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Alexandra Rigby

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

Division of Arts and Sciences  
Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures

Lady Killers: Depictions of Gendered Subjective Violence in *Audition*

by  
Alexandra Rigby

A thesis presented to  
Washington University in St. Louis  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Master in Arts

May 2023  
St. Louis, Missouri

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Alexandra Rigby

*Washington University in St. Louis*

*May 2023*

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Lady Killers: Depictions of Gendered Subjective Violence in *Audition*

*by*

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Master of Art in East Asian Studies

Washington University in St. Louis, 2023

Professor Rebecca Copeland, Chair

This thesis will examine the depiction of Asami as a female antagonist figure in the 2001 film adaptation of the novel *Audition* directed by Miike Takashi and adapted from the 1997 novel of the same name by Japanese horror author Murakami Ryū. By considering the differences in her original portrayal and how the language of film changes the presentation of Murakami's female antagonist, this project aims to analyze how Murakami and the directors who choose to adapt his works approach depicting acts of violence committed by women in a genre inundated with male-coded violence against female-coded characters. The existing framework for analyzing horror film antagonists is by framing them as inherently masculine. Murakami's female characters, however, often predicate their violence and antagonism on their femininity, not despite it. This paradigm of female antagonists who are physically violent is not one which has yet been thoroughly explored. These female characters, who are aggressive villains not in spite of their femininity but because of it, upset the current model of "victim as female" and highlight a lack of scholarly language to describe physically violent female characters in villainous roles in fiction.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

Murakami Ryū's first novel, *Almost Transparent Blue* (1976) was a break-out success, winning the Gunzō Newcomer's Literature Award, as well as the illustrious Akutagawa Prize. Several critics decried the work for being vulgar, with one member of the Akutagawa selection committee threatening to quit if Murakami won.<sup>1</sup> Murakami's works have always had a polarizing effect, with grotesque imagery, inflammatory language, and unique characters. Of particular note among them is Asami, the antagonist of his 1997 novel *Audition* (オーディション), a beautiful and proper young woman who brutalizes the men in her life with the creative use of a cheese wire.

In her seminal work *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Carol J. Clover argues that the position of "victim" in horror films is inherently gendered female, as "a figure does not cry and cower because she is a woman; she is a woman because she cries and cowers."<sup>2</sup> However, Murakami repeatedly defies expectations in his thriller and horror stories by portraying women in an antagonistic role, committing violent and aggressive acts usually relegated to men in fiction. By utilizing Clover's framework, this project intends to analyze the exceptions to Clover's rule, and further examine how depictions of gender inform depictions of violence in horror media. Further, I will examine the female villain archetypes laid out by Victoria Lynn Schmidt in *45 Master Characters* and how this framework exempts female villains from

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<sup>1</sup> Eijiro Inui, "Criticism: Tatsuo Nagai, Parents of the Akutagawa and Naoki Prizes" in *Aoyama Life Publishing*, April 2017. The committee member was Takii Kōsaku. Ultimately, he voted against Murakami winning the prize and continued to serve on the committee for nine more award seasons.

<sup>2</sup> Carol J. Clover. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 13.

committing acts of physical violence, as well as the history of female antagonist archetypes in Japanese literary traditions that do much the same. By examining the exception to seemingly every rule surrounding female villains in fiction, I hope to highlight the gap within current discourse and how we as academics describe acts of specifically gendered violence.

In her book *Dangerous Women, Deadly Words*, Nina Cornyetz defines a dangerous female character as “embodying and occupying a site that is socially and physically abjected.”<sup>3</sup> In much modern feminist discourse, the female body is naturally and pre supposed a site of horror and violence:

precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject...the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation.<sup>4</sup>

By this definition, simply being present within a text grants female characters a degree of subversion and thus become dangerous to the carefully maintained rigid structures of patriarchal society. She is dangerous because she is not a man, the object of both his sexual dreams and castration nightmares. There is something *immutably dangerous* about the female body, that a female character’s power is intrinsically linked to her gendered body, and thus her power arises from her mere existence; her ability to destroy is just as natural to her as her ability to create, as her abject body is both the site of penetration and birth. Some characters are fully aware of their potential as agents of abjection, such as Meiko from Enchi Fumiko’s 1958 *Onnamen* (translated to English as *Masks*), a concrete example of a female character who uses her femininity to her advantage to take action against agents of a patriarchal system that wronged her.

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<sup>3</sup> Cornyetz, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, (Routledge, 2011), 6.

I am, however, dissatisfied with this framework. While there is absolutely something to be said about existence as subversive action (and Cornyetz does so convincingly), what of direct, physically, subjective action? What of the women who are physically *violent*?

Although the existing framework for analyzing horror film antagonists is by framing them as inherently masculine, Murakami's female characters often predicate their violence and antagonism on their femininity, creating a paradigm that has not yet been thoroughly explored, as most villainous female archetypes act violently in spite of their gender presentation. Asami, who is an aggressive villain not in spite of her femininity but because of it, upsets the model of "victim as female." By conducting this character analysis and showing that she does not clearly fit into any well-defined character archetypes, I will highlight that film and literature analysis discourse still lack language for describing physically violent women, and how this lack of language creates an ouroboros. Because these female characters cannot be defined by the current discourse, they fail to materialize in media in general, and when a physically violent female antagonist does appear, critics and academics attempt to define her by pre-established definitions, bypassing the need to create frameworks upon which we can discuss female-coded physical, subjective violence in literature and film.

## 1.1 Scholarly Literature Review, *or* The Genre Black Sheep

Horror as a genre has only recently enjoyed scholarly attention. What was once relegated to pulp magazines and scholarly derision is now enjoying a renaissance of critical analysis and mainstream approval. Ian Olney argues that the reason horror cinema and literature had been previously overlooked is that it was labeled as "lowbrow" pop media during the 1960's when film analysis was first gaining traction as an academic area of study. It was not until the late 1990's with the advent of cultural media studies that the horror film became worthy of academic

interest.<sup>5</sup> Because of the relatively new status of horror as an academic subject, the literature surrounding it lacks the decades of progress made in other literature subfields such as mystery and science fiction. Although the progress of the past several decades has been swift in catching up and has the benefit of terminology and discourse developed in these other subfields, there are still many blind spots in horror media analysis.

One such example is the lack of serious academic analysis of horror films made outside of America: “The scholarly neglect of non-Western horror, while absolutely lamentable given the unique genre traditions in question, is perhaps not totally unexpected.”<sup>6</sup> Pioneers of horror media study such as Carol J. Clover and Barbara Creed focus almost entirely on American slasher horror media, which had its heyday in the late 90’s and early 2000’s when the study of horror fiction was beginning to hit its stride. This trend of focusing on Hollywood creations has left a venerable selection of horror films that deserve critical analysis as both individual works and indicators of general trends within the genre untouched in academic circles.

An interesting trend that has gone unexplored in academic circles is the presence of the female horror antagonist in Asian films, especially in Japan. Horror film antagonists are almost always male, and “Female killers are few and their reasons for killing significantly differ from men’s.”<sup>7</sup> Despite this, many of the mainstream successes in Japanese horror films include a female antagonist, including Asami from *Audition*. Some research done on this phenomena, such as Jennifer Yoo’s recent research into what she terms the “dead wet girl” phenomena of female spectral entities in Japanese horror cinema, such as Sadako and Kayako from the *Ring* and *Ju-On*

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<sup>5</sup> Ian Olney, “Euro Horror : Classic European Horror Cinema in Contemporary American Culture.” in *New Directions in National Cinemas*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Clover, 19.

franchises, respectively.<sup>8</sup> Yoo traces the roots of the dead wet girl to the *onryō*, vengeful spirits seeking harm upon the living, almost always depicted as women who were wronged while alive. These spirits often served an antagonistic role in Japanese folklore and traditional theater, “with the increased influence of Buddhism, women’s perceived vulnerability to the supernatural and innate pollution in turn manifested as a particular susceptibility to or inherent sinfulness in, and consequent ‘demonization’ of the feminine,”<sup>9</sup> leading to popular depictions of women as vengeful, powerful, and antagonistic. However, Yoo’s research focuses solely on the supernatural, with no attention paid to the murderous living, and thus characters like Asami fall outside of this purview, though it is hard to deny at least some correlation between Japan’s historic female villains and the works of those like Murakami.

Likewise, Carina Stopenski has written on violent women in horror in her work, “Exploring Mutilation: Women, Affect, and the Body Horror Genre.” In it, she proposes the archetype of the “female mutilator” as a direct contrast to the well-established “final girl” mainstreamed by Clover, “one who takes back her power through explicit gore and violence” and thus subverting the idea that to be passive and victimized is to be feminine.<sup>10</sup> Stopenski examines three films as case study for the female mutilator, all of which are American and made within the last twenty years.<sup>11</sup> The films frame their female mutilators as sympathetic anti-heroes/protagonists. I believe Stopenski’s creation of the term “female mutilator” will prove invaluable in research to come on the subject, similar to how Clover’s “final girl” changed the

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer M. Yoo, "Monstrous Wives, Murderous Lovers, and Dead Wet Girls: Examining the Feminine Vengeful Ghost in Japanese Traditional Theatre and Horror Cinema." (Order No. 29162992, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>10</sup> Carina Stopenski, “Exploring Mutilation: Women, Affect, and the Body Horror Genre.” *(Un)common Horrors*, NO. 2 - YEAR 12 - 06/2022.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 9.

discourse around 90's slasher films. I would like to expand the scope of her research in this regard and apply her theoretical framework to films and characters outside of American productions, as well as to female antagonists.

