

**The Ideal of Self-Sacrificing Women in Japanese Culture:
The Wives in Ozu and Mizoguchi's Films**

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Introduction

There are many different social concepts that can be seen in Japanese literature, for example, *risshin shusse* (rising in the world), *giri* (obligation) and *ninjō* (personal feelings). In addition to the ideas of *risshin shusse*, *giri* and *ninjō*, there is a social ideal that is frequently noticeable and reoccurring in Japanese literature. That ideal is that a woman should be self-sacrificing. In this paper, two main film works will be analyzed to demonstrate and examine views on self-sacrifice by Japanese women. Those two works are *Ukigusa monogatari* (A Story of Floating Weeds, 1932) and *Ugetsu* (Tales of Moonlight and Rain, 1953). These films are set in the Edo period (1600-1868) and the Shōwa period (1926-1989) respectively. [Ugetsu's periodization is problematic: the film mainly borrows from a story from Ueda Akinari's original *Ugetsu monogatari* (Tales of Moonlight and Rain) that is set in the Sengoku Period (1467-1573), the period leading up to the Edo Period, but I read both the film and its source material as being representative of the Edo Period itself, when Akinari wrote the source work.]

The films of *Ukigusa monogatari* and *Ugetsu* were both completed in the Shōwa period and both of these works noticeably deal with self-sacrifice from the primary wife characters. Whether the question of self-sacrifice was socially obligated or voluntarily based is a question that I will pursue; in-depth exchanges in dialogue will be examined in order to support the hypothesis. Women's power within society will be also investigated to further clarify the concept of self-sacrifice by Japanese women.

According to Cornyetz (1999:7-11), since Japan has long been a male-dominated society, Japanese women have been identified as submissive to their family and husband. It is worth scrutinizing women's self-determination from the Edo to Shōwa periods to observe whether women in general possess less power over men in the Edo and Shōwa periods

specifically. Before discussing the details regarding women's sacrifice, we first need to define what self-sacrifice is within Japanese society in the Edo and Shōwa eras. Self-sacrifice can be defined, according to Oord (2008:286) who has written about it in the field of social sciences as:

Self-sacrifice is also referred to as selflessness or altruism which is selfless concern for the welfare of others. It is a traditional virtue in many cultures, and a core aspect of various religious traditions, though the concept of others toward whom concern should be directed can vary among religions. Self-sacrifice can be distinguished from feelings of loyalty and duty. Self-sacrifice focuses on a motivation to help others or a want to do well without reward, while duty focuses on a moral obligation towards a specific individual, a specific organization or an abstract concept such as patriotism. Pure self-sacrifice is giving without regard to reward or the benefits of recognition and need.

This definition of self-sacrifice explains that self-sacrifice focuses on a motivation to help others without compensation, obligation, or reward. In Japanese culture, the concept of a woman's self-sacrifice is frequently shown by her actions toward her family or husband or children. For example, in the films of *Ugetsu* and *Ukigusa monogatari*, the Japanese women characters, Otsune (from *Ukigusa monogatari*) and Miyagi (from *Ugetsu*), both dedicate their lives for their husband and family without any reward for their suffering; they both act in this way, such as raising a child alone and waiting for the husband without knowing when he will return to her. They wanted to live a simple and good life within the family. Whether they do so out of love or self-sacrifice could be hard to distinguish because people voluntarily do many things for their family, lover, and friends because of their emotional attachment to them. Love also occurs voluntarily without feelings of obligation just like self-sacrifice, but there is usually no direct suffering from being in love. Generally, there is no suffering when a mother loves her child, but if there is a sense of suffering implied, it is more closely related to self-sacrifice. Simple and general distinction between love and self-sacrifice can be derived from the words' meanings. For example, the opposite meaning of love is hate and the opposite meaning of self-sacrifice is selfishness. To differentiate the implication between love and selflessness is beyond the scope of

this paper, thus an in-depth differentiation between love and self-sacrifice in Japanese culture will not be discussed here.

Yet it is difficult to ascertain why the Japanese women in these films suffer from their own decision when there are more attractive options available. What makes them be loyal and submissive to husband for their family? Is it because of the socio-cultural expectations during the Edo and Shōwa periods in Japan? A typical perception of older periods of time is that it generally relates to conservatism rather than liberalism. It is easier to have a stereotype that women in the Edo period tend to be more self-sacrificial or obedient toward their family since the Edo period is much older period compared to the Shōwa period. For instance, a majority of women in North America were usually housewives only several decades ago. A typical role of men was working outside while women usually stayed at home, did house chores, and took care of children. Now it is hard to imagine that women will stay at their homes as housewives. Recently, most women have a career and a couple shares the house chores. Like the example in North America, those older periods of time normally imply conservatism.

