enables a dialogue” that both mourns the past and reflects upon the present.

The tragic hahamono mother narrative not only served the genre of melodrama, but kaiki gothic horror narratives as well. The gothic mother’s “special link to madness or the supernatural” was particularly useful in transforming the home from a place of safety to one of danger and uncertainty. In the words of Ruth Goldberg, this “uncanny mother” subverted cultural norms, which allowed the mother to “embody conflict and ambivalence over the changing ideas about women in Japan and the Japanese family in


17 Ibid., 23.

18 Ibid., 24.

19 Ibid., 26.

transition.” Thus, the gothic mother acted not only as a dialogue with the past, as did the hahamono melodramas, but actively expressed contemporary anxieties about changing ideas of the family, or, by extension, the national collective. More specifically, however, the ghost mother was the ideal vessel to simultaneously express anxieties about the horrific war and reassure audiences that they would be cared for in the aftermath. The scarred mother could both elicit sympathy for her tragic circumstances and put distance between herself and the viewer.

**Literature**

While there is ample scholarship on Japanese genre films, horror films in particular, as well as the historical context of the post-war, there is very little to no scholarship attempting to connect the demonic woman motif to a post-war working through of the memories of war, and of the anxieties surrounding post-war social changes. In addition, though it is a commonly accepted idea in horror film scholarship that the female body is a site of displaced anxiety, that theory has never been applied, in a sustained way, to the alternately tragic and horrifying mothers of post-war Japanese film.

All the films that I examine here draw upon the *kaiki* genre, a filmic category that uses stylized, gothic forms to depict supernatural retribution. Michael Crandol’s dissertation, *Nightmares from the Past: Kaiki Eiga and the Dawn of Japanese Horror Cinema* traces the development of *kaiki* cinema, with particular focus upon the development of the genre during the 1950s and 1960s. Crandol’s definition of *kaiki* states that a film must include “spaces physically and/or temporally removed from present-day

reality, accomplished via a period setting or else stylized art direction,” and the “evocation of osore, or cosmic terror, most often embodied in the figure of the monster,” to be considered kaiki.22

However, while Crandol provides an baseline for the definition of kaiki, my analysis focuses on its implication for the postwar nation imagined as a “family.” In particular, I suggest that the “demonic mother” is not one who has destroyed the family, but rather the psychic center of a family and nation that is hurt, angry, and wronged by oppressive structures. As Ruth Goldberg discusses in her essay, “Demons in the Family: Tracking the Japanese ‘Uncanny Mother Film’ from A Page of Madness to Ringu,” the presentation of the supernatural mother in Japanese film is deeply rooted in cultural ideas of the “ideal mother” who sacrifices for the good of her male family members. Thus, Ruth Goldberg claims, the uncanny mother film warps the Japanese “reverence for motherhood” to express anxieties about the changing family structure. While this may be true for the later films she studies, I suggest that these early “demonic mother” films retain this reverence for motherhood, because they seek to cast the mother—and by extension, the suffering nation—as oppressed.23

“Demonic mother” films, furthermore, draw upon popular images that sought to identify the Japanese people with the mother and thus build a cohesive postwar identity. In Making Icons: Repetition and the Female Image in Japanese Cinema, 1945-1964, Jennifer Coates suggests that the female body became a symbol for the Japanese

22 Crandol, “Nightmares from the Past,” 86.
collective, which was then expressed as a repeated motif in art and film. How the female body was “pictured” in the postwar had intellectual and social significance. Yoshikuni Igarashi’s discussion of why the postwar film should dwell on bodies provides a critical lens through which to examine the bodily appearance of the demonic mother in film. As he suggests in *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970* the body became a site of intellectual focus in the postwar era. Bodies represented “entities that survived destruction and thus embodied historical continuity… bodies became sites for national rehabilitation, thus overcoming the historical crisis that Japan’s defeat created.”24 Igarashi argues that bodies onscreen served as a both an expression of the trauma of war, as well as a site upon which to process and construct the memory of that war. He writes that “both bodily tropes and memories [were] deeply embedded in the material conditions of postwar Japan.25

The only work that examines the body of the female ghost as a site for the working through of war memory is Adam Lowenstein’s *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*. Lowenstein poses the question of war victimization as well as war memory, arguing that “the figure of woman enables a historical narrative of forgetting, where victimization replaces responsibility for aggression.”26 He reads *Onibaba* as a “trauma text” which revisits the


25 Ibid.

bombing of Hiroshima and “displace(s) the Japanese national responsibility for the trauma itself” by suggesting that the demonic mother (as representative of the Japanese people) is both “victim and victimizer” of war.\textsuperscript{27} His argument hinges upon the mother’s disfigured face, which he argues is both punishment for complacent acquiescence of aggression during the war as well as the result of exploitation by the government. However, Lowenstein only looks at \textit{Onibaba}, which offers the most shocking representation of atomic scarring, thus inviting the viewer to see allegories of war.

While all of these works inform my project, none address the allegorical use of the demonic mother in the post war period. While individual films are discussed at length in such fundamental works of Japanese film scholarship as Keiko McDonald’s \textit{Reading a Japanese Film}, and Joan Mellen’s \textit{The Waves at Genji’s Door}, these scholars tend to focus on the films as works of art independent of their political context; while there is some attention devoted to social aspects as postwar gender roles or postwar economic growth, the crucial question of why these ghosts of the past haunt the present is ignored. Again, while they examine the visual and thematic presence of the demonic mother, they also analyze each film as a stand-alone work. To clarify, I am not doing a historical study of postwar film; rather, I am exploring how historical ideas are expressed through film.

\textbf{Chapter Breakdown}

Each chapter will focus upon a specific film and examine how that film’s visual and thematic presentation of the demonic mother narrative engages with collective war memory. I start with Nakagawa Nobuo’s 1959 \textit{Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan} because it is the

\textsuperscript{27}Adam Lowenstein, \textit{Shocking Representation}, 83, 86, 88.
archetypal vengeful mother story that sports a long history in Japan, thus providing a useful template for how post-war film uses familiar ghosts to work through memories of the war. Because it is archetypal, many scholars discuss its stylized form and gothic revenge narrative, the crimes of the husband projected onto the terrifying, avenging ghost of Oiwa. My chapter complicates this discussion by bringing in Kinoshita Keisuke’s 1949 Occupation-era *Shinsaku Yotsuya Kaidan*, which scholars rarely discuss, to argue that while the *Yotsuya Kaidan* narratives differ enormously in style, both suggest that Oiwa’s ghost is not a scapegoat for the wartime government, but a victim of its errors. Chapter two will discuss Mizoguchi Kenji’s 1953 film *Ugetsu*, while chapter three will discuss Shindo Kaneto’s *Onibaba* (1964).

The films are organized so as to examine the chronological movement of three different presentations of the demonic mother narrative, from the more recognizably gothic in *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* and the melancholic ghosts of *Ugetsu*, to the ambiguous demon mother of *Onibaba*. Furthermore, the three chapters engage with the question of the Japanese people as victims of war. I argue that the whereas *Yotsuya Kaidan* makes Oiwa the tragic victim of male machinations, the demon mother of *Onibaba* is more ambivalent, standing in for Japan as both victim and perpetrator of war. The spooky but unthreatening ghosts of Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu* represent a third form of engagement with the question of war memory and responsibility, where Japan is held responsible but also forgiven for mistakes made during wartime.

Both *Shinsaku Yotsuya Kaidan* (Kinoshita Keisuke, 1949) and *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* (Nakagawa Nobuo, 1959) follow the traditionally gothic narrative — the
demonic mother who returns as a frightening specter to right a wrong committed by her husband. Iemon, the scheming samurai, is undeniably guilty of murdering his innocent wife, who then returns to haunt him for his crimes. In these films, Iemon and his partner in crime, Naosuke, can be understood as the oppressive military government who subjugates and torments the Japanese people. Though Iemon’s crimes differ according to the film — in the Occupation-era *Shinsaku Yotsuya Kaidan* he is guilty of succumbing to governmental pressure, while in the later *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* he has let go of vital familial values — in both he is tormented by the return of his murdered wife. While the ten years that separate the two films affect how Iemon is presented, both films represent Oiwa as a victim, her suffering linked to the Japanese people under a wartime government.

Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu* (1953), by contrast, rejects the narrative of victimhood to focus upon the tragedy of war. While the demonic mother of *Yotsuya Kaidan* is frightening, threatening viewers with the karmic consequences of wartime misdeeds, Mizoguchi’s ghosts are gentle specters. While the film does not let wartime criminals off the hook, and in true *kaiki* style each ghost returns because of a wrong done her, each acts as a forlorn reminder of the mistakes made during war by not only government militarism but by common people as well. While *Yotsuya Kaidan* condemns the errant, *Ugetsu* both mourns and forgives.

*Onibaba* (Shindo Kaneto, 1964), my third case study, can be seen as a critique of the victim narrative present in both adaptations of *Yotsuya Kaidan* and the theme of forgiveness present in *Ugetsu*. While the demonic mother’s disfigured face is still a
reminder of Japan’s atomic tragedy, the mother, as a representation of the common people is still held accountable for the actions of war. While in Yotsuya Kaidan the demonic mother may rail against her mistreatment, the guilt in Onibaba is imputed to both the mother and oppressive government structures. Unlike Oiwa, the mother is not held blameless, and her scarred face is a result of her own war profiteering as well as a symbol of her oppression. For this reason, unlike Oiwa of Yotsuya Kaidan, and Miyagi and Wakasa of Ugetsu, who must die to exorcise the wartime past, the demonic mother here is scarred but has a hope of redemption because she is allowed to live.

In sum, in this paper I pair visual analysis with social and cultural context. The ghostly and demonic woman has a long history in Japanese folklore, and has enjoyed a prominent place in popular culture and legend. With this project I show that the demonic woman narrative in Japanese film is a vehicle for grieving, condemning, forgiving, and ultimately working through the memory of war.
Wronged Mothers: The Mother As Victim in Shinsaku Yotsuya Kaidan (1949) and Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan (1959)

Introduction

Any discussion of the ghostly mother in Japanese film would be lacking without Yotsuya Kaidan. Adapted from Tsuruya Nanboku’s 1825 kabuki stage play, it is Japan’s most famous ghost story; the earliest film version was produced in 1912 (The Ghost Story of Yotsuya, Makino Shozo), and the story was remade semiannually by various studios until the 1930s. Though the play was derived from a collection of older, folkloric sources, Tsuruya Nanboku’s play established the “Ghost of Yotsuya” as a spectacular fable of desire, murder, and revenge, making it a favorite of later filmmakers.

The many adaptations of Yotsuya Kaidan speak to the lasting appeal of the ghost woman narrative, and to the continued relevance of that narrative even in rapidly changing times. Though hampered by a military government that favored nationalist propaganda over entertainment during World War II, and later by Occupation period censorship of “feudal” revenge tales, Yotsuya Kaidan re-emerged after Occupation restrictions were lifted in the 1950s. Colette Balmain argues that the continued popularity of Yotsuya Kaidan in the postwar “provides a point of parallelism between past and present, times at which the social fabric of Japan was torn apart.” Having just emerged from the watchful eyes of the American Occupation, Japanese viewers may have craved an emotional release. As Michiko Iwasaka and Barre Toelken note, through the “actions of an angry ghost, feelings of guilt can be acted out which would be repressed in

29 Balmain, Introduction to Japanese Horror Film, 55.
The ghost of Oiwa, tragic yet wrathful, could capture both the pain and anger viewers may have felt about their war experience, all from the safe distance of several centuries.