It is worth noting that both articles mentioned above were published within one year of my current writing, further illustrating how topical this research has proven to be. The intense fervor in examining horror films in a new academic light has not yet been afforded to the genre, and the roles of female characters within them have proven to be more complex and nuanced than authors such as Clover and Creed gave them credit for. Because of the rapid development of the discourse surrounding this topic, I am hopeful that there will be a continued interest in developing the language surrounding female roles in the horror genre, especially those that fall outside the purview of "woman as victim" and instead "woman as aggressor," a subcategory that has until very recently been lamentably overlooked.

## 1.2 Defining Violence

Before fully committing to my analysis of Asami, whom I have repeatedly called a "female character who commits violence," I should first address what I mean when I say "violence." Philosopher Slavoj Žižek offers the definition as "when we perceive something as an act of violence, we measure it by a presupposed standard of what the 'normal' non-violent situation is... What Lacan calls *objet petit...* the surplus object that causes desire in its excessive and derailing aspect."<sup>12</sup> In more concrete terms, violence is an aggression against socially acceptable boundaries with intent to cause harm. This definition is broader than most conventional types, but it is by and large the most useful for this study. I use this definition

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<sup>12</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*. (New York: Picador Press, 2008), 64-65.

because I believe it is important to highlight that not all violence is physical. In fact, in much of human daily interaction, moments of violence are oftentimes verbal or social with no exchanging of physical blows, and yet the results of this violence are just as palpable. There is still harm being done, even when the violence is not tangible.

Žižek also divided violence into three distinct categories: subjective, objective, and symbolic.<sup>13</sup> Subjective violence is the most obvious, in which one active agent harms another out of malice. It is often interpersonal, and the palpable harm is hard to measure in any objective sense, in that the victim may feel harmed, but is unable to discreetly measure the harm done. The violence is interpersonal, with a clear victim and aggressor. Objective violence is the violence of systems and oppressive factors such as poverty and discrimination. The effects of objective violence are often more measurable, in that one class of people may or may not have more rights than another, but its root causes are rarely able to be sourced to one malicious bad actor. Likewise, symbolic violence is often perpetrated on some level by both victim and aggressor, an unconscious reinforcement of restrictive dynamics that results in harm to one or both parties. As an example of symbolic violence, a woman fetching coffee for her male superior because they both expect that of her, despite it not being in her job description and not expected of a male colleague, reinforces gender roles that assume women are subservient to men, despite neither actor in this situation consciously trying to do so.

Obviously, when speaking on horror media, subjective violence is what immediately comes to mind, such as a slasher hacking away with a knife, or a monster keeping an innocent woman captive. There is a clear aggressor, and the act itself usually has some physical element to

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 11.

it, be it an active physical assault or a restriction of the victim's movement or liberty. The subjective is visceral and immediately visible, and thus actionable; a hero can kill the monster, or the final girl can escape from the killer, immediately removing the threat. However, horror's use of subjective violence as a stand-in for objective violence is a well-explored trope. The aliens are never *just* aliens, after all. Class divisions can be explored by hillbilly cannibals hunting down out-of-touch urbanites on a camping trip gone horribly wrong, and creature features of the Hollywood Golden Age largely grappled with "othered" identities encroaching upon white suburbanite America.<sup>14</sup> The antagonist of horror films is almost always synecdoche for some overlying fear of the contemporary audience, be it the loss of privacy in 90's suburbia found in slasher films, or the hidden negative potential of new technology in the mid-2000's J-Horror boom such as *One Missed Call* and *The Ring*. Although the backlash against horror has often been predicated on the subjective violence portrayed on the screen, the objective violence behind it usually has more troubling social implications than the number of dismembered limbs on the screen.

I place emphasis on this distinction because there *do* exist any number of violent female characters in film and literature. However, their violence is almost always relegated to *implied* harm rather than anything direct. Nurse Ratched of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is not a horrifying antagonist because she personally beats the inmates under her care: instead, she is part of the objective violence inherent in the prison system. Her psychological abuse of the inmates is enabled by their lack of recourse against her, highlighting the inequality within the system. This lack of physical, subjective violence does not make Nurse Ratched any less evil; I would argue

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<sup>14</sup> See Rhona J. Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

she's just as dastardly as any Leatherface or Jason Vorhees; but her violence is relegated to objective methods. Likewise, Mieko of Enchi Fumiko's *Masks* is manipulative, cold, calculating, and has a predilection for blood, but she never lays her hands on someone. Even the *onryō* mentioned previously are not physically violent as they often kill their victims in an indirect way, such as inciting a heart attack or driving them to madness and eventual suicide. For a woman (or for that matter, anyone) to be an antagonist, at least some level of violence must be present, and yet female characters very rarely are presented as subjectively violent. This level of removal between the violent female and her victim sanitizes the violence committed. Only protagonists with which the audience can sympathize, Stopenski's female mutilators, are allowed grotesquery and physical violence.

Thus appears Asami, a physically, subjectively violent female antagonist. She butchers her victims and revels in the viscera. In the following sections, I will examine the character of Asami with the above-described frameworks, and in the process, identify how these frameworks fail to encapsulate her character. I will argue that her femininity is a core tenant of her characterization, a stark contrast to Clover's model of "feminine as victim," and that no suitable discourse exists to fully archetype characters such as Asami.

## Chapter 2: *Audition*

### 2.1: An Introduction to the Novel

Originally published in 1997, *Audition* follows Aoyama, the successful head of a video production company, on his search for a new wife. His first wife, Ryoko, had died of cancer seven years prior to the book's opening, and both father and son Shige believe it is time for Aoyama to re-enter the dating pool. At the suggestion of his film-making associate Yoshikawa, Aoyama begins hosting the titular auditions under the guise of finding an actress for a new film project. His true intention is searching for a suitable wife, whom he believes he has found in Yamasaki Asami, a soft-spoken and polite former ballerina. The two begin to date before their relationship takes a sinister turn. Asami is possessive and jealous to an extreme degree, and captures and tortures Aoyama for a perceived transgression. The novel ends when Shige kills Asami and rescues Aoyama.

The novel was relatively well-received, with one reviewer writing upon the time of release,

After reading a novel by Murakami Ryū for the first time in a long while, I am still amazed by how talented a novelist he is. Until the first half of chapter 9 of the 12 chapter novel, I was completely taken by the scary “charm” of Yamasaki Asami, almost as if reading a well-written romance novel... The transition after the latter half of chapter 9, especially chapter 11 onwards, is frightening to say the least... I could not shake off that sense of discomfort.<sup>1</sup>

*Audition* was released amid financial and political tension. The economic recession in Japan was in full-swing, and the post-war economic miracle had worn off for the most part. The strain on

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<sup>1</sup> Nakahara Norio, “Murakami Ryū [O-dishion],” *Gendosha Bunko*, (June 1997)

the average Japanese household to maintain its previous level of comfort created an opportunity for authors like Murakami to play on the fears of the average reader; the “sense of discomfort” mentioned in the above review implying that there is something uncontrollable and sinister lurking just beneath the veneer of a peaceful every day. Asami’s precarious financial stability echoes what many Japanese households were facing, where her finances “might be a little tight, but... enough to pay the bills and buy the books and CDs and things I want.”<sup>2</sup> Compare this to Aoyama’s membership at various golf resorts and sporting clubs, as well as his ability to take Asami out on luxurious dates to restaurants she could never afford on her part-time wages, and it becomes noticeable how vast the differences are between those who have wealth and those who do not in the setting of the novel.

Outside of finances, other forms of power imbalance are highlighted within the relationship between Aoyama and Asami. His position of producer in the fraudulent film and her as his potential employee; their gender dynamics; age difference; and social status all play into the discrepancy of power between the two. Aoyama’s hunt for a new partner is based upon his previous relationship with his wife, who “was cultured, intelligent, and strikingly attractive... and as a wife she’d been quietly supportive of Aoyama in every aspect of his life and career.”<sup>3</sup> Ryoko’s attractiveness is thus predicated not only on her personality and physical beauty, but especially in her subservience and reliance on Aoyama. She is a housewife with no income of her own, but assists Aoyama in his business, as well as maintaining the brunt of household duties and raising their son Shige. Aoyama thus hunts for someone who can fulfill the role of his late wife, someone with refined hobbies and sensibilities who does not need to bring in any

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<sup>2</sup> Murakami Ryū, *Audition*. Translated by Ralph McCarthy. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 61.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

additional income and devote themselves to the domestic sphere. He can afford to support a domestic partner when much of the original readership was facing the prospect that a single-income household was no longer sustainable.

Asami, then, is a dream-come-true for Aoyama. She has high-class tastes in ballet and classical music, but due to a hip injury, can no longer dance professionally, thus eliminating the risk that she becomes financially and socially successful in her own right. Were they to enter a domestic partnership, Asami would rely on Aoyama for financial support, while Aoyama would likewise rely on Asami to maintain the domestic sphere. That the relationship ends with one dead on the floor and the other slowly bleeding out next to her does not speak well of Murakami's views on the modern nuclear household. Obviously, there was some resonance amongst his audience as well on this point. Asami is charming and beautiful, and Aoyama's stream of conscious narration when watching her makes it easy for an audience, and Aoyama, to ignore the multiple red flags in Asami's past. It is easy to believe oneself has fallen into a dream, but the reality of modern dating is rarely so perfect.