Although older periods of time generally represent conservatism like the example in North America, the Edo period in Japan was exceptional. One example of this is divorce. Changing marital status was much easier and divorce was a common phenomenon in the Edo period. According to Duus (1998:14-15), the role of women in the Edo period varied greatly according to her family's social status. Duus (1998:14-15) states that although women in upper classes were expected to submit to their male head of household, women from the lower classes were much less restricted by social expectations. Duus (1998:14) and Inoue (1976:21-23) present that a marriage in the Edo period was perceived as a trial marriage as there was a vague distinction between marriage and cohabitation. As a result, remarriage was not an uncommon

experience among people in the Edo period. According to Inoue (1976:79-82, 158-183) if a man wanted to divorce a woman, he only had to write her a letter saying he was divorcing her. The woman then received any dowries she had brought with her and returned to her parent's household. Inoue (1976:72, 158-183) states that if the husband did not want to divorce the wife in the Edo period, women could flee to a *kakekomidera* (divorce temple) where they could serve for three years at the convent, after which they would be considered divorced. There were two temples¹ in Edo period that the Tokugawa shogunate officially recognized as *kakekomidera*. One was Mantokuji Temple in the town of Ojima, Gunma Prefecture, while the other was Tokeiji Temple in Kamakura, Kanagawa Prefecture. After a woman spent three years in the temple, the husband was unconditionally required to issue her a letter of divorce.

On the other hand, despite superficial advances in the modern Shōwa period, such as shopping at Western-style department stores and dining at Western restaurants, divorce was much more conservatively controlled. According to Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda (1995: 188), the common idea of divorce in the Shōwa period was that women who did not get along with the parents-in-law or were not able to give birth to a child usually were divorced by their husbands. In other words, social bias of divorce in the Shōwa period was that women who were divorced had something wrong with them, such as mental or physical issues. Consequently, unlike the liberal concept of divorce in the Edo period, women in the Shōwa period tended to endure marital hardship rather than pursuing a divorce because of the cold social stereotype. In addition,

¹ Although many people understand that both Tokeiji and Mantokuji have the same function as *Kakekomidera*, there is a subtle difference between them. According to Inoue (1976: 18-21), Tokeiji was for women who were already in marital trouble, but the husband did not want to get a divorce. In other words, Tokeiji was a temple for women who needed to escape from their marital hardships. After three years in Tokeiji, the women were granted a divorce. In contrast to Tokeiji, Mantokuji was a divorce temple for couples who, by mutual agreement, wanted to end their marriage. Thus, women who went to Mantokuji in the past did not have to escape from their husbands.

there was a strong dependence on marriage before World War II among Japanese women in the Shōwa period. Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda (1995:184) state that when women faced difficulties in achieving economic independence, marriage was a form of social security for many women. As a result, the divorce rate in the Shōwa period was relatively low compared to other developed countries. Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda (1995:191-193) also state that in addition to the various historical and cultural factors, there are, of course, economic and social factors that have also played a significant roles in maintaining a relatively low divorce rate in the Shōwa period. Women's low positions in the labor market and lack of social security for children were critical factors. Many Japanese women were forced to discontinue outside employment once they had children because of the lack of childcare facilities and lack of help with childcare and household chores from their husbands, who tended to put in long hours on the job. Even today, opportunities for married women to re-enter the labor market on a regular and full time basis are extremely limited. Therefore, for the majority of women, it is a virtual certainty that, should they divorce, they would be unable to maintain their current living standard. In addition, in cases of divorce, even if a court orders the husband to pay child support, there is no mechanism for forcing compliance, and many men do not pay. Many women have been deterred from seeking divorce due to these financial reasons. They have, instead, endured their marriages by rationalizing to themselves as "divorce is bad for children or this is simply the way most marriages are." (Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda 1995:193)

Thus, women in the Edo period did not have to put up with all hardships from the family if they did not want to endure them because there was a more tolerant social notion of divorce. As Inoue (1976) shows earlier, since marriage in the Edo period was perceived as a trial marriage, divorce was exceedingly common up to five times. Unlike the Edo period, as

Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda (1995) mentioned, because of the historical, cultural, economic and social factors, women in the Shōwa period tended to endure personal hardships for their family even if there is matrimonial discord.