This allegorical reading of *Yotsuya Kaidan* as a safe way of expressing guilt and anger is particularly relevant in context of the postwar, as Japan sought to contend with the consequences of war at home and abroad. The two most well-known postwar interpretations of *Yotsuya Kaidan* are Kinoshita Keisuke’s 1949 *Shinsaku Yotsuya Kaidan* and Nakagawa Nobuo’s 1959 *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan*. While the specifics of these retellings of *Yotsuya Kaidan* often stray from the original play, the storyline remains recognizable. The underlying gothic story — that of a terrifying ghost woman — however undergoes a shift in the hands of these directors as they change the narrative from one of karmic punishment to victimhood. In *Shinsaku Yotsuya Kaidan*, Oiwa is the victim of forces neither she nor Iemon understand, making her the perfect vehicle to represent how the common people were duped by a war-hungry military clique. In *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan*, Oiwa herself is the scarred victim of the atomic bomb and thus the perfect representative of atomic suffering. Though the presentation of the two Oiwas are wildly different in each film, both women are the tragic, neglected victims of war whose appearance allows viewers to revisit its grief and suffering from a safe distance. By displacing the victim narrative onto Oiwa, the Edo-period ghost, each film reimagines the consequences of war into a scenario in which the Japanese are victims and not aggressors.

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If the historical setting is displaced into the past, so is the social setting; the tragedy of war is expressed through domestic drama. The plot revolves around a samurai, Iemon, and his wife, Oiwa, who have fallen on hard times. Iemon is a ronin, or masterless samurai, who is reduced to making umbrellas for a living. Though Oiwa is a dutiful wife, Iemon’s attentions stray and land upon a wealthier woman, Oume. With the help of an accomplice, Naosuke, Iemon plots to rid himself of Oiwa and marry Oume. Although the specifics of this plot differ across interpretations, all result in the brutal death of Oiwa. Iemon and Naosuke then rid themselves of her body by tying her to a door and throwing her into the river. To the other side of the door they tie the body of Takuetsu, the reluctant accomplice, who is killed in the process of Oiwa’s murder. The pair of men, Iemon and Naosuke, thus represent ruthless opportunism.

But Oiwa’s spirit does not rest in peace, returning to remind viewers of her suffering. The gruesomely disfigured ghost of Oiwa returns to haunt Iemon, disrupting his married life with Oume. Oiwa’s ghost terrifies Iemon and drives him to kill his new bride and her family. Pursued by Oiwa’s ghost, Iemon flees to a mountain retreat where he is discovered and killed by Oiwa’s sister’s husband. Though the surrounding circumstances of Oiwa’s ghost change in each retelling, throughout it all Oiwa remains a figure who returns from the dead as a reminder of wrongs done to her.

On the surface, the Kinoshita and Nakagawa’s two films seem very different; released ten years apart, they share neither common aesthetic nor cultural context. Kinoshita’s film follows the form of melodrama, and is almost entirely naturalistic; Oiwa’s ghost is implied to be a figment of lemon’s guilt-ridden psyche. Nakagawa’s, by
contrast, is a color spectacular, drawing upon the colors, sounds, and stylized effects of
the kabuki stage. Nakagawa’s presentation of Oiwa’s ghost is gruesome, with the camera
visually dwelling upon the physical markers of her suffering in her balding head and
disfigured face. Both were also released at different points in Japan’s postwar recovery;
Kinoshita’s film during the American Occupation, while Nakagawa’s came after Japan
had risen in prosperity and was facing questions of future warfare. However, despite the
differences between the two, both films imply that Oiwa is a victim rather than a ghostly
avenger.

Because the central image of Nakagawa’s film is the vengeful Oiwa returning
from the dead, scholars such as Colette Balmain see “the loss of traditional and pre-
modern values” as the primary concern of the film.31 Thus Balmain’s allegorical reading
of the film emphasizes how postwar materialism is chastised by Oiwa’s family-oriented
ghost. In contrast to her argument, this chapter highlights Oiwa’s tragic presentation —
she dies and re-appears as a result of Iemon’s heartless actions. In the Nakagawa version,
Oiwa plaintively reminds Iemon of his duties, whereas in Kinoshita’s Oiwa is the
wronged woman projected by Iemon’s own guilty conscience.

Yet, however she is presented in the film, there is no ambiguity that Oiwa’s return
from the dead stems from her persecution at the hands of the living. Neither Colette
Balmain nor Isolde Standish, who see Yotsuya Kaidan as an “examination of morality in
the age of rampant materialism,” fully appreciate Oiwa’s symbolic role as victim, in part
because they don’t consider Kinoshita’s version, which is less concerned with Iemon’s

31 Balmain, Introduction to Japanese Horror Film, 54.
opportunism.\textsuperscript{32} Seen side-by-side, these films are clearly meditations on the wronged rather than wrathful.

This chapter engages how both Kinoshita Keisuke’s \textit{Shinsaku Yotsuya Kaidan} and Nobuo Nakagawa’s \textit{Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan} construe the ghost of Oiwa — and by extension, the home front in war — as the site of tragedy. Given the Japanese valorization of the maternal in ideologies of \textit{ryosai kenbo} (good wife, wise mother), it is tempting to see the gruesome Oiwa as a vessel for expressing repressed fears about gender roles. Japanese horror films frequently transform the fundamentally protective space of home into one of danger and instability to, as Ruth Goldberg claims, reinforce conservative ideas about the place of women.\textsuperscript{33} In my reading, however, in contrast to both Balmain and Standish, Oiwa plays the double role of being both uncanny and mother; in her uncanny form, she can invoke unvoiced fears about culpability in war as vengeful aggressor; but as a mother, she can reframe that fear into the familiar, reassuring image of self-sacrificing women.

\textbf{Kinoshita Keisuke’s \textit{Shinsaku Yotsuya Kaidan}: The Mother as Victim}

Kinoshita Keisuke’s \textit{Shinsaku Yotsuya Kaidan}, or \textit{Ghost of Yotsuya: A New Interpretation} (1949) was released in the midst of US occupation censorship, which prevented Kinoshita from telling the tale with its kabuki themes of karmic vengeance. Kinoshita’s “new” interpretation of \textit{Yotsuya Kaidan} avoids this censorship by skirting the theme of “vengeance,” implying instead that Oiwa haunts Iemon’s guilty psyche and

\textsuperscript{32} Isolde Standish, \textit{A New History of Japanese Cinema} (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 254.

\textsuperscript{33} Goldberg, “Demons in the Family,” 373.
reminds him of his past mistakes.\textsuperscript{34} His retelling of the \textit{kaiki} narrative does not just conform to Allied censors, but also marks the development of the postwar Japanese victim narrative — both lemon and Oiwa are tragic victims who are manipulated by others. Though there is no direct allusion to war in the film, viewers in 1949 no doubt saw their own experience in war reflected onscreen. In Oiwa and lemon, they must have seen the Japanese people duped by opportunistic leaders and therefore accidentally inflicting terrible suffering upon innocent civilians.

The victim narrative Kinoshita develops is likewise reflected in his signature, melodramatic style. By using the form of melodrama, Kinoshita draws a connection between mother, the nation, and the victim. Melodrama, according to Christine Gledhill, “shift(s) its sympathies from the struggle of bourgeois ascendency to the victims of its success… Powerlessness regains moral power with its association with a family or social position that should command protection.”\textsuperscript{35} These, ironically, are often the similar to the forces confronted by gothic horror, though by a different instrument. Both melodrama and the gothic “re-enact for contemporary society the persistent clash of moral polarities… to demarcate the desirable from the taboo.”\textsuperscript{36} With his long and fruitful career in melodrama, Kinoshita thus was the ideal director to see the intrinsic similarities between the gothic and the melodramatic.

\textsuperscript{34} Crandol, “Nightmares from the Past,” 162.


\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 32.
In addition to incorporating these thematic elements, melodrama “revolves around a setting perceived as domestic space.”\(^{37}\) In this domestic space, the “ideal mother” frequently “debase(s) and absent(s) herself” for the good of the husband or son.\(^{38}\) The overt theme of melodrama is that “the good woman is always the mother,” the one who nurtures and protects her husband and self at her own expense.\(^{39}\) The melodramatic mother’s sacrificial devotion to the family ties her to a broader Japanese national narrative. As Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano argues, the mother figures in Kinoshita’s signature “mother-centric,” or *hahamono*, melodramas allow for the projection of “national narrative” onto those suffering mother figures — by making the suffering of the mother the symbolic equivalent of the suffering of the nation. This “maternalization” of a national narrative of war was tied to specific articulations of wartime and postwar Japan; Kinoshita’s works thus “reflect[s] the Japanese audiences’ collective memory” during the rise of postwar prosperity — during the war as victims of hardship and after the war as a tentatively recovering, though occupied, nation.\(^{40}\) In other words, his films contributed to the construction of a postwar “national narrative about the transition from a period of widespread poverty and hardship to an era of prosperity.”\(^{41}\) While living situations

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\(^{39}\) Ibid., 125.


\(^{41}\) Ibid., 19.
improved, “ambivalence remained toward nascent individualism and there was a sense that traditional family structures were being lost.”

The film sets up the relationship between mother, collective consciousness, and memory by presenting Oiwa and her sister Osode as two different representations of the Japanese collective. Though each woman acts as both representative of the home and nation, they symbolize the collective under two different forms of government. Oiwa represents the wartime Japanese people — the ultimate victim of the manipulations of Naosuke’s evil schemes and lemon’s weak will. Osode, while still ultimately subject to the will of her husband, is tough and perceptive as Occupation-era Japanese. Early in the

Fig. 1.1: Oiwa is submissive and rarely without lemon; here, she begs his forgiveness for her miscarriage.

film Oiwa and her sister Osode are framed as doubles, and Osode is pointedly and repeatedly mistaken for Oiwa. They are also cast as parallels and opposites as women and mothers, with Osode as the successful wife and mother, while Oiwa suffers a miscarriage early in the film. Oiwa’s miscarriage comes about by falling off of a stool, which she blames upon herself and apologizes for repeatedly (Fig 1.1).

Osode, however, is attacked by Iemon (who thinks she is Oiwa’s ghost), but somehow comes through unscathed. In contrast to Oiwa, who is never seen outside of a domestic space without lemon, Osode goes out often without her husband, to visit her sister and shop for kimonos. Osode is the one who proposes the idea that lemon is the murderer, and it is she who acts on that thought. Although Osode turns to her husband for help and guidance, she is encouraged by him and ultimately acts on her own judgement (Fig. 1.2).