That Asami turns on Aoyama may be perceived as an inevitability. No one could be so perfect and not have something wrong with them, especially with Murakami at the helm, but the methodology of Asami's violent revenge is especially of note. She drugs Aoyama and begins to saw off his limbs with a cheese wire while he remains conscious but paralyzed, an especially gruesome and sadistic method of torture. The physicality of her methods is worth analyzing further and will be the crux of following sections. Of note is that Asami's methods of balancing the playing field with Aoyama aren't through social activism or emotional confrontation. They are bloody, physical acts that even hardened horror readers find visceral and stomach churning,

so much so that noted horror director Eli Roth called it “one of the most creepy and unsettling of any horror movies” he has ever watched.<sup>4</sup>

The story has been regarded as both feminist and misogynistic, with much of the analysis predicated on interpretations of Asami’s violent outburst. For some, Asami is gaining revenge against a patriarchal system which wronged her, providing catharsis for women who otherwise feel they cannot fight back against the society which abused them. For others, Aoyama’s traditional requirements for a bride and general demeaning attitude towards women is an uncritical expression of patriarchal thinking that tries to assuage patriarchal guilt by giving plausible deniability in that Aoyama is tortured by a woman. However, because he lives, his views continue to live with him, and none of his earlier misogynistic ideas are directly challenged or corrected. Later sections of this paper will specifically analyze how Asami’s physical violence correlates to the gender of the characters in the story, and the dynamics between gender presentation and physical violence in fiction.

## 2.2: An Introduction to the Film

The novel did so well that the film rights were quickly acquired by Omega Project, which had found previous success in the horror film market with 1998’s *Ringu*. Miike Takashi was brought in to direct; despite being early on in his career, Miike was already notorious for his propensity for showing extreme gore in his productions, and one cast member later noted that he was “having so much fun” while directing the film’s torture sequence.<sup>5</sup> The film had a limited

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<sup>4</sup> Keith Phipps. "24 Hours Of Horror With Eli Roth". The A.V. Club. October 24, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Ishibashi Ryo, “Ryo Ishibashi: Tokyo – Hollywood” (Blu-ray (Disc 1)). Arrow Films. Event occurs at 0:15:00. FCD1208/1209.

theatrical release in 1999 but found success in the foreign film circuit and has garnered a cult following its home media release. The film is generally regarded as one of the best horror films ever made, making it onto multiple top 100 lists, and has reached a much wider audience than the original novel.<sup>6</sup>

Not much of the original novel was changed for the screenplay. The story is still centered around Aoyama's search for love and the unfortunate fate he finds in the hands of Asami. The most notable changes are in how information is presented to the audience. Much of the back half of the film cannot be taken literally, though to what extent each scene is a dream sequence, a hallucination, or a flashback is unclear, creating a sense that Aoyama, and by extension the audience, cannot trust their senses and the information which is presented concisely in the novel as fact.

Although Asami's torturing of Aoyama only occupies the back three chapters of the novel and the final 20 minutes of the film, this torture scene is the most memorable part of both and reveals Asami to be a physically violent woman. In the novel, Asami's violent nature is barely hinted at, with the film's build up being much more explicit about her intentions. The addition of "the bag man," a writhing burlap sack found on Asami's apartment floor, makes clear to the audience early on that there is something insidious about Asami, and that she is willing to become physically violent in order to get her way.

Violent women in film are the rare exception, with most horror antagonists being the "feminized male" archetype, an emasculated man who hopes to reclaim his potency through violence. Famous examples include Norman Bates from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Buffalo

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<sup>6</sup> Steffen Hantke, "Japanese Horror Under Western Eyes: Social Class and Global Culture in Miike Takashi's Audition." In McRoy, Jay (ed.). *Japanese Horror Cinema*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 56.

Bill of *The Silence of the Lambs*. When a female character does choose violence, her methodology is often more passive or removed from the direct, brutal stabbings of her male counterparts. Where Mike Myers slashes and hacks, Phyllis Dietrichson asks a man to do the killing for her. Female villains are common, but a physically violent female villain is rather rare. Of the myriad of sinister female antagonists in film, only a handful come to mind who commit physical violence without the aid of the supernatural: Annie Wilkes of *Misery* (1990), who breaks her captive's legs with a sledgehammer; the Deadly Vipers of *Kill Bill*, a league of female assassins; Margaret White of *Carrie*, who physically abuses her daughter; and, of course, Asami.

There are plenty of monstrous women in mythology, fiction, and film, with Victoria Schmidt identifying eight archetypes female villains generally fall into: the *femme fatale*, the gorgon, the backstabber, the over controlling mother, the scorned woman, the betrayer, the destroyer, and the troubled teen.<sup>7</sup> Even the more extravagantly named tropes listed above, such as the destroyer and backstabber, rarely resort to physical violence as a means to an end. In a later section will be an analysis of how these archetypes exclude physical violence from the modus operandi of even the most heinous of female villains, and how the presence of physical violence from Asami precludes her from any of the aforementioned categories. I will also further examine more traditionally Japanese villainous woman tropes, such as the *dokufu* (lit. “poisonous woman”) and the *onryō* (“vengeful spirit”). However, assigning Asami a role as a villainous feminine archetype, Western or Japanese, creates friction against an often cited criticism of the story, that Asami is not a developed female character at all. Instead she is simply a displaced subject of the male gaze, an apparition built upon Aoyama's guilt at mistreating women and the

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<sup>7</sup> Victoria Schmidt, *45 Master Characters: Mythic Models for Creating Original Characters*. (United States: Writer's Digest Books, 2001).

subsequent fear of retaliation, explaining why she is able to transgress against the violence gender boundary.<sup>8</sup> The question then becomes centered on Asami's agency as a female character. Does she represent displaced male anxiety, or is her violence a more complex evolution of established female archetypes, going against the adage that even villainous women are less violent than their male counterparts?

The seemingly arbitrary lines I have drawn around Asami (the lack of supernatural powers, her role as the antagonist instead of an anti-hero/protagonist, her gender/sex, that her violence is subjectively physical, and that she does not use her sex appeal in her violence) may seem needlessly limiting. There are many female antagonists who use magic or supernatural forces to torture their victims; for example, the dead wet girls Sadako and Kayako, as well as the myriad witches that haunt American cinema. Why not simply include Asami alongside them? I believe the lack of the supernatural in *Audition* is pivotal to Asami's unique position. Women are predisposed in multiple cultures to be natural sites of the supernatural: "the language and imagery of the occult film is thus necessarily a language and imagery of bodily orifices and insides."<sup>9</sup> Because the vagina is a penetrable orifice, women themselves are more "open" to hosting other entities, be it the devil's sacrament or a possessive ghost. This can be seen in multitudinous Hollywood films, from Regan of *The Exorcist* to Rosemary from *Rosemary's Baby*. The woman's agency is removed from her due to the "invading devil or dybbuk... construed as a male being, and the possessed woman as hence subject to masculinization... an object lesson on what happens to the woman who drifts out of the orbit of male control."<sup>10</sup> The

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<sup>8</sup> Dennis Lim, "An Outré Nightmare From Which There is No Escape." *The Los Angeles Times*. Oct. 4, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Clover, 101.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 103.

woman who threatens the status quo with her otherworldly powers can almost to a specimen be traced back to male fears projected onto a woman.

These fears have a strong history in Japanese fiction. The origin myth of Japan featuring Izanami and Izanagi ends with Izanami, the female half of the pair, dying in childbirth and her maggot infested corpse rotting in the darkest depths of the underworld; the sight of her causes Izanagi to recoil, and as he flees her, she sends waves of minions after him until he seals her away permanently. The message is clear that “the physical characteristics of the female body - its ability to transform, to engulf, to invite - that would be the source of its pollution were also the basis of its power.”<sup>11</sup> Women’s bodies as the site of an unnatural power rarely speaks of women’s fears, doubts, and terrors. Instead, it is a projection of men’s fears *surrounding* women that sparks the desire to denigrate the female body as a necessarily unholy place of pollution and dark magic. I would therefore like to steer the conversation away from magically enchanted female antagonists, and instead focus on a character whose power comes totally from her own physical presence. There is no beguiling witchcraft or devil possession to blame for Asami’s excesses.

## 2.3 The Male Gaze: Aoyama as Protagonist

Before delving into Asami’s role in the film, I will first analyze the protagonist Aoyama, as well as how the film frames both characters. This will include an in-depth review of the cinematography of the film as I recount the plot beat by beat. By understanding the protagonist

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<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Copeland, “Mythical Bad Girls: The Corpse, the Crone, and the Snake” in *Bad Girls of Japan*, edited by Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley, 81-95. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 19.

and point of view character, the film's messages about violence and the male gaze can be better understood.

### **2.3.1 A Breakdown of the Film**

Both film and book present Aoyama as sympathetic, despite the overly misogynistic overtones of using a farcical audition in the hunt for a wife. For critic Chuck Bowen, “though we're sympathetic to his plight, (Aoyama) has done the wrong thing. It would be easier if he were mean, or crazy. It's worse -- at heart, he's a desperate romantic who has fallen for a mirage. When his vision clears and he sees what's really there, it's much too late.”<sup>12</sup> He is both the point of view character and the protagonist, and many other critics seem more than happy to empathize with him, with one going so far as to say “Aoyama and Yoshikawa can share a drink and a smoke at a bar and enjoy one another in a way that they can not enjoy women, which is reflective of the behavior of many men in real life. This sadness, as well as the ghastly asymmetry between Aoyama's deception and the punishment it eventually incurs, keep the film from being a pat male-hating parable.”<sup>13</sup> The lack of concern over Aoyama's more heinous actions by film critics is somewhat distressing. That so many reviewers (many of them male) find Aoyama's actions forgivable and even endearing speaks to how insidiously unprovocative it is to take actions aligned with patriarchal values. Whether or not Aoyama is meant to be portrayed as sympathetic or not by the narrative is worth considering, as it informs the audience as to whether or not Asami's torture of him can at all be justified and what it means thematically.

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<sup>12</sup> Elvis Mitchell, “FILM REVIEW; Wife Hunting Sure Is a Sick And Frightful Business.” *The New York Times*. Aug. 8, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Chuck Bowen, “Review: Takashi Miike's Audition Remains a Furious Howl of Despair.” *Slant Magazine*. July 1, 2019.