Self-Sacrifice by Wives

Both films, *Ukigusa monogatari* and *Ugetsu*, significantly contend with the concept of self-sacrifice by the female characters. My evidence consists of quotes from the films for analysis to examine whether the women characters in these works can be considered to be exemplifying ideals of self-sacrifice. In the films of *Ugetsu* and *Ukigusa monogatari*, the Japanese women characters, Otsune (from *Ukigusa monogatari*) and Miyagi (from *Ugetsu*), both dedicate their lives for their husbands and family without any reward for their suffering. Although they wanted to live a simple and good life within the family, the husbands were indifferent to the female characters' needs. Otsune and Miyagi do not have their ideal simple life as they always wanted with their husbands, rather they both forgive, indulge and pamper their husbands.

In *Ukigusa monogatari*, there are two significant women: the ex-wife and the current girlfriend of Kihachi. The ex-wife Otsune has a son from Kihachi who is the main male character and the troupe leader. Kihachi visits Otsune only a few times randomly, not even once a year. However, Otsune always forgives, indulges and pampers Kihachi. Although Otsune does not know when Kihachi will visit her, when it is about the time that Kihachi comes, Otsune always prepares food and sake. Also, when Otsune sees Kihachi, Otsune does not mention a single word of complaint that Kihachi does not come to see her often nor not being able to know when Kihachi will visit. In the movie, when Otsune sees Kihachi, Otsune says "It is about time you are

coming and food and sake are ready” while folding Kihachi’s clothes. When Otsune says “It is about time you’re coming,” it implies that she does not know exactly when Kihachi will visit her. In addition, when Kihachi sees Shinkichi, who is his son, he says Shinkichi has grown a lot. This dialogue demonstrates how long Kihachi was apart from Otsune and Shinkichi. Not only waiting for Kihachi ceaselessly without knowing exactly when he will come, Otsune raises the son by herself without re-marrying. This is an emblematic of a Japanese woman’s self-sacrifice because raising a child by herself without a husband is arduous especially during the early Shōwa period. According to Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda (1995:188), as mentioned earlier, divorce was regarded as dishonor for a woman in the Shōwa period where strong stereotypes of divorce presented, and it is also the same for a single mother who raises her child by herself. When Otsune discovers that Kihachi has a girlfriend, Otsune is neither upset nor jealous. Without expressing any sense of being upset, Otsune even worries about others’ feelings to the point of saying “You must be careful about that woman because it would be awful if she tells the story to Shinkichi.” As her dialogue indicates, Otsune does not blame Kihachi for having a girlfriend. Although when Otsune finds out that Kihachi has a girlfriend, she always greets Kihachi very warmly every time he comes to her place. Otsune only cares about her son because Kihachi cares about the son as well. When Kihachi says that he will quit the troupe, Otsune looks very happy with great smile, and she replies “It isn’t good to be alone all the time.” “Let’s live together like a family.” In these quotes, one can infer that Otsune herself has been through a very difficult time being alone and raising her son on her own. During the entire movie, Otsune does not cry not even once in front of Kihachi even when Kihachi is leaving. Only after Kihachi leaves, Otsune sits alone and cries. This scene implies that Otsune cares about Kihachi so much as not to show her tears while seeing off Kihachi, but in fact, she can only show her sadness once he leaves.

Like the example quotes above, Otsune never confronts Kihachi with her emotions and this suppressing of her voice is her self-sacrifice.