Fig. 1.2: In contrast to Oiwa, Osode is decisive and perceptive.
Oiwa, by contrast, is weak and defenseless which, coupled with her victimization at the hands of Iemon and Naosuke, evokes the helplessness of wartime. Furthermore, though the film suggests that Iemon may treat Oiwa poorly, it not because he is innately unscrupulous; rather, because he too is weak. In this way, the film displaces evil from the family unit onto the “bad actor,” Naosuke. Throughout the narrative, Naosuke urges and threatens Iemon to commit his dreadful deeds. This helps to further the narrative that though soldiers may have committed atrocious wartime acts, they were at the mercy of the military leadership. Throughout the film, Iemon is consistently shown at the mercy of Naosuke’s manipulation. The film makes it clear that Iemon does not wish to murder Oiwa, and protests at several points that he “cannot do this” to her. When Oiwa falls into a tub of boiling water and burns her face (the source of the facial disfigurement of her ghost), Iemon is horrified by Naosuke’s use of burn ointment that will torture her even more. Throughout the Oiwa’s death scene, Iemon is paralyzed by Naosuke’s desire to kill Oiwa and Oiwa’s calls for help. Ultimately, Iemon does make the decision to feed Oiwa poison, but by that time Oiwa is already in so much pain that to kill her is a mercy. The film’s portrayal of Iemon as weak and easy to manipulate both displaces the blame of war acts and war suffering to the irredeemable Naosuke, and sets lemon up as nearly as much the victim as Oiwa.

Kinoshita’s interpretation suggests that both Iemon and Oiwa are caught up in circumstances that neither are equipped to deal with. Melodrama commonly “sides with the powerless,” and in this melodrama what is revealed are the social forces that leave
innocent Japanese at the mercy of cunning manipulators.\textsuperscript{43} Subjected to hardship by the agenda of more powerful leaders, they are thrust into a situation that is tragically unavoidable. Iemon’s frustrations stem from his financial problems, but they are framed as an unfortunate accident as lemon was unfairly blamed for a theft that he did not commit. Iemon is portrayed as entirely at the mercy of the villainous Naosuke, a figure who pretends to be a friend before the truth is revealed. After her death, Oiwa is then presented as not a literal ghost, but a recurring memory who reminds lemon of his previous failings.

Rather than lemon’s villainy or the vengefulness of a wronged Oiwa, then, the true focus of the film is upon the psychological torture that lemon endures at the hands of Naosuke’s murderous stratagems. The majority of the film is done in naturalistic terms; the camera movements feel natural, angles are typically at eye level, and no stylistic techniques interfere with or influence the viewer’s ability to comprehend the action. By emphasizing the naturalistic, the director brings the lemon closer to the audience as they see him experience the world in a recognizable way. In other words, lemon himself is the “every man” at the mercy of scheming villains.

Iemon’s mistakes not only harm Oiwa, however, but also threaten the stability of the home itself. The American occupation solidified domestic space as an important site of identity and social worth; Joanne Izbicki suggests that domestic space is doubly emotionally important under capitalism, as work under capitalism is reduced to labor

alone. Izbicki quotes film scholar Chuck Kleinhans, who argues that under capitalism “meaning and purpose are not in one’s work, which consists of alienated labor, but in whatever can be defined outside of work.” The widening division between work and family life placed a large burden upon the home as the center “identity and social worth.” The focus upon the domestic space caused women, as the keepers of the domestic space, to be burdened with the “emotional responsibility for personal problems that have their origin outside the home.”

The identification of women with domestic space offered itself as a means by which filmmakers could comment upon Occupation and the postwar. Izbicki suggests that the dichotomy of inside/outside the home was exaggerated in many postwar films by evoking the presence of the “foreign” American occupiers. By substituting “Japan” for “the home,” filmmakers used the domestic setting as the metaphor for the effects of the “outside” upon the interior. As Kleinhans suggests, “the family [now Japan] becomes a center of subjectivity, cut off from the world of action and decisions,” or an enclosed interior space that is nevertheless affected by the goings on of the outside. Though the domestic space of melodrama is supposedly set apart from public space, that space is depicted as the focal point of national consciousness.

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46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.
By identifying the Japanese collective with “the home,” melodramatic filmmakers such as Kinoshita could explore the influence of the Occupation without directly referencing contemporary politics. As such, Kinoshita’s presentation of Naosuke’s manipulative tactics reflects the American agenda when it came to building war memory; lemon is haunted by the guilt of murdering Oiwa, yet the film suggests that perhaps Naosuke is the one to blame for Oiwa’s painful death. As James Orr notes, “American policies set the framework in which the war was remembered in Japan,” and even before the end of the war “psychological warfare” waged against Japan included “charg(ing) the military clique with responsibility for the war,” distancing the people and the government that they once supported. The Occupation encouraged the idea that the Japanese were “misled by their leaders” during the war, and that the Occupation then liberated them “from a condition of slavery under an oppressive, militarist government.”

Iemon’s quasi-redemption when he stands up for himself against Naosuke, then, reflects this Occupation-encouraged sentiment of Japanese victimization at the hands of the military. Once he discovers that Naosuke is to blame for his misfortunes, lemon turns on him, crying that Naosuke was the one who “turned [him] into a murderer.” It is only after lemon challenges Naosuke that he sees his most complete, and only non-frightening, vision of Oiwa. She is sitting in the flames of Oume’s father’s burning house, making an umbrella as she used to do in their house together. This is the first and last time Oiwa is shown fully, as she had previously appeared only in short glimpses, superimposed upon

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49 Orr, The Victim as Hero, 16-17.

50 Ibid., 18-19.
other women — first Oume, and then Osode. This last, complete, peaceful vision of Oiwa suggests that by realizing how he has been manipulated, Iemon is able to acquire some peace. The final scene, in which lemon and Oiwa walk together through a cloud of falling cherry blossoms, suggests that they are able to reunite in peace after their deaths. This image evokes movement toward recovery from war and a hopeful present.

If one accepts Oiwa and Osode as the wartime and postwar Japanese citizen, the relationship between the two displays the interconnectedness of those two states — the same people who suffered quietly during the war can now uncover past crimes, and now that the tragic memory of war has been mourned the nation can be rebuilt under a benevolent father and husband. Before he has mourned or contended with them, Iemon is haunted by his crimes, suggesting the inability to banish the trauma of war without confronting its demons. Oiwa’s ghost is a physical manifestation of lemon’s guilt, which terrifies him until he is able to redeem himself. While lemon’s ineffectiveness in the face of Naosuke’s manipulation reflects the beginnings of a victim narrative, Oiwa’s forgiving ghost redeems the postwar Japanese while Osode’s success as wife and mother suggests a hopeful future under a new structure.

Nobuo Nakagawa’s Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan: The Mother As Victim and Warning

In 1959, exactly ten years after the release of Shinsaku Yotsuya Kaidan, Nakagawa Nobuo released his own Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan. In contrast to Kinoshita’s film, Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan visually reaches back to the stylized, spectacular effects of kabuki theater. However, despite the stylistic reclamation of Kabuki elements after the end of Occupation censorship, Nakagawa’s film uses the same model of the mother to
reflect on Japan’s past. If Kinoshita Keisuke used melodrama to imagine the tragedy and recovery of the “home” front, Nakagawa Nobuo used the drama and gore of kabuki theater to represent Oiwa as an awful reminder of the consequences of forgoing family values for easy material wealth.

In the ten years following the release Keisuke’s vision of *Yotsuya Kaidan*, Japan developed from an occupied nation still recovering from war into a prosperous, much more independent one. The poor Oiwa and Iemon are reminders of the material hardship of wartime Japan, and Iemon’s materialistic turn is a warning of the perils of postwar “high consumerism.” That Iemon accidentally leaves Oiwa with scars resembling atomic keloids is part of the film’s victim narrative, but not its central thread (Fig. 1.3). In Nakagawa’s view, the Japanese people, like Oiwa, suffered through wartime Japan poor but with a strong conception of the family. Oiwa steadfastly defends the home in the face of Iemon’s opportunistic forays, recognizing the family “as a sentimental investment in

Fig 1.3: The scars of Nakagawa’s ghostly Oiwa purposefully resemble those of a bomb victim.
need of nurturing,” recognizing its value while others might not. When she appears as a ghost, it is to rid society of the unscrupulous lemon. In this family drama, wartime Japan was tragic in that it was poor, but also noble in that it had self-sacrificing mothers such as Oiwa. Thus, though scholars such as Lowenstein and Balmain emphasize only Oiwa’s scarred face when discussing the politics of victimhood in the film, I emphasize this presentation of the Japanese as “noble” victims, of the self-serving, heartless, and greed-driven government, and also of the atomic bomb.

Nakagawa’s film developed in a culture in which poverty was a memory, not a reality. By 1959 Japan had left the poverty of the war and immediate postwar years behind to move into a new era of prosperity. In fact, according to Sheldon Garon, “high” consumerism arrived in Japan in 1959, and that same year the Economic Planning Agency declared Japan to be in the midst of a “consumer revolution.” As the director of the Economic Planning Agency famously declared in 1956, “already, the postwar is over,” a reference to rapidly growing prosperity. After years of emphasis upon frugality, Japan’s economy expanded rapidly, which prompted an increase in material ownership. By 1955 the economic stability many Japanese finally experienced allowed them to begin living that lifestyle.

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As Japan moved away from postwar poverty and occupation, the memory of war had to be rebuilt. Just fourteen years earlier, well within living memory of even young adults, nearly half of Tokyo was flattened by fire bombings. Thousands were left homeless, and hundreds of thousands more annihilated by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.\(^{54}\) Even as late as 1949, homelessness as a result of wartime destruction was commonplace.\(^{55}\) The same people who enjoyed the “consumerist” lifestyle of 1959 would have had vivid memories of poverty and suffering. The rapid prosperity the Japan of the late 1950s would have clashed with sentiments and memories solidified by long years of war. Nakagawa taps into this tension by emphasizing the relationship between Oiwa’s ghost — the personification of both the home and unsettled past — with the material objects surrounding her.

Oiwa thus represents wartime suffering as the self-sacrificing mother, but also the perils of prosperity. The prosperity boom of the mid- to late- 1950s also tracked with the re-emergence of the popular narrative of the Japanese as victims.\(^{56}\) A second round of nuclear fallout victims from hydrogen bomb experiments in 1954 solidified national anti-nuclear and pacifist sentiments. As such, “the ban-the-bomb petition movement of the middle 1950s helped make the idea of atomic victimhood a part of the Japanese cultural and political treasury.”\(^{57}\) However, while the sentiment of nuclear victimhood remained

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\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Orr, *The Victim as Hero*, 7.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 38.
popular, the emphasis was not upon “blaming” any specific aggressor, but upon the collective shared “domestic or home-front experience of being victimized by war.”

Hibakusha, or those affected by atomic fallout, became a widely used symbol of the pacifist movement of the late 1950s. A popular symbol of hibakusha, though the word applied generally, was that of the suffering mother. This hibakusha image drew upon earlier images solidified during the Occupation of the woman as symbol of the wider collective. The suffering hibakusha then referenced collective Japanese suffering during and after the war. Nakagawa’s Oiwa visually draws upon the popular image of hibakusha, which, in conjunction with the theme of materialism, references the “noble victimhood” of the war years and warns of values lost due to rapid prosperity.