Aoyama's position as ultimately the victim of Asami will naturally place him as a sympathetic figure to some degree. However, such sympathy is rarely garnered by the final girl in a similar position. Bowen, quoted earlier as being sympathetic to Aoyama's plight, is unmoved by a woman in a very similar scene. In *The Bad Batch*, the protagonist Arlen is kidnapped and tortured, resulting in the loss of two of her limbs. Bowen states, "Arlen isn't even allowed to be momentarily upset at losing two of her appendages, instead pushing forward as the narrative demands, playing the role of the avenging babe of few words."<sup>14</sup> Where Aoyama's struggle against Asami is viewed with sympathy, Arlen's escape is dismissed as uninteresting, despite both silently grimacing as they lose a foot.

The reception of Aoyama as a likable, if slightly bumbling, everyman can be taken at face-value to be part of the film's appeal. The stark contrast between the beginning half of the film, shot much like a typical meet-cute romantic comedy, and the horrifying latter half accentuates the terror as an "it could happen to you" response. One critic notes that "Aoyama, though far from perfect, does nothing to deserve Asami's ferocious violence. On the contrary, Miike goes to great lengths to present him as a well-intentioned, decent man."<sup>15</sup> I will now examine what exactly makes Aoyama "far from perfect."

Perhaps the most obvious example is that it is heavily implied that he has had a sexual relationship with his secretary. The first hint to their relationship is that she refers to Aoyama with "*anata*" while they are alone, implying a level of intimacy beyond a professional relationship. During business hours, the two have a strained if cordial relationship, but she does go out of her way to chase after him as he's leaving to tell him that she's getting married. When

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<sup>14</sup> Chuck Bowen, "Review: The Bad Batch." *Slant Magazine*. June 18, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Hantke, 59-60.

he disinterestedly asks whom she's marrying, she replies "Noone you know." As the elevator shuts behind him after a short, "Well, congratulations," the camera lingers on a shot of the secretary's face. She looks obviously disgruntled and unsatisfied with his response, but for what reason the audience is not yet privy to. Her appearance during the dream sequence later in the film reveals the reason for the discomfort as she asks him point blank, "You slept with me once. I had expectations of you, so does that make me stupid?" Aoyama apologizes with a guilty expression and the nightmare continues.

Interwork romantic relationships are not uncommon, and although they are often derided as unprofessional, it is rarely considered a mark against one's character if a person enters into one of these relationships; foolhardy, perhaps, but not morally repugnant. This is less true when it is a superior pursuing a lower-level member of the workplace, as is the case here. Aoyama is the direct superior of his secretary. This inherently creates a power imbalance in any relationship they pursue with each other. There could be fear of retaliation if the secretary denies his advances, and the awkward atmosphere after their romantic relationship ended is palpable, creating an unprofessional environment. The secretary's expectations were obviously not filled by Aoyama, but this lingering disappointment is never addressed between the two. Aoyama seemingly would prefer to ignore his past actions and not take responsibility by communicating clearly with the secretary. He is allowed to do so because he is in a position of power. Where the female secretary could face retaliation for misstepping in this relationship, Aoyama needn't fear any such repercussions. When the secretary says she is getting married, for Aoyama that means this woman is no longer available to be romantically involved with. After the close-up of the secretary, we get a similar shot of Aoyama's face in a three-quarter profile, seemingly deep in thought. It is therefore implied that this revelation, that women who were easily accessible to

him sexually are now being claimed by other men, is part of what drives him to host the auditions.

The titular auditions, too, are only possible because of Aoyama's social power. While the film does emphasize Yoshikawa's role in convincing Aoyama to go through with the audition, ultimately it is Aoyama's decision. Because of the cinematography reminiscent of a romantic comedy, the auditions are framed as a quirky "meet-cute," circumstances that can later be told as a heartwarming and/or funny story over dinner. This draws attention away from the inherently creepy premise of lying to potential suitors in order to get them within the same room as the pursuer. Any woman that does catch Aoyama's interest will inevitably find herself in a similar power dynamic as his secretary, the constant unasked question being, "If I say no, will I lose my job?" It is easy enough to point to this behavior as irresponsible in a post "me too" world, but even in 1999 Japan this behavior is indicative of an abuse of power dynamics at best. Aoyama, too, is well aware that what he is doing is at least questionable as while he flips through the resumes of potential actresses/wives, he turns his wife's picture so that she cannot "see" what he is doing, a clear sign of guilt.

Aoyama's attitude towards women is further highlighted when he meets his friend Yoshikawa at a bar. The main topic of discussion is women, or how modern women are "awful girls, common, full of themselves." The two conflate the downfall of Japanese civilization as they know it with women no longer reaching their standards. Although Aoyama doesn't parrot back the vitriol Yoshikawa says, his silence is an admission that he at least somewhat agrees, only further bolstered by his compliance with his friend's scheme. In a scene absent from the novel, Aoyama returns home to find his son has brought a girl home. She uses casual language toward Aoyama, and flippantly apologizes that she has eaten his dinner by mistake. The girl here

highlights the impropriety that Aoyama and Yoshikawa see in younger women, and it bolsters the audience's feeling that perhaps Aoyama is right to create a scenario to weed out the more undesirable women such as the one his son is seeing. However, she is not free from Aoyama's sexualizing gaze. Much later in the film, during an extended hallucination sequence, the girl is posed in a suggestive way and tempts Aoyama, the implication being that, even though he finds her rude, uncouth, and sexually unavailable to him, he still sexualizes her in the privacy of his own mind. All women are, consciously or not, sexualized by Aoyama to some degree, showing that his motivations for finding a wife are just as sexually driven as they are for finding a good mother figure for Shige. Although Aoyama frames the search as being altruistic in this way, and he himself may believe it to some extent, the audience later realizes that his base desires play an equally pivotal role.

Shortly before the first woman enters the room for her audition, Aoyama mutters, "I feel like a criminal." This further reveals some knowledge, and therefore guilt, about the improper nature of his actions. He is lying by omission to potentially hundreds of women in an effort to find a suitable partner. However, his guilt does not dissuade him from going through with his plot. This self-awareness may help viewers sympathize with Aoyama in the following scenes. His justification for founding his potential romantic relationships is that he is finding a suitable mother for his son and securing a more comfortable home. Because he considers his motivations pure, he is able to assuage his guilt and continue through with the audition. This is a hint to the audience that they, too, can put aside any guilt they might feel for the upcoming voyeurism. The audience is now implicated in Aoyama's male gaze.

Because Aoyama is the point of view character, the audience implicitly sympathizes with his gaze. What he finds important in a scene is what the camera will highlight, and thus the

audience's attention will be drawn to it. The male gaze is already an embedded part of cinematography, and so Aoyama's influence upon the camera is an easily overlooked given, especially during the first half of the film that relies heavily on well-worn cinematography meant to create a comfortable, familiar atmosphere. The lighting is conservative and unremarkable, the shot composition likewise usually focuses on the primary subject of conversation, and if Aoyama is not directly present in a shot, his presence is at least implied. There is no reason given to the audience to question Aoyama's perceptions, and so the audience is easily captivated by Asami when Aoyama is the same.

However, Aoyama's behavior during the auditions themselves is the first glimpse that the audience may not be entirely reliant on Aoyama as the point of view character. The film draws attention to the artificial atmosphere of the audition room, such as the bright fluorescent lights buzzing in the background, and the white empty walls punctuated with black blinds, starkly contrasting to the lived-in and warm interiority of Aoyama's home in the previous scene. When the first actress enters the room, the camera pans behind the cameraman recording the audition. This draws attention to the cinematic gaze, as the audience is a voyeuristic interloper, much like the cameraman. The cameraman's presence draws attention to the metatextual in that the gaze becomes palpable, both as diegetic and non-diegetic. Both the characters within the shot are at least somewhat aware that there is a layer of farce to the whole affair, and in turn, the audience becomes hyper aware that they, too, are partaking in unreality. In what should be an intimate environment where two potential romantic partners get to know each other, the artificial intrusion of cameramen, high intensity fluorescent lights, and the stark professionalism of a film audition intrudes and creates a feeling of detachment from what should be intimate interpersonal connections. The women here have been objectified, a rotating stock of surface level

characteristics to be consumed by Aoyama and the camera (i.e. the audience). This becomes even more blatant when one woman suddenly undresses. The audience first sees Aoyama's uncomfortable expression, then the woman's scantily clad body through the intertextual camera lens. Although Aoyama is the point of view character, the audience's perspective can differ from his because they are separated via the camera lens. The rest of the audition is interspersed with grainy VCR footage of the women, further drawing attention to this divide. The fourth wall, previously well established, has become breachable as the audience becomes more aware of the layers of editing, screens, and post-shot color grading separating them and Aoyama.

During Asami's audition, Aoyama pointedly stares into the camera during his line delivery, the object of his gaze being Asami. His gaze is pointed and almost oppressive; now that he has her in his sights, he would be remiss to let her leave. This is the *literal* male gaze. Likewise, Asami enters the room with her eyes to the floor. When she is introducing herself, the camera is behind her; the emphasis is placed on Aoyama's reaction rather than Asami's point of view. In her introduction, Asami is the objectified feminine, the literal object of Aoyama's male gaze. It is not until Aoyama asks Asami about her ballet experience that the camera switches angles to center on Asami's face. Here, the audience sees Asami's gaze for the first time. She looks candidly into the camera, her interest sparked by something she personally enjoys. The audience is in Aoyama's frame of reference, and our focus is centered solely on Asami, who meets our eyes. During this exchange, Aoyama does not blink once. He is totally enraptured, and the audience is prompted to share his enthusiasm, but the opening shots of Asami's back instead of her face implies that there are things about her that the audience does not know, and that she is first and foremost an object to be gazed at by Aoyama.

