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Looking Beyond the Image:
An Analysis of Three Sentō Bishojō Characters in Japanese Anime

The sentō bishojō or "beautiful fighting girl" is a term Japanese psychologist and social critic Satiō Tamaki has used to describe a very specific female character popular in Japanese anime. The sentō bishojō is characterized as a hypersexualized and ultra-feminine prepubescent girl who is violent and even murderous. Sentō bishojōs usually have some superhuman power or unnatural ability that gives them inhuman strength and the ability to fight. "Beautiful fighting girls" are typically present in action-driven Shonen anime, which is aimed at boys between the ages of 10 to 18.

Many critics comment on the sexualization and objectification of these young female characters under the male gaze. They argue that the overly sexual and violent sentō bishojō is a form of female objectification, which denies female agency and individuality. However, a close analysis of individual sentō bishojō characters reveals a range of characteristics. Many sentō bishojō characters have complex backstories and fully developed personalities. Although they fit a narrow physical type, not all sentō bishojō are the same. An analysis of the sentō bishojō in the Japanese anime, *Shikibane Hime* (Corpse Princess), *FairyTail*, and *Gurren Lagann* reveals shared characteristics and differences within this trope.

An important aspect of the sentō bishojō, and one that is usually overlooked, is their motivation for combat. In the anime *Shikibane Hime* (*Corpse Princess*), deceased girls between the ages of 10 and 16 are brought back to life to fight alongside monks as Shikibane. In this world, people come back to life if they die with a deep regret. However, the monks bring these sorrowful girls back to life and force them to hunt and kill other Shikibane. The monks deceptively promise these girls salvation after 108 Shikibane kills; however, after 108 kills, instead of going to Heaven, the girls become "destroyer Shikibane," whose sole occupation is murder. The situation is further tainted by indications of romantic and even sexual attraction between the Shikibane Hime and their monk-masters. Some monks exploit the girls as weapons and shields, viewing them as inhuman monsters who do not warrant humane treatment. This example of sentō bishojō lacks both complexity and agency; despite their superhuman powers, there is nothing empowering about these images.

On the other side of the spectrum is Erza Scarlet from *FairyTail.* She is one of the most powerful characters in her world. She may wear scandalous outfits while kicking ass, but she is emotionally complex and has significant character development throughout the series. Another anime with a sentō bishojō is *Gurren Lagann,* which is

infamous for its character Yoko Littner, who is only 14 years old. Yoko wears a flaming bikini top flaunting her enormous breasts and routinely is the object of fan service. However, she is shown to be a caring person who ultimately renounces violence to become a kindergarten teacher, thus finding a newer, less aggressive way to defeat evil.

Many sentō bishojō are liminal figures who are human but not really human, dead but not really dead, or machine but not really machine; these hybrid identities complicate the question of whether they are images of objectification or empowerment. The sentō bishojō is rafted to be the object of the male gaze, yet their ability, and in some cases, their own resolve to fight rejects the simple view that these characters are purely for male entertainment. A multi-faceted feminist perspective offers ways of viewing the sentō bishojō that acknowledges her sexualization, repossession of sexuality, agency, lack of agency, and ability to be strong. There are many sentō bishojō in Japanese anime that fight against polarizing arguments of empowerment or objectification, claiming a new space for discussion.