Nakagawa’s classically stylized kabuki ghost of Oiwa strongly implies the chastising of the wayward and the restoration of family order. Everything from the very first sound, the striking of the ki, which signals the start of a kabuki play, to the predominance of static shots which allow the viewer an experience that more resembles a play than a film, translate kabuki into filmic terms. These stylized elements come together to create an experience that combines the personal, immersive qualities of film with the stylized drama of the kabuki stage. The film is thus able to recapture the “morality play” so central to the Yotsuya Kaidan plot while, like Kinoshita, associating the ghost of Oiwa with the personal suffering of the Japanese people. By juxtaposing

58 Orr, The Victim as Hero, 52-3.
59 Ibid., 57.
Oiwa’s ruined face with material objects, the director denounces the emphasis placed upon materialism and outward appearances, instead endorsing values of family cohesion and sentimental belonging. By referencing the story’s kabuki roots, Nakagawa both identifies with a native Japanese tradition, implying the importance of retaining native values, and comments both upon the growing culture of materialism in the late 1950s. By referencing the atomic bomb in Oiwa’s scars, Nakagawa warns of the consequences of putting material gain over sentimental values. Oiwa is as much a victim of greed as she is of war itself.

As in Kinoshita’s film, Oiwa’s ghost appears because of lemon’s corruption and materialistic greed. It is not lemon’s desire for material objects specifically that unleashes the ghost of Oiwa, but how he allows that desire to undermine greater moral responsibilities. As Michael Crandol suggests, Oiwa’s ghost must destroy the evil lemon, ridding society of his unscrupulous values and returning balance to the world.61 Oiwa’s ghost is a frightening specter that reminds viewers of lemon and his servant Naosuke’s self-serving and morally wicked actions, her ghost returning to its beautiful form only after lemon and Naosuke are dead. At the same time, the film is less concerned with the spectacle of the ghost than the actions that provoke her appearance.62 Nakagawa paints lemon’s murderous ways as a threat to the “very structures of Japanese society.”63 Oiwa’s ghost has the power to terrify and wreak havoc upon those who wrong her, but her wrath is awakened by her abuse and death at the hands of lemon.

62 Ibid.
63 Balmain, Introduction to Japanese Horror Film, 57.
Oiwa’s ghost is concerned, in particular, with the pitfalls of materialism. The scene in which Iemon attempts to pawn first the mosquito net and then Oiwa’s mother’s comb draws that clear distinction and establishes two symbols that will recur throughout the film. Each object is cast in two different lights by Oiwa and Iemon — Iemon attempts to sell both, seeing only their commercial value, while Oiwa protests by expressing their sentimental, practical, and cultural values. When Iemon tries to sell the mosquito net, Oiwa protests vehemently by expressing horror at the thought of their son being “eaten alive” by mosquitoes. Throughout the film, Oiwa expresses concern over their son being harmed by Iemon, even after she has been poisoned and is dying. Iemon’s unconcerned attitude over his son’s well being illustrates the fixation on the benefit of material goods, without regard to what function they might fulfill in the home.

The contrast between Iemon, the evil materialist, and Oiwa, the self-effacing protector of the home’s, interactions with these objects ties back to the theme of war — how forgetting the values embodied by these objects leads to war and destruction. In this vein, Oiwa’s mother’s comb likewise serves as a symbolic representation of Oiwa’s dedication to remembering family values. The comb has sentimental value because it belonged to Oiwa and Osode’s mother — it is a *katami*, a keepsake to remember the dead.64 And yet, the comb is also clearly valuable. Oiwa begs Iemon not to sell the comb, expressing far more resolve than she had up to this point, going so far as to even forcibly tear the comb away from Iemon. Although Oiwa’s attachment to the comb is not functional, as in the case of the mosquito net, her dread at losing it points to the

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64 Oiwa consistently refers to the comb as a *katami*, an object kept as a reminder of a deceased loved one, rather than using the word for “comb,” or *kushi.*
importance of the role of remembrance and familial ties within the home, both of which are values Iemon clearly lacks. Both the net and the comb serve as symbols of values set aside by Iemon’s greed.

However, it is also by the presence of the comb that Osode discovers the fact of her sister’s death, setting the final sequence of events into motion. The scene in which Osode realizes the significance of the comb is particularly interesting, as the scene features two Oiwas simultaneously: her ghost as in its frightening, grotesque form, as well as a form that much resembles the living Oiwa, so much so that Osode at first assumes that she is alive. Interestingly, only the murderous Naosuke can see the frightening Oiwa, while Osode sees the benign version of her ghost (Fig. 1.4, 1.5).

![Fig. 1.4: Osode, holding their mother’s comb, sees only Oiwa’s benign form.](image)

Seeing the comb solely as a material object of value unleashes the scarred, haunting Oiwa, while recognizing its sentimental value causes her to appear in her beautiful, unblemished form. This is illustrated when Naosuke is first introduced to Oiwa’s ghost. Naosuke fishes the comb from the river to sell, and brings it home. When Osode sees it
she immediately recognizes it as her sister’s, commenting that it was their mother’s. Oiwa then appears at the door and is welcomed by Osode, still clutching the comb.

Simultaneously, Naosuke is haunted by Oiwa’s deformed, terrifying image. Due to how they see the object — as a source of material gain, or as a source of familial connection and value — Osode and Naosuke are exposed to two different ghosts.

These twin themes — the home as a site of suffering, yet also a site from which the postwar can be rebuilt — are also encompassed in repeated images of the mosquito net. The mosquito net, which Iemon so callously attempts to sell despite his child’s needs, returns to haunt him as a suffocating presence. The net, as an item important to the health and comfort of the child, acts as a reminder of the home as a nurturing space. With the mosquito net sold, the safety of that space is cast into doubt. While the comb serves as a reminder of broader familial duties abandoned, and can have different meaning for Oiwa and Naosuke, the mosquito net is representative of Iemon’s crimes against Oiwa as representative of the suffering collective.
That Iemon should be threatened by what he has devalued implies the dangers of forgetting the family-centric values represented by Oiwa. Furthermore, it references the possibility that the suffering of war can always return if those values are forgotten. When Iemon is hiding in the temple, the disfigured ghost of Oiwa appears to Iemon, this time holding the ghost of their son. The mosquito net falls from a black sky, covering the camera and giving the impression of complete suffocation (Fig. 1.6). Here follows a surreal, frightening montage sequence that acts as culmination of all of the hauntings that have taken place so far. The director spacially disorients both Iemon and the viewer by placing Iemon in a blank, black environment that appears to break the laws of space as the ghostly Oiwa, the net, and the door Oiwa was nailed to after her death appear inexplicably wherever Iemon turns. There is no hiding for Iemon from these material reminders of his crimes.

Fig. 1.6: A ghostly mosquito net descends from a black sky, threatening to suffocate Iemon.

The director constructs the comb and net as symbols of relationships corrupted by lemon and Naosuke’s villainy, and then places those objects in relation to the ghost of
Oiwa, the mother figure who is the representation of the Japanese collective. The multiple adaptations of *Yotsuya Kaidan* allow the viewer to process memory by using the woman as to express either terror or redemption. In Kinoshita’s film, he allows postwar Japanese to acknowledge their guilt before leaving the controlling and destructive military regime behind for a hopeful future. Oiwa’s ghost is implied to be a figment of Iemon’s guilty conscience, and his visions cease once he has vanquished Naosuke’s evil influence. Iemon and Oiwa are ultimately allowed to reunite in harmony. Nakagawa’s film, by contrast, emphasizes the anger of Oiwa’s wronged ghost. Rather than simply the projection of a guilty conscience, Nakagawa’s Oiwa is actively resentful of her death, and purposefully haunts her murderers. Kinoshita’s Oiwa, in her appearance as the product of a tortured mind and her peaceful reconciliation with Iemon, suggests the possibility of a bright postwar future once the corrupting powers have been banished. Nakagawa’s Oiwa, with her terrible anger and resentment as a victim, can rage against her ill treatment; but whatever fears she summons are carefully exorcised by her representation as a caring mother. Each Oiwa suggests a different way of remembering and reacting to war — one ultimately delivers a message of hope for the future under a new order, while the other calls out her torturers and offers no easy means of escape from the consequences of their actions.
Ugetsu (1953) and the Politics of Forgiveness

Introduction

Mizoguchi Kenji’s Ugetsu (1953) broke onto the international film scene by way of the Venice film festival, winning both a Silver Lion and the Japanese film industry a place on the world stage. The film is famous for its gorgeously filmed ghostly apparitions, landscapes, and foggy crossings.65 Mizoguchi’s ghost story differs from both Nakagawa and Keisuke’s Yotsuya Kaidan, in which Oiwa’s ghost appears as a victim of wartime, and Shindo Kaneto’s Onibaba, in which the terrifying demonic woman reminds viewers that Japan was both victim and oppressor. In Ugetsu, Mizoguchi reinvents the gothic narrative by presenting his ghosts as mournful reminders of wartime errors, rather than as avenging punishers. Mizoguchi’s women, instead of terrifying the men, forgive them for their lapses. In this way, Mizoguchi both laments the tragedy of World War II but forgives the errant.

Ugetsu, like Yotsuya Kaidan, is set in feudal Japan, and thus a retelling of World War II from the safe distance of several centuries. The story tells of a pair of war profiteers and their wives: Genjuro and his wife Miyagi, and Genjuro’s brother Tobei and his wife Ohama. Genjuro is a potter, and hopes to use the chaos of wartime to his advantage and make a profit on his work. Tobei dreams of becoming a samurai, despite his commoner status. In spite of the danger of approaching armies, Genjuro and Tobei go to town to sell Genjuro’s pottery. While in town, Genjuro and Tobei part ways. Tobei buys samurai armor while Genjuro attracts the interest of a beautiful, wealthy woman by

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the name of Lady Wakasa. Lady Wakasa invites Genjuro into her home and seduces him, inviting him to forget Miyagi and their son. The plot thus captures the adventurism, the profiteering, and the allure of going to war.

Though Genjuro initially succumbs to Lady Wakasa’s charms, he meets a priest who warns him that Lady Wakasa is not a woman at all, but a ghost. Genjuro escapes Lady Wakasa’s spirit and returns to his village, where he finds his house miraculously intact amidst war-torn ruins. Miyagi greets him at the door, and they joyfully reunite. The next morning, however, Genjuro discovers that Miyagi is gone — she was murdered by soldiers while he was with Lady Wakasa. The film ends as Genjuro rebuilds his home and his business; the closing shot shows Genjuro’s son mourning the devastation of war as he lays flowers upon his mother’s grave. The film thus ends by the rejection of the temptations of war and the resumption of everyday family life.

Mizoguchi could have chosen to tell *Ugetsu* as a frightening tale of spirits and ghosts, but instead chose to emphasize the melancholy over the traditionally gothic. As Donald Richie points out, both Lady Wakasa and Miyagi “died wanting love.”⁶⁶ Though Miyagi can be read as a virtuous personification of the dutiful wife and Lady Wakasa as the temptress who lures Genjuro away from his family, in the end Miyagi and Lady Wakasa share the same fate; they are rendered helpless by a patriarchal structure and abandoned by the men who should have protected them.

In his ghost women, Mizoguchi draws upon both the standard gothic ghost woman who returns to right social wrongs and the contemporary image of the suffering

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woman in film. Both Miyagi and Wakasa serve as conduits of national discourse, as women onscreen played a central role in reshaping the Japanese conception of war memory in the early 1950s. As Jennifer Coates argues in “Victims and Bystanders: Women in the Japanese War-Retro film,” “the female image [in war-retro film] function[ed] as an emotional screen in the retrospective war narrative, anchoring the affects and identifications of the viewer to the leading characters and hence to the political and national affiliations they represent.”