During their first date, their conversation is shot with a conventional shot-reverse-shot set-up, with one key difference. When the camera is on Aoyama, it is a straightforward close-up, full frontal shot, but when the camera is focused on Asami, it is shot over Aoyama's shoulder. This subtly removes the audience from Aoyama's point of view and places them instead in Asami's. Rather than framing Asami as a feminine object to be viewed by a masculine gazer, this camerawork instead presents Aoyama as the subject of Asami's gaze. This symbolically grants Asami a degree of power within their relationship, though only through the audience's ironic removal from the situation. It is an important point to make, however, as it continues to prime the audience to align their interests with Asami rather than Aoyama.

After their date, the cinematography begins to heavily imply that Aoyama is missing critical information that the audience has become privy to. After Yoshikawa suggests that Aoyama distance himself from Asami, Aoyama waits several days for her to call in order to not seem uncouth. The shots within Asami's apartment reveal that she spends her days crookedly bent over the phone waiting for Aoyama to call, her only company being the bag man. At this point in the film, the audience does not know what is in the sack, which occasionally twitches on the ground, revealing its contents to be alive. There are still things the audience does not know about Asami, and the ironic tension between the audience being aware of the bag man and Aoyama's blissful ignorance creates tension for the rest of the film. Each cut back to her apartment reveals her condition has deteriorated, her posture becoming more and more bent over the phone, the sign of Aoyama's affection. When he finally breaks down and calls her, an extreme close up of her lips shows a twitchy smile, the only sign of life she has shown since their last date. She regains her composure and answers demurely and sweetly, saying that she was not expecting him to ever call her back. They schedule their next date.

This disconnect between what Aoyama knows and what the audience knows begins to distance the audience from Aoyama. During the next date, the establishing shot is a midshot with the two on an equal eye level, implying to the audience that they are now equals, or at the very least, that their power dynamic is now not so clear-cut. The shots in this scene are now more frenetic, with quick cuts and short times between them, creating a mounting tension belying the characters' inability to stay in this static point in their relationship, as both are restless in their current state. There is a reasonable mistrust of Asami from the audience at this point, due to the shots of her apartment. The quick cuts and angled shots mimic the movements of anxious eyes darting back and forth, as if looking out for any other signs that something is wrong with Asami. Even more conventional shots are oddly cut to near identical other takes, creating a disjointed viewing experience. Was there just a cut there, or are the viewer's eyes deceiving them? The audience now cannot trust their own vision, implying that nothing on the screen can be trusted or taken at face value.

Aoyama asks Asami to join him on a romantic getaway to a remote hotel where he had previously stayed with his wife. Asami enthusiastically agrees. When the two arrive, it's shot much like a romantic comedy, with sweeping shots of the beautiful landscape and hotel. When they retire to the hotel room, however, the tone markedly shifts. Common practice for shooting romantic scenes, especially sexual ones, is to create mood lighting using red or orange filters; warm tones imply sensuality and intimacy, and tight close-ups relay much the same. Asami appears dressed in a flowing white gown, partly obfuscated by the billowing white curtains. The white is a strong indicator of the purity and beauty of Asami, but the camera hangs back, keeping her relatively far away from the audience, and her obfuscated face gives her the appearance of a traditional Japanese *onryō*. Once she goes to the bed, the modern iron wrought bed frame

resembles a cage, separating her from both the audience and Aoyama. The color grading is a stark, unnatural blue and the sex is heavily implied rather than shown. The most the audience sees of Asami's nude body is one shot of several burn marks on her inner thigh. Asami is played as stiff and still, and when she asks Aoyama to love "her and only her," her head is motionless and she gazes directly into the camera. Aoyama agrees, and the scene fades to black.



Figure 1. Miike Takashi, dir., *Audition* (1999; Lionsgate, 2005), DVD. The distant camera and blue overtone create a chilling effect.

When Aoyama wakes up the next morning, he feels heavily hung over and Asami is nowhere to be seen. Hazy flashbacks heavily imply that Asami has drugged Aoyama, and the front desk clerk confirms that she left early that morning. She has only left a note signed, "The woman who has lost her name." Aoyama, deeply depressed and confused, returns to Tokyo to try and piece together who Asami really is, catching up to the audience's point of view that Asami is hiding something. As he goes through the contact list Asami left on her resume, it becomes blatantly obvious that every clue is a dead end. Aoyama goes to the dance studio listed on Asami's resume, where he meets a man in a wheelchair. Here, the color grading is yellow, and the room is dimly lit. The bright yellow spotlights highlight the characters and create deep purple

backlights, creating stark contrast and highlighting duality, the meeting of light and shadow. As Aoyama gets closer to the truth, the shadows cast by Asami's violence become more obvious. Aoyama asks the blind wheelchair-bound man about Asami, and it's revealed through flashback that he is the one responsible for the burns on her thighs. At this point, it is unclear how or if this information is being provided to Aoyama at all, or if it is only being shown to the audience, reinforcing the distance between Aoyama and the audience's point of view. The man only makes chiding comments about how far Aoyama and Asami have gone physically, and so it is left to the audience to decide whether Aoyama is now privy to the information shown in the flashbacks, or if they are real at all. The older man reveals that his legs are prosthetics and demands that Aoyama leave.

Aoyama then goes to the bar Asami claimed to work part-time, and the color grade becomes even warmer. However, instead of an intimate red, which could also imply danger or getting literally "warmer" to the truth, the palette is distinctly a sickly yellow. A passing neighbor explains that the owner of the bar was brutally murdered, and that multiple human body parts not belonging to the owner were strewn about the carnage. Having come to a dead end, Aoyama returns home and settles down with a drink. As he does so, a flashback occurs showing their last several dates, as well as Asami's childhood. It is revealed that the wheelchair-bound man was Asami's stepfather, who abused her as a child. She talks about the abuse she suffered as a child, interspersed with seemingly random shots of Aoyama and Asami interacting in different ways. She tries to undress him while appearing as a high school student and her child-self leers at them while they have dinner, all with stark lighting and frenetic cuts between shots, creating a sense of unease and tension. Other women in Aoyama's life, such as his dead wife and old secretary, suddenly shift between seducing him and chastising him with icy glares. The dream-

like sequence culminates in Aoyama appearing in Asami's apartment, where she reveals the bag man to be horribly maimed, missing both of his feet and most of his fingers. Asami vomits into a bowl, which is quickly lapped up by the bag man. Aoyama looks on in horror, but it is impossible to parse how he discovered the bag man, or the veracity of any of the neighboring shots. Before this dream sequence, Aoyama was relaxing at home over a drink, and so it would not make logical sense for him to know about the bag man or what goes on in Asami's apartment.

The shots now oscillate at a frantic pace, cutting between Asami beheading her stepfather, Aoyama meeting with Yoshikawa to set up the audition, Aoyama's dying wife, and various shots of Asami as a child. The final shot in the montage is Aoyama sitting in the audition chair in a similar shot composition that framed the original auditions. He looks candidly in the camera and directly admits to the audience, "I'm looking for a wife because my son says I look worn-out." This admission shows that his desire for a wife was largely driven by his desire not to take care of his own domestic sphere and have a female partner take care of it. That he fell in love with one of the contestants is merely a happy coincidence. Aoyama views a potential wife as a homemaker first and a romantic partner second, showing that his misogyny is deeply rooted, to the point where he conflates a good romantic partner with someone who primarily provides for him in a domestic manner. His previously given statements, that his potential wife should be educated with high-class hobbies, are proven to be just as surface level as the auditions he used to find Asami.

The montage of disturbing images continues after his confession, including the decapitated head of Asami's stepfather rolling around the blue-drenched ballet studio and a finger floating listlessly in a yellow-graded drink. There is a hard cut to Aoyama collapsing onto

the floor, looking helplessly as Asami enters his home, clad in a butcher's apron over a prim white blouse and skirt, carrying a medical bag. Asami reveals that she has drugged Aoyama and intends to torture him with various sharp instruments. Asami's makeup remains immaculate, and she partakes in the torture with girlish glee, delightedly whispering under her breath, "*kiri kiri kiri*" (lit. "deeper and deeper") as she stabs him with a medical syringe. The next half hour of the film is dedicated to showing in intimate close-ups Asami stabbing, poking, and prodding Aoyama with various needles and other implements of torture. She stabs Aoyama in the eye, as well as paralyzing his tongue specifically. There is a flashback to the night they spent at the hotel, where it's revealed that Asami asked Aoyama to love only her, and sometime later that night, he revealed that he had a son he would like her to meet. This is what caused Asami to feel so betrayed; in her warped worldview, Aoyama's fatherly love for his son breaks his promise to only love her. Thus, her torture is a methodical reflection of this perceived betrayal. The needles paralyzing his eyes prevent him from gazing at her and making her an object of his affection, his tongue is paralyzed so that he can no longer lie to her, and the torture culminates with Asami pulling out a cheese wire with which to saw off his feet, so that he may never leave her.