Ugetsu by Mizoguchi

When Shibata's army attacks to the village, Miyagi goes to Genichi (the son) firstly and holds Genichi. There are many things to carry and prepare when escaping from military violence such as food and valuable belongings; however, Miyagi goes to Genichi first. This behavior shows Miyagi being a good mother in how much she cares about her child. When Genjurō leaves, Genjurō says "We will be back as soon as we have the money and return within 10 days. Wait for us," even though more than ten days pass, Miyagi still waits for Genjurō while taking care of Genichi. While Genjurō is having a pleasant time with Lady Wakasa, Miyagi always waits for Genjurō with holding the son in her arms. In the meantime, Miyagi is murdered by unknown soldiers when she is escaping. When the ghost of Miyagi sees Genjurō, Miyagi takes off Genjurō's shoes and serves sake and stew in the pot. When Genjurō comes back home empty handed, Genjurō apologizes for not bringing money with him. Miyagi says "Don't say another word, dear. You've come back safe and sound. Let's not speak of it anymore. You must be tired. I have some sake ready." Despite the fact that Miyagi waits Genjurō for a long time without knowing where Genjurō is, when Miyagi sees Genjurō, she does not complain a single word of grievance. Miyagi comforts Genjurō when Genjurō apologizes. When Genjurō falls asleep, the ghost Miyagi stares at Genjurō with tears and cover blanket to Genjurō. While Genjurō is sleeping, the ghost Miyagi dusts off Genjurō's shoes and arranges them. Until dawn comes, the ghost Miyagi stays near Genjurō and mends his clothes. After Genjurō realizes that Miyagi is dead, Genjurō goes to Miyagi's tomb. Miyagi says, "I did not die. I am at your side. Helping you spin the wheel is my greatest pleasure." "You have finally become the man I had hoped for, she

also says, but I am no longer among the living. I suppose such is the way of the world.” It must have been difficult for Miyagi waiting for the husband for such a long time and taking care of the son by herself. Miyagi does not even leave the house where Genjurō and Miyagi used to live, just in case Genjurō comes back. Despite Miyagi’s suffering, she does not criticize Genjurō at all. In Japanese culture, ghosts usually remain in this world, not in the afterlife world of the dead, when they have grudge or sorrow against their death. Since Miyagi is murdered by soldiers while she is waiting for her husband, she might have grudges against the unknown warriors; however, the ghost of Miyagi returns her house, not in the place where she is murdered, because Genjurō might return home later. One can speculate undoubtedly that the ghost of Miyagi has sorrow rather than a grudge since she returns home and waits for her husband again. The ghost Miyagi was not able to leave in this world without seeing her husband again. This example demonstrates Miyagi’s self-sacrificing female character because she cares about her husband and child even after her death. After the ghost Miyagi sees her husband, she then is able to leave this world as she resolves her deep sorrow.

Power relations

It can be argued that Japanese women are submissive because they have less power over men. The general perception about Japanese women is that they are always considered as weak; however, there are characters in literature and film that prove they are stronger figures than men. In *Ukigusa monogatari*, there is a character named Otaka who is a girlfriend of Kihachi. When Otaka finds out that Kihachi is seeing his wife and son secretly, Otaka is upset and shows her strong jealousy. As a result of the jealousy, Otaka has one of her younger actresses in the troupe seduce Shinkichi, Kihachi's son, to disturb his study. It is a well-planned revenge for Kihachi

which makes him miserable. Otaka's action is a complete reversal against the typical perception that Japanese women are submissive. Otaka's plan to disturb Shinkichi's study succeeds: Shinkichi spends more and more time with Otoki who is the younger actress in the troupe. When Kihachi realizes that all the planning is done by Otaka, Kihachi called Otaka to talk; however, when Otaka comes, her tone of voice is aggressive. Otaka says, "You wanted to see me? What do you want?" "Who cares about your son? He's cheap like you, playing around with actresses. I hope you will be very sorry." Otaka's attitude is blunt, a quality that lacking in Miyagi and Otsune.

Another woman character in *Ugetsu*, Ohama is also a strong woman compared to other female characters in Japanese culture. The stereotype of Japanese women is that they are compliant to their husband, but Ohama is different. Tobei (her husband) always wants to be a samurai without working diligently, every time Ohama sees Tobei, she lashes Tobei with sarcastic words. For example, Ohama says "You can't even handle a sword, crazy fool! You think you will be a great samurai?" "You look like a beggar. You've become the village idiot." Although Tobei clearly is not an assiduous man, Ohama should encourage him to work harder rather than scolding him. Ohama is a remarkable example that Japanese wives do not adhere to the stereotype that they are subservient to their husbands. In addition to Ohama, there is one more female character in *Ugetsu* who tends to possess more power than men. That lady is Wakasa. As Lady Wakasa is a ghost, she has certain advantages over men obviously; however, since Genjurō first thinks that Lady Wakasa is a human, she is included this category.