Coates here defines the “war-retro” film as a film that looks back upon World War II after the end of the Allied Occupation. While the films that Coates discusses are all explicitly contemporary war narratives, it is likewise possible to apply Coates’s analysis to an oblique war narrative like Ugetsu, particularly as Japan began to construct war memory as a newly independent nation through the image of the suffering woman.

The development of a booming mass culture, particularly film, at the same historic moment as both end of the Occupation and the demand for clemency for war criminals also created a platform for new forms of war memory to be widely dispersed and consumed. After 1952, filmmakers shook themselves free from American censors, which prohibited subjects “deemed to be militarist, nationalist, or anti foreign.” In response to these lifted restrictions, 1952 and 1953 saw a “steady stream” of films released that would have been censored under Occupation. These films questioned Japan’s role in the war as well as the Allied tendency to place an inordinate amount of

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67 Coates, “Victims and Bystanders,” 234.

blame upon not only Japanese actions but Japanese culture as a whole, a fact amply evident to the Japanese through the war criminal trials. As Coates suggests, “The affective qualities of the retrospective war film can tell us much about the attitudes of postwar Japanese viewers, and suggest how the war film can contribute to the production of a national collective memory.”

Mizoguchi’s use of the traditionally gothic “ghost woman” cues the viewer to expect a frightening ghost who will punish the men for their wartime errors. However, whereas gothic women typically chastise men for their moral lapses, Mizoguchi presents these women as melancholy ghosts rather than terrifying avengers. As the film was released in 1953, just one year after the end of the Allied Occupation of Japan, Mizoguchi’s reimagining of the gothic woman speaks directly to a new, more forgiving attitude to the crimes of the past. By politicizing Mizoguchi’s masterpiece in this way and by linking it to war memory, I offer a new reading of the film, which has hitherto only been studied as a visual tour de force. Its compelling visual artistry seems to discourage political readings, so much so that any politicization of the film is limited to the tragic fate of its war widows. By focusing on Mizoguchi’s genre-bending, I show that Mizoguchi softens the chastising tone of the traditional gothic narrative, leaving in its place a seductive dream of errantry.

Ugetsu: Literary Antecedents and a New Narrative of Forgiveness

Mizoguchi’s film has deep roots in the gothic tradition. The book upon which

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69 Wilson, Trefalt, and Aszkiewicz, Japanese War Criminals, 187.
70 Coates, “Victims and Bystanders,” 234.
Mizoguchi’s film is based, Ueda Akinari’s *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, or *Ugetsu Monogatari*, is generally agreed to be “Japan’s first definitively Gothic work.” Composed in the late Edo period and based upon even older Japanese and Chinese stories, *Ugetsu* features “gloomy medieval settings, the sweep of ghosts and demons, and the forces of sorcery and sex that disturb social and religious norms.” Akinari’s work thus chastises those who undermine a strict Confucian social code, a trope that would later become a staple in gothic literature and film.

Ueda Akinari’s *Ugetsu Monogatari* was also an influential forerunner of the popular “Edo-Gothic” genre in Japanese film. Its “obsession with status and material wealth” that leads to “murder, blackmail, and adultery” marked it as an early forebear of flamboyantly Edo Gothic films like Nobuo Nakagawa’s *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan*. The “Edo Gothic” was typically set in feudal Japan and featured “deceitful Samurai and wronged women” who return as ghosts to confront those who harm them. In other words, traditionally the gothic is seen as a conservative genre where gothic women chastise men for prioritizing self over society or family. However, though the Edo Gothic reached its filmic peak in the 1950s and 60s, it drew upon a much older story-telling tradition that, while only clearly defined in the late eighteenth century, had deep roots in folkloric traditions.

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72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Balmain, *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film*, 50.

75 Ibid.
Mizoguchi based *Ugetsu* on two stories: “The Reed-Choked House,” and “A Serpent’s Lust.” In “The Reed-Choked House” a peasant, Katsushiro, goes to Kyoto to sell silk in the midst of wartime. He makes a good profit, but is cut off from his home village by the rebel army. He assumes that his wife was killed by the turbulent warfare and stays away for seven years before he makes up his mind to return home and learn of her fate. When he reaches his house, he is shocked to be greeted by his wife; her “skin dark with grime,” her “eyes sunken,” and her “hair loose down her back,” a far cry from her previous beauty.\(^76\) Though Katsushiro is initially afraid that his wife might be a ghost, he is nonetheless delighted to find her alive and lies down to sleep beside her. His ghostly suspicions are proven correct when Katsushiro is awakens to his home ruined and inhabited by wildlife. He immediately realizes that he has seen the ghost of his wife, “just as he had feared.”\(^77\) Later, an old man informs him that his “virtuous wife” waited for him to return until she pined away and died within that very house.\(^78\)

Ueda Akinari’s story amplifies the Confucian ideal of the dutiful waiting wife in order to punish the unfeeling husband who stays away too long. Though Katushiro only truly realizes that his wife is dead when he wakes up in an abandoned house, the reader is cued to suspect that Miyagi is a ghost as soon as Katushiro returns home. Miyagi’s decrepit appearance, the inexplicable preservation of the house when the rest of the village is destroyed, and her odd behavior strongly indicate the presence of the


\(^77\) Ibid., 100.

\(^78\) Ibid.
supernatural. Miyagi even reminds Katsushiro of his neglect, saying, “I am happy now that my long resentment has been dispelled. No one else can know of the resentment of one who dies of longing, waiting for another to come.”

Though the return of Miyagi’s ghost offers the perfect opportunity for a vengeful ghost narrative, Miyagi is presented as a forgiving, loving, and melancholy spirit. Mizoguchi’s filmic retelling, particularly the scene in which Miyagi welcomes Genjuro home, does away with most of the overtly grotesque, and even supernatural, elements. The viewer is aware of Miyagi’s death — she was stabbed to death by rogue foot soldiers — but in contrast to the original story there are no clear markers of her ghostly nature. Miyagi appears no different from when she was alive, and rejoices at Genjuro’s safe return. The contrast between the traditionally gothic themes of the story and the forgiving nature of Miyagi’s ghost engages with a nationwide debate over Japanese war guilt just after the end of Occupation.

While the Occupation narrative of war emphasized Japanese “guilt vis-a-vis other countries and peoples,” Japanese at home were “overwhelmed by grief and guilt toward their own dead countrymen.” As the nation sought to contend with these strong emotions, the war-retro film became a site upon which those emotions could be processed. Female images in these films, as Jennifer Coates notes, then “became symbolic of the losses Japan had suffered at home during 15 years of imperial expansion

79 Ueda Akinari, Tales of Moonlight and Rain, 99.

and war."\(^{81}\) Women in these films were depicted suffering and eventually dying, thus testifying to a postwar collective grappling with the suffering of wartime. *Ugetsu*’s women, particularly its ghost women, can be read as a direct means of addressing the “popular tropes of the inhumanity of war which were central to postwar Japan’s self-identification as humanist pacifist nation.”\(^{82}\)

As in the war-retro film, men and women each have distinct roles to play in *Ugetsu*’s drama of remorse and forgiveness. Robin Wood notes that throughout the film “it is the men who carry the action and determine the whole course of the narrative. It is the men whose exploits and experiences we follow throughout the film, with the brief exceptions of the sequences showing Ohama's rape and descent into prostitution and the mortal wounding of Miyagi. To put it crudely, we learn with the men, we suffer with the women.”\(^{83}\)

Genjuro’s remorse and Miyagi’s forgiveness are critical to the film’s narrative of forgiveness in the face of grievous and destructive error. Genjuro stands in for the grieving nation, while Miyagi collectively represents the innocents, particularly the mothers, who suffered and died in the war. Miyagi’s reappearance at the end of the film to reunite with her husband is an indication of her forgiveness despite Genjuro’s abandonment and adultery. She embodies the “nobly forgiving source of the most rewarding form of redemption known to man,” as she greets Genjuro and settles down to

\(^{81}\) Coates, “Victims and Bystanders,” 236.

\(^{82}\) Ibid., 241-2.

mend clothing. Likewise, Robin Wood connects the deaths of both Lady Wakasa and Miyagi to “the masculine drive for power, domination, [and] acquisition, in all its manifestations.” Both are victims of a patriarchal system, and, as Wood points out, “it is men who make wars.

The dynamic of remorse and forgiveness is played out visually in the moments just after Genjuro finally returns home. When Genjuro sees Miyagi, he is relieved to see her safe, while Miyagi drops her chopsticks in her rush to embrace Genjuro. Genjuro attempts to apologize for both his absence and his liaisons with Wakasa, saying that he has done terrible things. Miyagi refuses to let Genjuro speak, insisting that it does not matter now that since he has returned safely. While Miyagi does not deny that Genjuro has made grievous errors, she likewise does not punish him. Instead, she lovingly welcomes him home and brings him sake and a meal.

Their dynamic is likewise illustrated in the cinematography. Long, primarily static and eye-level shots dwell upon Miyagi and Genjuro’s loving reunion, as well as Genjuro’s heartfelt reunion with his son. These devices serve to normalize the scene and evoke stability. As the scene progresses the camera slowly zooms in upon Miyagi as she comforts Genjuro and serves him food and drink. Her face is softly illuminated in the dark room, which focuses the viewer’s attention on their tearful reconciliation. A long, steady take keeps the viewer’s attention upon Miyagi’s face to emphasize both her humanity and her reaction to Genjuro’s return (Fig 2.1). The camera remains upon

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84 McDonald, *Mizoguchi*, 122.
85 Wood, *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*, 245.
86 Ibid.
Miyagi’s face as she slowly raises her sleeve to her face to wipe away a tear. Miyagi’s reaction and the camera’s emphasis upon it both forgive Genjuro for his wartime errors and simultaneously mourns their consequences.

Fig 2.1: A long, static take focuses upon Miyagi’s reaction to Genjuro’s return.

Even so, rather than echoing Genjuro’s remorse, the scene dramatizes Miyagi’s forgiving welcome. As Genjuro expresses his relief at Miyagi’s safety, the camera cuts to a silhouetted shot of her back, which emphasizes her separation from Genjuro and Genichi. This time Miyagi remains in shadow while Genjuro and Genichi are softly lit. The entire scene is evocatively lit by candlelight and shot to provide what Keiko McDonald terms a “supernatural aura.”

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Though Genjuro is grievously aware of his errors, instead of condemning him, as the traditionally gothic ghost mother might, Miyagi forgives and welcomes him home. This attitude of forgiveness for mistakes made in wartime echoes Japanese collective discourse of the early 1950s. When *Ugetsu* was released in 1953, Japanese intellectuals were reconsidering Japan’s role in the war, Japan now finally released from under the watchful eyes of the Allied Occupation.\(^{88}\) During the Occupation, Japanese guilt was publicly displayed through trials of some 5,700 Japanese suspects.\(^{89}\) Nearly all were charged for war crimes, and about a thousand were condemned to death.\(^{90}\) Public protest against these trials began as early as the late 1940s. While subdued at first, the movement gained momentum through the end of the 1940s and into the early 1950s, particularly after the end of the Occupation in 1952.\(^{91}\) Ordinary people lobbied and petitioned for prisoners to be granted clemency and for criminals held overseas to be allowed to return home.\(^{92}\) As Sandra Wilson points out, “reflection on the current and future situation of war criminals and of the circumstances of their convictions provided an early platform for the reformulations of the meanings of the war and of war guilt.”\(^{93}\)

That these nationwide sentiments toward forgiveness of war crimes should be


\(^{90}\) Ibid.