### **2.3.2 That Scene and the Victimized Man**

This last torture sequence is the oft remarked upon *pièce de résistance* of the film. Noted film critic Robin Wood, who had previously decried Miike's earlier works as simply "torture porn," remarked that *Audition* is "authentically disturbing, and infinitely more horrifying: the first time I watched it – on DVD, at home, after warnings I had received – I was repeatedly tempted, through the last half hour, to turn it off."<sup>16</sup> The question I then pose is, why is this scene

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Wood, "Revenge is Sweet": The Bitterness of *Audition* in *Film International*. Intellect Ltd. (7): 23.

so impactful? In a genre full of beheadings and gore-stained basement walls, why do seasoned critics recoil in horror at Aoyama's torture at the hands of Asami? I believe part of the reason is that Aoyama is a middle-aged man. Isolde Standish, in her book *Myth and Masculinity in the Japanese Cinema*, defines the role of the masculine hero in post-war Japanese cinema as having a "reflexive masochism element." Because only the female body is socially acceptable to perform as a site of the passive reception of violence, the male receiver of violence becomes coded as feminine. However, when a male protagonist who is expected to perform a masculine role, i.e., the audience surrogate and active protagonist, any violence against him must go through a circumlocution to allow him to retain his masculinity, what Standish calls "reflexive masochism:"

While the thematic structure of the masculine discourse of (modern) films deters spectator-identification with the passive subordinate position, it does encourage identification with a 'reflexive masochistic' position which... is in fact active and therefore compatible with dominant social conceptions of masculinity.<sup>17</sup>

Standish uses *yakuza* films as her example, but I believe the same observation can be made in horror films such as *Audition*. The framing of a male victim of violence often *does* take the narrative position of a female, with emphasis placed on the pain they are experiencing and their ability to be penetrated by a male aggressor, but there is a second framing not afforded to female victims; rather than their pain being the main focus of the shot, it is instead stoicism in the face of pain or danger. The horror of being tortured is instead replaced with a gritty stoicism, proving the male worthy of the role of protagonist by being able to withstand pain that would cripple or kill a weaker or more cowardly man. By framing male displays of suffering as stoic resistance rather than passive victimization, films can "codify competitive male relations of

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<sup>17</sup> Isolde Standish, *Myth and Masculinity in the Japanese Cinema*. (Curzon Press, 2000), 176.

domination and subordination along a passive/active division which... is further codified as a feminine/masculine distinction.”<sup>18</sup> By not showing expected reactions to pain (screaming, crying, writhing, etc.), the man receiving the torture humiliates and therefore feminizes the man torturing him.

Therein lies the rub. In Standish’s examples, the male recipient is always being tortured by another man. Because each participant in the torture is the same gender, their narrative dynamics are decided by their actions and reactions, rather than their physical sex. Likewise, when a man tortures a woman in film, their gendered narrative roles align with audience expectation. The masculine is the aggressor, and the feminine is the victim. However, when the physically female aggressor tortures the victimized man, this paradigm collapses. The man cannot sufficiently emasculate his attacker through stoicism because the attacker is *already* a woman. This breaking of gender norms within the narrative creates a discomfort beyond the usual torture scene reaction. The female aggressor, Asami, maintains her power over Aoyama, the male victim, but because both characters still react within their prescribed gender roles outside of the aggressor/victim dichotomy, the audience is left with a scenario they do not have an easy paradigm for. Asami is, undoubtedly, still a woman and Aoyama, likewise, is still obviously a man, and yet their expected places within the aggressor/victim dichotomy have been subverted. Because Asami retains her feminine features, such as her long neat hair and girlish way of speaking, the audience cannot comfortably place her singularly within either role as “aggressor” or “woman,” and it is unheard of for a character to exist within both simultaneously.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 172.

The same is true for Aoyama, whose masculine body is still being invaded by hypodermic needles.

Robert Hyland considers Asami a manifestation of Aoyama's guilt, that she is a reflexive answer to men's anxiety about receiving punishment for their transgressions against women. She is the avenging angel here to chasten Aoyama as the embodiment of his guilt and fear of female backlash. This reading ties into Clover's concept of women as sites of male projection of their fear of castration. Their feminine bodies are displayed as safe spaces to explore the feelings of violation and penetration, etc. This image of Asami falls into the idea that portrayals of women in cinema are still inherently male-controlled through the male gaze, the objectified feminine. However, I would argue that the cinematography mentioned above is not material to this reading of Asami's characterization, and that by gradually removing the audience's sympathy for Aoyama, the film also shifts the audience's sympathies toward Asami. The male gaze of Aoyama is not merely subverted, it is invaded and inverted. Asami is not simply a replacement for the male gaze toward the now feminine body of Aoyama becoming punctured. It is a reactive feminine gaze, one which currently lacks proper discourse around it.

## 2.4 The Woman Problem: Female Archetypes and a Lack of Subjective Violence

That writers like Schmidt insist on a binary division between male and female archetypes speaks to how female and male characters are treated within narrative. Because of the male gaze theory within cinema, which posits that the cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied white male is the default character upon which audiences project (due to the assumption that the default

audience reflects this character) and thus all characters who do not align with this mold are considered the “other,” female characters are inherently different from their male counterparts. The female character is defined by her femininity, and thus all actions she takes must be viewed through a gendered lens. However, even to this point, the female audience is absent, in that a female character acts as a vessel for projection from the assumed-male audience. A female hero can have very little to do with the lived experience of being a woman and can rather be a figure upon which the anxieties and subversive pleasures of the male symbolic order can be projected for the male spectator. Violence is “so messy and so unwholesome, in fact, that running it through a woman may be the only way it can be run... the woman as a kind of feint, a front through which the boy can simultaneously experience forbidden desires and disavow them on grounds that the visible actor, is after all, a girl.”<sup>19</sup> Likewise, as mentioned earlier, female villains are often considered projections of male anxiety and fears such as the classic Freudian fear of nothingness the vagina represents in the male psyche. It is therefore with a grain of salt that “female” character archetypes should be addressed, since many of them are catered to explaining the male fears and desires they represent rather than the complex internality afforded to their male counterparts.

This projection of male fear onto female forms can explain much of why there are so few physically violent women in film and literature. Barbara Creed argues that the monstrous feminine stems from the earliest point of childhood, where the child views the mother as abject, and must free themselves from her.<sup>20</sup> Thus, female bodies are the perfect medium to project fear and horror onto. There is a fundamental, intrinsic understanding among all men that the female

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<sup>19</sup> Clover, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection" in *Screen* (London 27, no. 1 1986), 44-71.

body is the site of castration, alienation, and the abject other. However, because of the synchronous view of the female body as fetish object, to be appealing and available at all times, the female body can only *receive* violence. Women are open, penetrable, lacking, victims, their open mouths and writhing bodies waiting to be filled by a phallic object such as a chainsaw or knife. For a woman to commit physical violence is to have this structure subverted. This is not the point upon which aggressive females are disdained however; Hollywood loves to play with audience expectations, and will often distort tropes to any number of ends. The crime the violent woman commits is deemed much graver. She becomes unappealing to the male gaze. A woman who stalks, kills, and maims, covered in the gore of her victims instead of her own, is frankly unattractive to mainstream audiences, and a woman can be anything *but* unattractive. For a woman to commit direct, physical violence against a man, the man must be placed in the feminine position of victim and the woman in the position of masculine aggressor. To do so would be unfathomable, if not because of a puritan disdain for relaxing gender roles, then out of a self-interested worry of not pandering to audiences.

I will also further examine the historic Japanese archetypes of *yamamba* and *onryō* and how they continue to exist within the cultural zeitgeist as the “dead wet girl.” Japanese mythology, as mentioned in the introduction, is rife with female antagonistic figures, some of whom get their hands dirty playing with their male prey. However, there are two elements which preclude Asami from belonging to this category: one, that she is not supernatural, following the long trend of Japanese female villains being spirits, ghosts, or demons in disguise; and two, that she is physically attractive and sexually available to men.

With this framework in mind, these villainous female archetypes allow little room for the character to be physically violent, already precluding Asami from fully belonging to any one of

them. However, I believe there is still value in examining how these archetypes are broken in regards to Asami's characterization, and how quickly these archetypes break when introduced to a physically violent female character. Because they would be minimally applicable, I will not be going into depth about the troubled teen or over controlling mother archetypes, though I will make a quick aside to bring attention to these tropes. They are directly attributed to feminine qualities in an even more overt manner than the others, predicating a woman's villainy on hormones, either through puberty or maternity. Their motivations, like all female archetypes, are based upon their femininity, although to a more blatant extent. I will be most focused on the trope of the *femme fatale* because I believe it to be the most obvious parallel to Asami, as she has been called such by reviewers, but the remaining archetypes are worth analyzing as well.

#### **2.4.1 The *Femme Fatale* and the *Dokufu***

Kathryn Hemman writes in her analysis of *Audition* that Asami is “a vengeful *femme fatale*.”<sup>21</sup> The *femme fatale*'s modus operandi is seduction and poison. Where the male's impotence drives him to murder, the murderous woman uses her sexuality as a powerful tool to manipulate her victims, who are usually men. She is “a beautiful woman who seduces a male protagonist into criminality and a web of deceit, causing his demise.”<sup>22</sup> However, I would vehemently argue that Asami does not fall under the umbrella of the *femme fatale*. She does not use sex to ply her victim, and her preferred method of killing is even more direct and intimate than the usual slasher villains, as she stabs and pierces Aoyama with pins and hypodermic needles and cuts off his limbs with cheese wire. This goes in direct opposition to the *femme*

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<sup>21</sup> Kathryn Hemman, “Illusion, Reality and Fearsome Femininity in Takashi Miike's *Audition*” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Comics, Games and Transmedia*. (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 110.

<sup>22</sup> Julie Grossman. “The *Femme Fatale*” in *Quick Takes: Movies and Popular Culture*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 1.

*fatale*'s propensity for poison or asking her male counterpart to kill on her behalf. This visceral and direct violence goes against the Western archetype of the *femme fatale*, as well as the films careful framing of Asami's sexuality not as a weapon, but as a facet of her trauma.