For instance, Lady Wakasa says "Your talent must not be hidden away in some poor and remote village. By swearing your love for Lady Wakasa and marrying her once, then you will be successful." Genjurō is a success-oriented man and he always wants to be rich. Because of the

wealth that Lady Wakasa possesses she may be able to help Genjurō become famous as a potter, Genjurō hesitates to tell her that he is married and has a hard time turning down Lady Wakasa's offer. Lady Wakasa makes Genjurō forget his self-sacrificing wife with her wealth and beauty. In other words, Lady Wakasa has power over Genjurō since she is able to cloud Genjurō's moral decision and prevents him from turning down her enticing offer.

Sacrifice over Agency

The definition of self-sacrifice could be much more meaningful when a person prefers to choose self-sacrifice when there are other, more attractive options available. Alternatively, if there is only one option presented, and the option is self-sacrifice, the value of selflessness might not be as significant as when other options are available. Agency can be defined as a means of self-control. For example, for Otsune from *Ukigusa monogatari*, her self-sacrifice is highly recognized since she has other attractive options beside waiting for Kihachi and raising Shinkichi, her son, by herself. As Kihachi does not come home very often, Otsune could have relationships with other men or Otsune could marry another man because she is tired of raising her child by herself. Despite the favorable alternatives, Otsune chooses to remain where she is as a wife of Kihachi and a mother of Shinkichi.

In *Ugetsu*, since Genjurō told Miyagi that he would be back in ten days, Miyagi could wait for a few weeks and then give up for waiting for Genjurō at the house. It is ambiguous, especially during the time when Shibata's army is invading the village. Genjurō might get killed by Shibata's army, but Miyagi keeps waiting for her husband and remains steadfastly loyal. In one of the more telling dialogues in the *Ugetsu*, Miyagi mentions that "I just want us to work in peace as husband and wife and for the three of us to live happily together. That's all I wish for.

Living together as a happy family is enough for me.” Thus, all Miyagi wants is to live a simple and happy life. In contrast, Genjurō is eager to make war profits by selling his wares to the competing armies. When Genjurō is busy making ceramics, he does not pay attention to either his son or Miyagi. Genjurō becomes more concerned about the time passing too quickly for him to produce enough wares during the limited time. Genjurō’s goal is clearly different from Miyagi’s. Although the original story of *Ugetsu* was published in 1776, the setting of the story was in the Sengoku period (1467-1573). The Sengoku period has been known as warring-states period in Japan since there was nearly constant military conflict that lasted roughly from the middle of the 15th century to the beginning of the 17th century. Although incidents of divorce were rare in the Sengoku period compared to the Edo period (Fujimura-Fanselow and Kameda 1995) and Inoue (1976), there was still a *Kakekomidera* in the Sengoku period. Women as early as in the late 13th century could escape from their marriage hardships to the *Kakekomidera* as Tokeiji was founded in 1285. Even though divorce was uncommon phenomenon in the Sengoku period, Miyagi could have divorced Genjurō for a better, more simple life with a different man. However, Miyagi takes good care of both Genjurō and their son even after Miyagi becomes a ghost.

Conclusion

It is surprising that the Edo period had the more liberal perspective towards divorce compared to the Shōwa period. There are some changes in socio-cultural perceptions towards divorce between the Edo and Shōwa periods, but both the two female characters, Otsune in *Ukigusa monogari* and Miyagi in *Ugetsu*, did not choose the option of divorce. They choose rather to self-sacrifice themselves for their family and husband rather than deciding for a better,

more attractive conditions for themselves. Through a comparison between one of these two representative works of Edo and Shōwa periods, one sees that Japanese women tend to be obedient to their husbands' wishes and choose the option of self-sacrifice for their husband and family. Their self-sacrifice is made much more significant due to there being no explicit social obligations for the self-sacrifice.

The women characters in *Ukigusa monogatari* and *Ugetsu* were examined whether their self-sacrifice is socially obligated or voluntarily based in this paper. Although there are many other enticing alternatives Otsune and Miyagi could choose in the films, they rather decided to select the idea of self-sacrifice. Therefore, Otsune and Miyagi's devotion and self-sacrifice toward their family become much more noteworthy. Mizoguchi and Ozu might have produced these films in order to show the ideal of women's internal beauty based on true self-sacrifice in contrast to a contemporary view of women being selfish. In this paper, the two main female characters are demonstrated choosing self-sacrifice voluntarily rather than deciding other tempting options. In the future opportunities, I would like to look at the issue of female agency perhaps as conceived by women writers or artists themselves.

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