\(^{91}\) Ibid., 88.


\(^{93}\) Ibid.
reflected in *Ugetsu* is unsurprising, for both the print news and cinema played a
prominent role in creating the narrative of war criminals in the early 1950s. A boom in
mass culture left both journalists and filmmakers looking for content, and both writers
and filmmakers “sought out and interviewed convicted war criminals, inviting them to
tell their stories.” 94 These writers told stories of “ordinary men, missing their homes and
families, and needed by those families — rather than to describe or reflect on what they
had done during the war.” 95 The narrative of forgiveness did not completely overlook the
fact of Japanese atrocities overseas; as early as 1945, public discourse in newspapers such
as *Asahi* suggested that the Japanese should even punish their own war criminals, and
general sentiment was anger and bitterness toward those who had led Japan to defeat. 96
Those tried in the Tokyo trials, however, and against whom most of the vitriol was
directed, were considered “class A” criminals. 97 The actions of lesser war criminals were
not forgotten, but in the years after the Tokyo trials ended in 1948, the dominant narrative
was one of broken families waiting at home, not crimes committed during wartime.

This narrative of forgiveness is furthermore reflected in Genjuro’s interaction with
Lady Wakasa. Genjuro’s liaisons with Wakasa follow the script of another traditionally
gothic narrative — a social climbing peasant who abandons his wife for a seductive ghost
woman. This cues the viewer to expect Lady Wakasa to transform from beguiling to
frightening, punishing Genjuro for his opportunism. This is never the case, however;

95 Ibid., 91.
97 Ibid.
Wakasa remains ethereally tragic rather than punishing, inviting the viewer to sympathize with Genjuro’s wish to remain by her side. Though Genjuro’s adultery is understood to be wrong, Mizoguchi’s sympathetic presentation of Wakasa’s ghost suggests that while Genjuro’s (and by extension the Japanese collective’s) actions — born from greed and leading to tragic outcomes — are undeniably mistakes, a certain amount of sympathy can be reserved for the beguiling dream that prompted those errors.

The fleeting romance between Genjuro and Lady Wakasa was likewise adapted from Ueda Akinari’s *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, where, following the conventions of the traditional Japanese gothic narrative, the monstrous woman seduces and then chastises the male social climber. The original story follows a fisherman’s son, Toyoo, who wishes to learn the “courtly, refined ways” of the capital rather than earn a living for himself within his social rank.  

98 One day he meets a woman, Manago, who seduces him and gives him a sword that she claims was her dead husband’s. His family and the police, suspicious of how he came upon the sword, go with him to Manago’s house, only to discover it falling apart and rotting. Manago is revealed to be a demon, a snake who had “attached” herself to Toyoo “out of lust for [his] beauty.”  

99 Toyoo is finally able to outwit the snake with the help of a priest, who traps it in a bowl and buries it. By tricking and trapping the snake, Toyoo manages to survive, but not before the snake follows him, possesses his wife, and threatens his life. Ueda Akinari’s original story is a representation of the dangers of striving too high above one’s station, and the snake thus chastises Toyoo.

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98 Ueda Akinari, *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, 160.

99 Ibid., 173.
for his sexual and material desires.

Fig 2.2: Lady Wakasa’s gauzy clothing and painted face differentiate her from her mundane surroundings.

In contrast to the original narrative, Mizoguchi’s film only gently chastises Genjuro’s attempt to raise himself above his original station. Wakasa is seductive and eventually must be banished, but she is simultaneously beautiful, gentle, and loving. Instead of being purely a punishment for Genjuro, Lady Wakasa’s appearance suggests that, while his actions were wrong, the seductive and idyllic dream that he pursued was an understandable one. This is achieved by presenting Lady Wakasa as a lofty, preternatural beauty. Lady Wakasa initially materializes like a beautiful specter amidst the hustle and bustle of the pottery market. She is dressed and her face is painted like a grand lady, setting her apart from her everyday surroundings (Fig 2.2). Like Miyagi in the final
scene of the film, there is clearly something odd about her, and the viewer can easily
draw the correct conclusion that Wakasa is a ghost. In keeping with this, the mood of her
home is eerie, but not threatening. Candlelight, shadows, and the trappings of wealth
contribute to a melancholy atmosphere. When contrasted with Ueda Akinari’s startling
description of the snake woman’s true form, “filling the door frame, gleaming whiter than
a pile of snow, eyes like mirrors, horns like leafless trees, gaping mouth three feet across
with a crimson tongue protruding,” Lady Wakasa is tame by comparison.100

Fig 2.3: Lady Wakasa towers over Genjuro in the onsen scene.

And yet, for all of Wakasa’s gently ethereal beauty, Genjuro is never in control.
The power Wakasa holds over him is constructed visually. In the hot spring scene she

100 Ueda Akinari, *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, 178.
stands, fully clothed, over Genjuro while Genjuro himself is seated, naked, in the water. Lady Wakasa’s positioning within the frame ensures that she towers over Genjuro, visually stating her power over him (Fig 2.3). Genjuro’s state of undress further emphasizes his vulnerability. The power that Wakasa is visually implied to hold over Genjuro links her presence to the serpent-woman of the original story.

But despite Lady Wakasa’s clear dominion over the scene, the visuals are simultaneously peaceful. The lighting of the scene is soft. Lady Wakasa glows ethereally, but not threateningly. The steam from the hot spring softens the entire image, while a soundtrack of peaceful music and birdsong gives the setting a sense of peace and tranquility. The effect is one of romance rather than perilous seduction. Though Lady Wakasa is a dominating figure, she is simultaneously a loving one, an understandably enticing dream that drives Genjuro’s hope of social movement.

The scene in which Genjuro and Wakasa picnic by the sea also illustrates how their “strange” romance becomes more dreamlike, but nevertheless unwise. The viewer receives no spacial orientation or direction, which places the picnic outside of the already established filmic spaces. Bright lighting (in contrast to the hot spring scene) causes the setting to “sparkle,” again giving the scene an ethereally idyllic quality (Fig 2.4). And yet, while the setting is peaceful, it is still clear that Wakasa holds the power. At all times Genjuro is shown as sitting or kneeling, while Wakasa towers over him. Even when they embrace, Wakasa physically dominates Genjuro by knocking him over backward.

While they are understood to be wrong, the film invites the viewer to likewise indulge in Genjuro’s errors. At no point is Lady Wakasa overtly threatening, as would be
expected. Rather, she is a “touching, vulnerable figure, associated with art and beauty.”

As Robin Wood notes in *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film: Hollywood and Beyond*, Mizoguchi’s Lady Wakasa is “agonizingly human,” which “both complicates and deepens the tale.” The visual construction of the film emphasizes the contrast between Wakasa’s gentle, enticing aura and her role as the seductive ghost.

![Fig. 2.4: The setting of Lady Wakasa and Genjuro’s picnic contributes to the ethereal mood.](image)

The understanding that to succumb to Wakasa’s charms is wrong, coupled with the film’s sympathetic portrayal of those charms, addresses the tension between the understanding of war criminal’s actions and the desire to grant them clemency. As the movement to free war criminals moved forward, a number of strategies to exonerate them

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101 Wood, *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*, 244.

102 Ibid., 243.
from guilt appeared in fictional narratives, press accounts, and statements by activists. These included suggesting that they were not in fact guilty at all, that they were guilty but had been punished enough, or that they had repented for their sins. These suggestions were not always unfounded, as the widely held (and likely in some part accurate) belief was that many were punished simply for the crime of being on the losing side of the war. While the question of how to interpret war criminals and crimes remained a contentious one, by 1953, the year of *Ugetsu*’s release and one year after Occupation officially ended in Japan, press articles “claimed with increased confidence” that the public wished to see prisoners released.

The return of Mizoguchi’s ghost women, not as punishing specters, but as melancholy visitations reflects a collective reaction against the narrative of Japanese guilt perpetuated during the Occupation years. By using the form of the gothic woman, Mizoguchi primes the viewer to expect a certain gothic narrative that punishes Genjuro for his wartime errors. However, by filmically forgiving Genjuro, Mizoguchi instead both mourns the mistakes and consequences of wartime and suggests that the perpetrators of those mistakes be forgiven. In this way, Mizoguchi both mourns the death and destruction of the war, while also imagining Japan as a new nation of repentant and forgiven men.

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103 Wood, *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*, 94.

104 Ibid., 96.

105 Ibid., 100.
Feudal Power and the Scars of Oppression:  
The Mother as Victim and Victimizer in Shindo Kaneto’s Onibaba  
(1964)

Introduction

Shindo Kaneto’s *Onibaba* was released in 1964, five years after Nakagawa’s  
*Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* and eleven years after Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu*. *Onibaba* was  
released as an independent art film; and in fact, 1964 was a turning point for independent  
filmmakers in Japan. Film revenues had been declining since the early 1960s, and  
major studios started supporting independent films rather than excluding them from their  
distribution venues. In addition to *Onibaba*, two other high profile independent films,  
both also reminiscent of the *kaiki* tradition, were also released in 1964: Teshigara  
Hiroshi’s *Sunna no Onna (Woman in the Dunes)* and Masaki Kobayashi’s *Kwaidan*  
(*Ghost Story*). While *Onibaba* was released and marketed as an art film, its distribution  
by Toho gave it a wider audience than it might have had five years earlier.

By the time of *Onibaba*’s release, Shindo Kaneto was already known for work  
that addressed the atomic bomb and scars of World War II. In 1952 he worked on  
*Genbaku no ko (Children of Hiroshima)*, as well as a number of other films throughout  
the 1950s that explicitly referenced the bomb and aftereffects of atomic radiation.

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Cinema.” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 16, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 45.

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid.

109 Lowenstein, “Allegorizing Hiroshima: Shindo Kaneto’s Onibaba as Trauma Text,” in *Trauma 
and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang, 145–61 
(Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 146.
However, *Onibaba* is unique among Shindo’s work involving war memory and trauma in that it makes use of the monstrous mother figure. While it was clearly not unprecedented for post-war films to use the demonic mother figure as a means by which to address war memory, *Onibaba* is unique in that respect for Shindo’s filmography. By using the demonic mother trope, Shindo’s film joins a larger body of work of ghostly mother films that likewise address the question of war memory.

Like *Yotsuya Kaidan* and *Ugetsu*, *Onibaba* draws its origins from old roots — in this case a Buddhist parable. In the original parable, a mother is frustrated with her daughter-in-law for neglecting her chores to pray at the temple. In order to terrify the daughter into working, the mother hides in the bushes and jumps out at the daughter while wearing a demon mask. Buddha then punishes the mother for her impiety by sticking the mask to her face. The mother prays to the Buddha to allow her to remove the hideous mask, and the Buddha agrees — however, when the mask finally comes off it removes a layer of skin as well, leaving the mother disfigured and scarred.\(^{110}\)

Though essential details remain the same, Shindo adapted the simple parable to reflect on terror tactics and a “feudal” power structure. In *Onibaba*, the country is divided between two warring emperors, an allegory for both the American occupiers and the militaristic regime of the war years. A middle-aged woman and her daughter-in-law live in the midst of an endless field of tall grasses, scraping a meagre living by killing lost soldiers and selling their armor while their son/husband is away at war. Their fragile existence is disrupted by the arrival of Hachi, a fellow soldier who brings news of the

son/husband’s death. Over time, the daughter-in-law and Hachi develop a relationship, which the mother recognizes as ruinous to the women’s carefully maintained survival tactics. Eventually, in desperation, the mother dons a demon mask in an attempt to scare the daughter-in-law away from Hachi.