In the position of the *femme fatale*, feminine sexual appeal is often highlighted as the crux of the character. She is powerful, and thus scary, because of her ability to seduce. The film completely subverts this expectation. When Asami and Aoyama have sex, the color palette is a restrained, cold blue. Everything is overlaid with blue lighting, creating a chilling effect, the opposite of the usual warm palettes associated with sex and sensuality. The viewer is not given a full-frontal nude depiction of Asami, as is the norm of women in horror films, but she is instead always covered. It seems obvious that special attention was given to *not* sexualize Asami in this moment when it would have been so easy to do so. The sex scene between her and Aoyama is a pivotal moment in the narrative in which the power dynamic between the two becomes obviously distorted. Asami has gained the upper hand and Aoyama is her befuddled victim, but because the sex scene is so obviously *not* titillating, the narrative rebukes the reading that Asami's seduction is part of her evil nature. Her feminine sexual appeal is not part of her violence. Instead, the cool color palette and stoic camera angles away from her body imply that this is a chilling scene, not a seductive one. Where Aoyama originally believed himself in control, Asami's sudden departure leaves him confused and disorientated. Upon her return, she is now fully the aggressor, chasing him through the halls of his home.

However, despite her new predatory status toward Aoyama, the cool nature of the sex scene implies and the dream sequence that follows positions Asami as sympathetic, if distant. The physical and emotional abuse Asami suffers from her stepfather places her in the

traditionally feminine victim role. This starkly contrasts with her position as violent aggressor later, but the film treats these acts of violence rather differently.

When the child version of Asami is being tortured by her stepfather, the set lighting is direct and stark. The light pouring through the window makes the contrast of the shot almost physically painful to look directly at. There is no romantic lighting at play here, no stark blues or romantic red lens tints. This bare coloring of the scene places it in the realm of the common place and the mundane. The abuse is obviously incredibly traumatic for Asami, but by framing it in such average colors, especially when book-ended with the intense reds and blues used in the other sequences, the abuse becomes something cynically ordinary. Compare this lighting to the interspersed shots of child Asami practicing ballet between her stepfather's abuse. The shots are distant wide shots, with Asami slightly off center. The point of view character in these shots is the stepfather, and thus it makes sense that the poses Asami are shown in could be sexualized (her raising her legs, slowly lowering her pelvis, etc.). The film is careful to avoid actively sexualizing the child, however. The blue lighting returns, and the distant camera refuses to linger on any one part of her body that could be potentially sexualized. That Asami is slightly off-center implies the voyeuristic nature of the observer, that looking at her in this way must be hidden because it is perverse. The film does not look kindly upon any viewer who sympathizes with the gaze of her stepfather.

The cinematography is similar to what is used during the sex scene with Aoyama. This uncomfortably supposits Aoyama as being predatory himself. In the dream sequence, the point of view character, the stepfather, is unmistakably shown to be a heinous creep with his overt sexualization of a minor, by showing his lustful gaze as having a literal chilling effect. The physical abuse he inflicts on Asami, while terrifying, is mundane compared to the emotional

impact his predatory gaze had on her. Likewise, by repeating the cinematography from the earlier scene with Aoyama, it places Aoyama as likewise an aggressive predator. Although he has no intention of harming Asami in any physical way, he has lied to and manipulated her from his position of social power. His wealth and gender have enabled him to assume he is the more powerful partner in his relationship with Asami in much the same way her stepfather assumed the role of aggressor as an extension of his masculine power over her.

The torture scene following the dream sequence has a more subtle red hue, creating a warm atmosphere that is more traditionally in line with mainstream sex scenes and intimate chats by a fireplace. The presence of this red color palette stands in stark contrast to the blues used earlier. Where the sex scene lacks intimacy, the torture scene highlights the intimate nature of Asami's torture methods, straddling over Aoyama as she injects his tongue with a hypodermic needle. When Asami is being objectified and sexualized by men, the camera hangs back in wide shots implying that the audience cannot intimately know her, just as the men sexualizing her do not understand her. Where the physical violence done toward Asami by her stepfather is framed as mundane, her physical torture of Aoyama is the audience's chance to understand and know Asami outside of her objectification from the men around her. Asami's control of the situation thus serves as a stark contrast to the control the men in her life believe they have over her.



Figure 2. Miike, Takashi, dir., *Audition* (1999; Lionsgate, 2005), DVD. The warmer color palette and tighter shot composition create an intimacy absent from the earlier sex scene.

It is important to note that Asami's control of Aoyama does not come from seducing him, but instead physically threatening him. However, sexuality is not the only trait of the *femme fatale*, as "Putting on a 'show,' performing femininity while charting the damage done to women because of predatory men and institutional biases, is trademark *femme fatale*."<sup>23</sup> Surely, Asami's revenge against Aoyama serves as a classic example of a woman fighting back against the system that oppressed her. Where Aoyama stands as a synecdoche for patriarchy, Asami stands as the *femme fatale* that pushes back against the unfair treatment she has faced.

However, I would argue that the tradition of the *femme fatale* has a complex history in Japanese cinema, and *Audition* is no exception. Influenced by the *femme fatales* of American noir cinema, films such as *Ugetsu* (1953) introduced *femme fatale* characters into traditional Japanese narratives. The ghostly Wakasa seduces the protagonist, tempting him into a life of debauchery with her. However, after conversing with a wandering priest, the protagonist escapes, and Wakasa is never seen again. This is the first of a long pattern of ghostly *femme fatales* in

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 4.

Japanese cinema, highlighting that female temptresses need to already be dead if they wish to seduce the protagonist. Flesh and blood women are not capable of acting upon their sexual desires, and only after experiencing the freedom of escaping the mortal coil can they become sexually liberated. This theme is present in a long list of Japanese films such as *Ugetsu, Himiko* (1974), and *In the Realm of Senses* (1976). Even before film, there were the legends of fox demons becoming beautiful women to seduce and trick men. There is a long-standing tradition of conflating female sexuality with the supernatural in Japanese storytelling, and there is nothing so supernatural as a ghost coming back to haunt the living.<sup>24</sup> Asami, much to Aoyama's eventual chagrin, is very much flesh and blood.

*Audition* plays with the expectation of Asami being supernatural. Shortly after learning of Asami's backstory, there is a fake out, with Aoyama and Asami back in bed at the vacation resort. For a moment, the audience can believe everything that happened was a dream. In the next shot, Asami disappears behind a curtain, as if she were an apparition this whole time, like a Christmas ghost simply visiting to teach the Scrooge-like Aoyama a lesson about respecting women. However, this comforting fantasy is ripped to shreds when the film hard cuts back to Asami sawing off Aoyama's legs. Asami is very physically present and physically threatening, breaking the Japanese trend of the *femme fatale* being a ghost or spirit. It is also worth pointing out that while Asami maims Aoyama, she does not kill him. In fact, she makes it a point to keep her victims alive. The bag man has been writhing in agony in her apartment for an unknowable length of time, and it can be reasonably assumed that a similar fate awaited Aoyama before he is rescued by his son. She does not desire to kill Aoyama, and instead rip away his agency so that

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<sup>24</sup> Ima-Izumi Yoko, "A Land Where Femmes Fatales Fear to Tread: Eroticism and Japanese Cinema." *Japan Review*, no. 10 (1998), 123–50.

she can enjoy their relationship on her terms, however distorted and ugly those terms may be. These motivations are more nuanced than the usual straightforward *femme fatale*'s murderous revenge.

Similarly, there is the Japanese trope of the *dokufu* (lit. "poisonous woman"). The term was popularized in the early Meiji era and is often considered a direct parallel to the Western concept of the *femme fatale*. Although it has been applied to several real women and fictional characters, it is most associated with two women in particular: Abe Sada (1905-1971), a prostitute who strangled her lover and absconded with his severed penis; and Takahashi Oden (1848-1879), the last woman to be sentenced to death by beheading in Japan after being found guilty of slitting her lover's throat. Newspapers ran multiple stories about their crimes and often attributed their violent outbursts with an overdeveloped sexuality, and both went on to inspire a host of films, novels, and various other forms of media.<sup>25</sup> The cultural fervor that surrounded women like Abe and Oden created an entire phenomenon, so could it stand to reason that Asami is another iteration of the *dokufu*, rather than the Western *femme fatale*?

One of the most prominent aspects of the *dokufu* is her sexuality. Abe was physically and psychologically examined in an effort to uncover the pathology of her criminal activities. The result was *The Psychoanalytic Diagnosis of Sada Abe*, which contains a multitude of essays expressing what each medical professional thought to be the core reason for Abe's murderous behavior. The resounding conclusion was that "She has not graduated to accept phallogentric sexual norms. Sada is both unrepressed (operating at the level of instinct) and underdeveloped

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<sup>25</sup> Christine L. Marran, *Poison Woman: Figuring Female Transgression in Modern Japanese Culture*. Minneapolis:University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

(exhibiting a regression to earlier libinal stages)... primitive, hysterical, animalistic.”<sup>26</sup> Her apparent lack of self-control in matters of sexual desire is what caused her to kill her lover, and newspapers ravenously descended on this news in articles about her, capturing the public’s imagination. She was eventually released from prison, and multiple best-selling novels and critically acclaimed films were based on later interviews with her. That she worked as a prostitute and was upfront about her sado-masochistic tendencies created an interesting paradigm for post-war artists, exploring that “Through the identification with female deviancy, the male accomplice can deny any complicity with power and privilege. The female criminal is useful because she can be successfully deployed in romanticizing the rejection of cultural and ideological encumbrances.”<sup>27</sup> The poisonous *dokufu* thus instead becomes a cure, brazenly rejecting patriarchal sexual norms in favor of exploring fleshly desires and acting in uncontrollable and outlandish ways to validate both herself and her male partners.