Terror tactics backfire, however. On the third night of terrorizing the daughter, the mother is caught in a rainstorm and the mask adheres itself to her face. In a panic, the mother reveals herself to the daughter, who, in return for helping to remove the mask, forces the mother to stop interfering with the daughter’s relationship with Hachi. After a prolonged struggle, the daughter manages to remove the mask only to reveal the mother’s face to be inexplicably scarred and disfigured. The daughter flees, believing the mother to truly be a demon. The mother chases her, tearfully reminding her that she is human, but the daughter leads the mother to the hole where historically the two of them have deposited the bodies of their victims. The mother jumps, but the film leaves her fate undetermined, cutting to black just as she leaps.

Though Shindo’s interpretation of the Onibaba parable sets the story in the 14th century, the film also has clear correlations to Japan of 1964. As Shindo himself stated, “[Japanese directors] select certain old stories which have sufficient modern application; I should say, stories which have universal and modern implications.”\(^{111}\) Though the film is set in the distant feudal past, the setting of a divided Japan, ravaged by war, is undeniably intended to not only engage the question of how to remember World War II, but also contemporary antiwar sentiment in the midst of the war in Vietnam.

While the social structure Shindo critiques may loosely be called “feudalism,” in the film it is a catch-all idea that captures the wartime authoritarian way of life. As Shindo further remarked, “when I want to dissect a modern problem, I actually find many similar problems in ancient days…by using a comprehensible social structure such as we had in the past, it is much easier for me to convey or recreate modern situations.” The new post-war social imagery emphasized that Japan was leaving behind a feudalistic past for a democratic future. In the rosy prognosis of postwar intellectuals, a pre-war authoritarian family was giving way to a nuclear family that valued individual desire over the will of the collective.

Shindo’s characterization of the wartime state as “feudal” reflected intellectual debates among his contemporaries. As the intellectual Maruyama Masao argued, during the Meiji Restoration “authoritarian aspects of feudal government prevailed over the dynamic elements of the feudal society,” manifesting themselves anew in modern nationalism and the militarist state. Maruyama specifically discusses the place of the “autonomous self” in the modern state, suggesting that in both feudal and imperialist structures the “self” must give way to the “integrative mechanism” of the oppressive structure. This “semifeudal” structure of the wartime and post-war years, prompted another contemporary, Hani Goro, to argue that “an idealist philosophy came to stand in for the political activities forbidden by the repressive state apparatus,” and that this

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112 “Kaneto Shindo,” by Joan Mellen, 92.


114 Ibid.
idealism led to a “unwillingness or inability to directly confront reality.” Shindo’s feudal setting evokes the oppression and lack of autonomy of the war years; like these critics, it also engages with worries about “incomplete democratization” in postwar national discourse, and critiques denial of the reality of that process.

In particular, Shindo complicates the easy linear narrative of progress from feudal norms to a democratic future by revealing why feudalism and fascism may have been attractive. As Christopher Gerteis and Timothy George note in *Japan Since 1945: From Postwar to Post-Bubble*, “depicting Japan as emerging from feudalism, while useful, elided the fact that most people had been attracted to fascism.” In doing so, this chapter extends arguments made by Keiko McDonald and Joan Mellen to uncover this “dark” and unacknowledged desire for feudal power. These authors, however, do not comment on what the “sexual liberation” the daughter desires may mean for the film — an aspect that must be examined in terms of the politics of individual freedom in the postwar period. In sum, *Onibaba* is not simply a critique of “tragic” portraits of Japan, as Adam Lowenstein claims, nor only a critique of wartime feudal ideas as McDonald claims, but a challenge to the conventionally linear narrative of wartime militarism to post-war democracy.

**Onibaba: Victimizer and Scarred Victim**

As many scholars have noted, the scarred face of the mother when she removes her mask instantly reminds viewers of atomic bomb victims. By showing the scarred

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victim of the bomb on film, Shindo engages in a complex reworking of the postwar filmic trope of woman as war victim. As James Orr notes, “mythologies of Japanese war victimhood… reached a critical period of common acceptance in the third decade of Showa (1955-1965),” as the image of the innocent “A-bomb” maiden proliferated in pop culture and the generation that would have been young during wartime came of age.\textsuperscript{117} This “postwar shift in Japanese cultural representation” exchanges “Japan’s pre-Hiroshima imperial aggressions in favor of post-Hiroshima national victimhood, where national iconic images of the militarized male are replaced with images of the blameless, self-sacrificing maternal female.”\textsuperscript{118} This trope is visible in Oiwa of \textit{Yotsuya Kaidan} and in Miyagi of \textit{Ugetsu}, but the mother of \textit{Onibaba} does not embody this ideal even before her demonic transformation.

\textit{Onibaba}’s mother also departs from the filmic stereotypes found in \textit{hahamono}, or “nurturing mother” films. As Ruth Goldberg notes, the mother of \textit{Onibaba} “could not be more diametrically opposed to the popular vision of the \textit{hahamono},” as she not only resembles a demon but spends much of the film murdering and conniving.\textsuperscript{119} The uncanny mother film, according to Goldberg, features “otherworldly anger [that] becomes symptomatic of the familial rift in communication and crisis over roles,” ultimately culminating in the mother’s punishment.\textsuperscript{120} Even before she becomes a demon,
the mother in Onibaba is neither beautiful nor innocent, as the *hahamono* ideal dictates she should be.

As Adam Lowenstein argues in his essay *Allegorizing Hiroshima*, *Onibaba* is an allegory for “war responsibility and the construction of gendered models of Japanese national identity.” Specifically, as Lowenstein emphasizes, the character of the mother is the focal point of the film’s dual exploration of victimization and war responsibility. Lowenstein draws a connection between the hole in which the mother deposits the bodies of her victims and the site of the bomb, asserting that “it is a site of trauma in the landscape that both begins and ends the lives of the people surrounding it.”

This hole becomes the concentrated focus of the implications of war, and its significance is indicated at the very start of the film. The first few shots highlight the hole

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121 Lowenstein, “Allegorizing Hiroshima,” 145.
122 Ibid., 151.
123 Ibid., 156.
both from above, differentiating it from the field of grasses, and then from below, with overlaid text that labels it definitively as “the hole.” The hole is presented to the viewer both visually and through onscreen text before even the title of the film, indicating its importance as a visual and thematic device. The hole, while it interrupts the landscape of grasses, also hides the unsavory sight of murdered and looted bodies. If the field represents the battlefield and its ruins, then the hole conceals the underlying ugliness that likewise underlies warfare, a “hell” that houses the bodies of the dead (Fig 3.1).

The hole does not simply hide the bodies of the murdered soldiers, but those who spearhead the disastrous war as well. While foot soldiers and the samurai alike personify war, there is a clear distinction between the two groups. As Hachi says, “it’s the generals’ war, not ours,” recognizing the lack of unity among the common soldiers and their leaders. The masked samurai represents the elite, the “generals” who lead men like Hachi and the son to their deaths. Even so, the hole holds the bodies of both the common soldier and the high-ranking samurai, condemning them equally. The mixture of hostility, death, and warfare makes the hole a repository of toxic waste that is then sold by the mother and daughter as a means of survival.

While the men fight the war, the mother and daughter embody the wartime commoner. They are tough people, but simultaneously forgotten and living within the confines of a feudalistic state. Their association with the landscape demonstrates both their separation from the elite as well as their resourcefulness. The first shots of the film are devoted to the waving grasses, some even bordering on the abstract with extreme close-ups and low and high-angles. These emphasize the complex visual terrain — the
field appears differently depending upon the positioning of the camera — and yet the two women have complete mastery of it. Furthermore, the two soldiers who are pursued and killed in the opening sequence are suggested to be at the mercy of the landscape. The extreme high and low angle shots, as well as shots through the grass, give the impression of both chaos and bewilderment for strangers who wander in (Fig 3.2). The first shot of the soldiers, in which they are shown nearly swallowed by grasses sets the tone for the rest of the scene, setting up the field as a site of fear and uncertainty, even for accomplished soldiers.

![Unconventional angles and close-ups lend a sense of chaos.](image)

The abstract setting of the film, in its sameness, allows the events of the film to unfold without being rooted in time and place. The effect is that of a dreamlike space and although the field is presented as a potentially real place in 14th century Japan, the swaying of the grasses and lack of other landscape markers create an almost fantastical landscape where anything might be possible. In such a space, the fantastical event of the mother’s fusion with a demonic mask is not implausible. Furthermore, the abstract feel of
the setting enables the viewer to view what could be taken as a simple “folk” story as a contemporary narrative.

By displacing the setting of the film into an abstracted and unspecified feudal past, Shindo also links his film to contemporary dialogue connecting feudalism and the wartime government. These most notably align with the ideas of the prominent thinker Maruyama Masao, who spent a long and influential career writing critically about political theory in postwar Japan. Maruyama argued that when Japan transitioned from feudal to centralized imperial government under the Meiji Restoration in 1868 it was a “revolutionary change consolidated from above, but it was not a revolution.”

Ultimately “because of the feudal nature of the economy, popular opinion was unable to guide the modernization of society,” and the nation never truly moved away from the feudal system.” Furthermore, “the triumph of imperialism was not just the inevitable working out of historical materialism. It was rather an extension of the loss of self.”

This loss of self, or the opposite of “personal autonomy,” on the part of the populace was a fundamental contribution to the development of the oppressive materialist state. Maruyama believed that to “correctly grasp the concept of democratic rights” one must enjoy both personal and political autonomy from state.

124 Kersten, *Democracy in Postwar Japan*, 64.
125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid., 66.
128 Ibid.
Shindo addresses Maruyama’s discussion of “personal autonomy” through the character of the young woman, who rebels against the mother. The film uses the interesting means of sexuality to bring together the dual issues of the “feudal” family and oppressive class structures. As the director notes, “my mind was always on the commoners, not on the lords, politicians, or anyone of name and face. I wanted to convey the lives of down-to-earth people who have to live like weeds.”¹²⁹ The primary conflict in the film is not between warring armies, but between mother and daughter-in-law. Both make compelling arguments — while the daughter wishes to begin anew with a new lover, the mother is afraid of being unable to survive without the daughter’s assistance. The fear of abandonment prompts the mother to don a frightening Noh mask and attempt to scare the daughter into submission. However, the source of the mask — the samurai who threatens the mother— is a representative of the system that has killed the mother’s son and reduced her to profiteering to make a living. By donning the mask, the mother borrows the power of an oppressive feudal system to intimidate the daughter into submission.

Though the mother is punished for her desire to control the daughter-in-law, she is still cast in a sympathetic light, as she does so because she needs the help of the daughter to survive. Film scholar Keiko McDonald reads the events of Onibaba as, at base, a power struggle within a feudal system of class oppression. The samurai is a “general,” one who, in the words of the mother, “killed [her] son” by sending him to die in a pointless war. The samurai’s disfigured face is a mark of that oppressive system, a mark

¹²⁹ “Kaneto Shindo,” by Joan Mellen, 80.
passed on to the mother when she attempts to use it. McDonald cites Joan Mellen, who writes, “It is not easy to remove the face of feudalism stamped on its victims. Even when they are successful, disfiguration will remain.” Mellen argues that the “degenerative disease” of the masked samurai is physical manifestation of his rank and class, and that the mother is afflicted with it “when she [takes] on [the samurai’s] role, even if fleetingly and only to survive.” Instead, Mellon argues, the mother is at the mercy of a feudal system that entraps her within a “culture that also afflicts its victims” as well as its perpetrators.

Fig 3.3: Lighting, posture, and camera angle contribute to the masked mother’s threatening

While Mellen’s argument clearly expresses the class tensions within the film, she does not address the implications of the Noh mask that takes such a prominent role in the second part of the film. The masked samurai, and then the mother, wear what is

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131 Ibid., 111.
132 Ibid., 111-12.
recognizably a demonic *hannya* mask. In both cases, the mask is intended as an expression of power, what McDonald terms “an ancient form of threat from folk religion” (Fig 3.3). And yet, the mask itself is not only linked to its formal Noh-derived expressions of jealousy and rage. Skillfully borrowing from the Noh mask’s ability to convey different emotions when worn at different angles, the mask also “comes to suggest the wearer’s sorrow and dejection” (Fig 3.4).

The shot angles of the scene in which the mother terrorizes the daughter allow the mask to function both as a symbol of power and one of oppression. In the first scene, the mother successfully scares the daughter. The camera looks up into the mother’s masked face, and menacing underlighting give the mask a supernaturally threatening appearance. In the second, however, when the mother witnesses the daughter and Hachi in the grass, the mask no longer evokes terror, but the sorrow of the mother as an oppressed being.

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133 McDonald, *Reading a Japanese Film*, 111.

134 Ibid., 116.
This time, the camera is neutral and the mother stares straight at the viewer. The lighting is not nearly as dramatic as in the previous example, which transforms the effect of the mask from frightening to sorrowful. The transformation of the emotional implication of the mask is an early indication of the mother’s punishment. Her abuse of the mask’s power in the first shot leads to her sorrow in the second, and the transformation of the mask itself reveals how it can be both a symbol of power and oppression.

These shots reveal how the mask, which initially symbolizes established power, is revealed to be a curse when both the mother and the samurai are punished for abusing of that power. As McDonald writes, “Onibaba offers a grimly ironic worldview. No matter what they do, the masses are at the mercy of the oppressive feudal system.” In the words of the director, “the mother has done some very cruel things, like preventing her daughter-in-law from finding another man. She is punished for these acts, but the punishment is an expression of the uncontrollable events which these people meet in their actual lives…the destroyed face is not the end of her world.”

Though she expounds on the critique of feudalism in the film, Keiko McDonald misses its portrayal of how “freedoms” would be achieved. By depicting the mother oppressively restricting the sexuality of the daughter, Shindo draws an interesting parallel with the changing approach to sexuality and family relations under the newly “democratized” Japan after the American Occupation. Under the military regime of the war years, sexuality was discussed “as a means of managing ‘human resources [ningen

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shigen’ and not as a source of pleasure or relationship building.”136 In the eyes of the state, the woman’s primary role was reproductive, producing many bodies to serve the national body.137 However, the Occupation brought with it new social customs and ideas. The 1947 Constitution contained several articles pertaining specifically to women’s rights, as did other Occupation reforms, as authorities were eager to “‘liberate’ Japanese women from what they considered ‘feudal’ customs, attitudes, and practices.”138

Enthusiasm for “free love and romance,” was widespread, evident by its presence and discussion in popular media, and the public quickly correlated the arrival of democratic reforms with more liberal sexual behavior.139 Given the military state’s energetic repression of free sexuality in favor of a national agenda, “the extent to which sexual liberation, romance, and kissing in particular became symbolically linked with discourses of freedom, liberation, and democracy” in the postwar period is hardly surprising.140 A connection was drawn between the “loosening of ‘feudal’ strictures” as the physical body was allowed more freedoms.141

The correlation between sexual freedom with democracy, and, conversely, sexual control with feudalism, maps onto the dynamic between the mother, the daughter, and the


137 Ibid., 50.

138 Ibid., 517.

139 Ibid.

140 Ibid., 532.

141 Ibid., 535.
samurai of *Onibaba*. When the mother’s face is finally and painfully revealed from under the demon mask, her bloody, pitted, and scarred features strongly resemble those of an A-bomb victim (Fig 3.4). In fact, Shindo based the makeup for the mother’s face on photographs of bomb victims, making unmistakable reference to the mother as a survivor of wartime and the wartime state.\(^{142}\) She tries to restrict the daughter’s sexual freedom while wearing the trappings of the feudal system, and is punished by disfigurements that resembles nuclear bomb scars. However, she is presented as a product of the oppressive system, rather than the instigator — she merely borrows the mask off of a true representative, and does so because she is prompted by a situation that that same system has forced upon her.

![Fig 3.5: The mother’s disfigured face resembles a victim of Hiroshima.](image)

However, the ideals of democracy triumph when the daughter forces the mother to stay out of her relationship with Hachi while also finally managing to painfully pull the mask off of the mother’s face. By removing the mask and gaining the mother’s consent to

\(^{142}\) Lowenstein, “Allegorizing Hiroshima,” 150.
her relationship, the daughter simultaneously asserts her triumph directly over the
feudalistic oppression of sexuality, and also removes the mark of that system from the
face of the mother. The daughter’s triumph is reflected by consistent high angle shots,
visually indicating the mother’s defeat. The mother is scarred, of course, but the mask
that has adhered itself to her face has been removed, which, when paired with her
filmically suggested escape from death within the “hell” of the hole, suggests that she
too, while still scarred, may also have a chance at liberation.

Shindo avoids a pious endorsement of the linear narrative of progress from
feudalistic society to democratic state, but he does advocate for individual social choice
within the family. Despite the positive connotations of the daughter’s liberation, it is not
clear that what opportunities her new cohabitation with Hachi will give her. Instead,
rather than show the old family’s transformation into the new, Shindo presents not a
“better” family, but one that emphasizes individual choice. While the feudal family was
oppressively patriarchal, Shindo presents the new living arrangements with room for
individual choice.

Rather than explore the memory of war explicitly, Shindo refers to it obliquely,
setting his narrative in a 14th century Japan where a divided nation could be understood
as an allegory for for a nation caught between two “emperors,” each trying to shape the
country in their own way. Furthermore, the divide between the mother and daughter
represents a generational gap as those who are older see themselves as victims, while
those who remember only the prosperous postwar embrace democratic liberties. With
*Onibaba*, Shindo utilizes the form of the uncanny mother narrative, using a feudal setting
and a demonic mother as a means to suggest the scars of feudal oppression. By
identifying the uncanny mother figure with the commoners of the postwar collective,
Shindo is able to highlight a point of change for the family and for postwar identity.
Conclusion: The Ghost Mother Lives On

The ghost mothers of Japanese film adapt with the times; they speak to and engage with whatever problems haunt the consciousness of the Japanese public at a particular historical moment. While it is the age-old duty of the horror film to draw upon the primal fears of the viewing public, the Japanese ghost woman is unique in that her appearance remains consistent across the centuries — from Edo-period illustrations of Oiwa to the horrible apparitions of *Ringu* (Nakata Hideo, 1998), long, unkempt hair, flowing kimono, and general sense of *osore*, or cosmic terror, mark the ghostly mother’s presence. The four directors I discuss here adapt this long-standing image of the ghost mother for their own purposes. While each mother — Oiwa, Miyagi, Wakasa, and the unnamed demon mother — fulfills the requirements of her genre, the ways in which she deviates from the form also inform viewers of critical subtexts. Is she vengeful, pitiful, or both? Is she idealized, demonized, or both? Each director uses the familiar trope of the ghost mother to explore collective uncertainty and guilt over a devastating war and an all-too-quick recovery.

With this project I have addressed how the postwar victim narrative and the memory of war was processed through the ghostly mother trope in film. By connecting in-depth analysis of the visual and narrative components of each film to the intellectual and cultural moment in time that it was produced, I have been able to track how the narratives of both Japanese guilt and victimhood appear as fundamental components of these films. Viewed together, these four films provide a mosaic of how the adaptation of one trope can tie into wider cultural dialogue; in the postwar period the ghost mother
acted as a screen upon which the Japanese collective could explore uncomfortable and often suppressed ideas about suffering, memory, and personal guilt.

However, as with any cultural or artistic analysis, cultural cues can be missed or lost to time. By tracking the correlation between the ghost woman narrative and the cultural moment in which that narrative appeared, I have narrowed the scope of my analysis to the interlinked themes of suffering, war guilt, and victim narrative. However, no film appears in a vacuum; one work of art can and will draw from a myriad of cultural, artistic, political, and social influences. I have restricted my analysis to cultural influences related to the memory of war based upon intertwined cultural and political ideas, but other angles, such as fear of forgetting the past or anxieties about new cultural influences, could prove just as rewarding. The longevity of the ghostly mother trope in Japanese film in the postwar — and even other eras — can and will continue to offer any number of interpretive readings.

The myriad of possible interpretive readings leaves the door open for future study of the cultural and socio-political concerns of Japanese film in the postwar. While scholars such as Keiko McDonald and Adam Lowenstein link films such as *Onibaba* or Mizoguchi’s melodramas to their cultural moment in time, and others, such as Colette Balmain and Michael Crandol, may analyze the *kaiki* genre as a shared repository, never has there been a concentrated effort to examine how one moment in time is embodied in a pre-established cultural trope.

Likewise, while I have selected the most well-known ghost woman narratives and films produced in the postwar to examine here, many more remain unstudied. The ghost
cat woman subgenre discussed in Michael Crandol’s dissertation *Nightmares From the Past: Kaiki Eiga and the Dawn of Japanese Horror Cinema*, for example, provided a rich well of material for my personal contemplation, which I was not able to include here.

Other internationally notable ghost woman films, though from slightly later, include Shindo Kaneto’s *Kuroneko* (*Black Cat*, 1968), and Kobayashi Masaki’s *Kwaidan*, (*Ghost Story*, 1965). Even later films, such as Obayashi Nobuhiko’s *Hausu* (1977), which harkens back to tropes found in *Yotsuya Kaidan* and other postwar *kaiki* films, have the potential for rich scholarly study. By viewing these films as part of a larger cultural and historical framework, this paper provides new conclusions and insights into the subtle ways in which film, as a form of storytelling, taps into mass cultural consciousness.
Color Images in Black and White

Fig 1.3: The scars of Nakagawa’s ghostly Oiwa purposefully resemble those of a bomb victim.

Fig. 1.4: Osode, holding their mother’s comb, sees only Oiwa’s benign form.
Fig. 1.5: At the same time, Naosuke is stalked by Oiwa’s disfigured ghost.

Fig. 1.6: A ghostly mosquito net descends from a black sky, threatening to suffocate Iemon.
Filmography


Bibliography