Likewise, Takahashi’s body after her execution was autopsied to find a physical root of her criminality. Her genitals were of particular note, with the attending physicians remarking on perceived abnormalities, and it was ultimately decided that an excess of fatty tissue was what caused her deviancy. No explanation of how the fatty tissue led to such actions was given, proving that “discourses of science are manipulated to prove that the body of the poison woman, which is described as unfeminine, assertive, and even masculine, is ill and barbaric.”<sup>28</sup> This impulse to attribute Takahashi’s crimes as a result of a physical abnormality frees “normal” women from her actions. Because she was physically abnormal (large genitals, which are associated with male sexuality; fatty tissue stores despite strict prison rations, which implies a

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<sup>26</sup> Christine L. Marran, “Masochist’s Heroine, Abe Sada” in *Bad Girls of Japan*, edited by Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley, 81-95. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 87.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>28</sup> Marran, *Poison*, 11.

larger, more masculine physique), her behavior can be discounted. Rather than stratify her behavior as having social causes, the male populace can rest assured that their lovely wives could not commit such violence, as their feminine beauty precludes such masculine behavior.

This sexual element of the archetype again excludes Asami from it. Much of the runtime of the film is dedicated to showing the extent to which Asami has already conformed to Aoyama's expectations, and Japanese modern society at large since she dresses conservatively, yet puts an obvious amount of effort in her appearance, maintaining clean hair and fashionable makeup; she spends her meager expendable income on sensible CDs; and her cultured upbringing and interest in ballet shows her sophistication while avoiding the social baggage that comes with actively performing in show business. She is prim and proper, even when eviscerating Aoyama's leg tissue. Rather than directly cut off his penis like Abe, Asami instead focuses on the nonsexual parts of his body such as his legs. Her hair remains neat throughout the entire scene, and the white, flowing skirt she wears under her butcher's apron is a constant reminder of her traditional femininity. Although she takes pleasure in her sadistic torturing of Aoyama, it is not framed as a sexual subversion.

The ending of the film also counters the usual *dokufu* narrative. In the end, the woman kills the man (the woman may or may not live, but the emphasis is on the man's death). Asami's intent was to maim Aoyama, not necessarily murder him, and the film ends with her death at the hands of his son. Aoyama is not given the role of the self-saving hero, such as the final girl, but rather is perpetually the victim. He is not allowed to be "her masochistic lover who is framed as a rebel in his own right for giving up power. The postwar bad girl... is not bad simply because she is destructive, seductive, and even murderous. She is bad because she incites antisocial

behavior in man.”<sup>29</sup> As seen with the critical reception quoted earlier, many viewers find Aoyama anything but subversive, instead being a hapless everyman in an unfortunate situation.

If Asami is meant to be a woman straining against an agent of the patriarchy, her efforts are shallow. Her breaking point against Aoyama is the perception that he lied to her. The audience has been well aware of this fact since the beginning of the film as their entire relationship has been built on a false establishment. However, it is not the false audition that Asami takes umbrage with, but instead the revelation that Aoyama has a son, whom he totes on with fatherly affection. To Asami, this breaks the promise Aoyama had made the night before that he will love her and only her. If Asami is supposed to fight against Aoyama as a replacement for the general patriarchy, would it not be more succinct to have the original lie be the tipping point? He has used his position as a wealthy male to obfuscate his intentions, which would reasonably be considered more intrusive and violating than him loving his son. Likewise, Asami does not initially go after Shige. Her main focus remains Aoyama, and it is only when Shige tries to rescue his father that she begins to hunt him as well. This reveals that it is the transgression itself which fuels Asami’s actions. The damage has been done, and even if she removed Shige from Aoyama’s life by killing him, her trust has already been betrayed. By making the “lie” that breaks Asami’s heart the one that is seemingly trivial in the face of all of Aoyama’s other transgressions, the narrative draws focus away from the actual transgressions made by Aoyama against Asami, and instead draws attention to her extreme reaction. In this way, Asami fails to fit within either the Japanese or Western traditions of the sexualized, powerful male killer.

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<sup>29</sup> Marran, “Masochist,” 93.

## 2.4.2 The Gorgon, The Backstabber, and the Scorned Woman

The gorgon archetype is based upon the mythical beast of the same name. As a character, she is a “villain (who) would do anything to come to the aid of another woman, even if it meant killing an innocent man by mistake.”<sup>30</sup> The core emotion at the heart of the gorgon is violation. When heroes entered Medusa’s temple, they were turned to stone. Likewise, the gorgon archetype seeks to rectify a wrong and is aggressive about doing so. I lump the backstabber and the scorned woman archetypes into this section because both arise from the same basic source, a desire to “not be like the other girls” and succeed in a world built by men through their own power. Their inability to fully absolve themselves of their “weaker” gender is received as a violation, and thus they retaliate in a manner similar to the gorgon.

These female archetypes lash out against masculinity at large, with each man being another cog in the system that wronged them, so “she is now punishing all men that come close to her... (the) wrong generalization is that all men deserve to be punished, especially because she cannot punish (the original aggressor) as he is too powerful and out of her reach.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, the violence committed by the gorgon is that of emotional instability, a displacement of her original betrayal and anger to all men, who are now equally culpable in her eyes. Because she is so passionate about her cause, she lashes out in bursts of emotional outrage, rather than carefully planning out her revenge. She may be well aware that her violence is unproductive if not futile, but she does not care; she only wishes to exert her pain onto others. For an example of the gorgon archetype in modern Japanese fiction, see the goddess Izanami in Kirino Natsuo’s *The*

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<sup>30</sup> Schmidt, 38.

<sup>31</sup> Anthony Stevens, “The Archetypes” *The Handbook of Jungian Psychology* edited by Papadopoulos R., 2006, 113.

*Goddess Chronicle*, who dooms one thousand mortals to die each day in displaced vengeance against her husband Izanagi.

The gorgon archetype is presented as the most masculine of the archetypes in Schmidt's writings as her bravado and aggression often draws comparisons to men or her male peers. She is astutely aware of her gender, and wishes to overcome it, "that if the women would just toughen up... the issue of male-on-female violence would evaporate... If a woman fails to get tough, she is... asking for it."<sup>32</sup> She refuses to become a victim again, and thus becomes proactive in her defense, usually to a degree which the film takes umbrage with. She takes her defense too far, instead becoming offensive, and thus masculine coded.

The act of being violated in of itself is a feminine one in film language. Part of the dream sequence revealing Asami's past is predicated on the idea of Asami as a victim. She has suffered under the hand of her stepfather as a child, and the framework presenting this narrative is a familiar one. As explained by Clover, the position of victim is coded as inherently feminine because women are penetrable, physically smaller and weaker and thus more vulnerable to abuse.<sup>33</sup> This is highlighted by the cinematography of the scenes in which Asami is victimized by her stepfather. She is shot from a high angle, creating the sense that she is small and weak in the face of her aggressor.

In a mirroring of these scenes, when she is torturing Aoyama, the camera is positioned in an extreme high angle, almost as if hanging from the ceiling. It frames both Aoyama and Asami as lower than the audience, smaller and pitiable. This is paired with Aoyama's point of view shots, which frame Asami as the aggressor, standing menacingly over him. The audience has

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<sup>32</sup> Clover, 143.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 61.

gained sympathy for Asami due to her backstory being revealed, but the viewer's sympathy can not wholly reframe her as innocent. She is still very much an active aggressor in this scene, which the cinematography does not try to obfuscate.

However, Asami's revenge against Aoyama is entirely subjective. She does not express any desire to take revenge against the patriarchy at large. The film establishes her motivation as subjective rather than objective. This text is predicated on Aoyama's lies, the false pretense that brings Aoyama and Asami together in the first place. As expanded upon in an earlier section, Aoyama's lies are only possible through his higher social position, and so it would be easy to explain Asami's aggression as a rebuttal against the patriarchal system which lied to and took advantage of her. Asami also pointedly punishes Aoyama explicitly for lying to her, but it is not the false audition with which she takes umbrage. Instead, she believes Aoyama lied to her when he reveals that he has a good relationship with his son. In her interior logic, this violates the promise Aoyama had made to Asami to love her and no one else.

While most people would not conflate the love a man has for his son with violating a romantic agreement with a partner, Asami is not most people, and thus retaliates against Aoyama for "lying" to her. This subversion is a strange one. The pacing and plot of the narrative would not need much change to accommodate her instead retaliating for the more obvious lie of the false auditions, but instead, both the film and the book choose to place Asami's snapping point at Aoyama's smaller, less substantial "lie." Asami herself also lies throughout the story. Her dead relatives she has murdered are of course a lie by omission, and her resume is full of small, white lies that Aoyama finds no harm in. Why, then, would the narrative place emphasis *away* from the structurally more significant lie of Aoyama's fallacious auditions, especially if the narrative is to serve as a critique of patriarchal power structures as so many critics claim?

Asami was undeniably victimized by the patriarchy and the men in her life since childhood, but her violence does not serve an objective purpose. She is by no means trying to dismantle the patriarchy by mutilating Aoyama. She does not cut off his legs to prevent him from breaking another girl's heart, but purely for the selfish desire for Aoyama not to leave her. Asami's feminine looks and mannerisms while she slices off chunks of Aoyama's flesh highlight the disconnect between the audience's expectations of physical violence to be masculine coded, and that these actions are being done by a woman who retains her femininity throughout. Even her method of choice for torture seems feminine when compared to cleavers and chainsaws, as "knives and needles, like teeth, beaks, fangs, and claws, are personal extensions of the body that bring attacker and attacked into primitive, animalistic embrace."<sup>34</sup> The maiming of Aoyama is framed as more intimate than the previous sex scene, the warm colors and extreme close-ups creating a more intimate atmosphere than the static blues of the sex scene. The actual consummation of their relationship, then, is Asami torturing Aoyama rather than them engaging in intercourse, as only when Asami is straddled on top of him puncturing his tongue with a needle that both he and the audience get to truly understand her, even if only to a certain degree.

Thus, Asami's torture of Aoyama is not a revulsion against the system that enabled him, nor is it an attempt by Asami to subvert her gender and exist within a masculine world as an equal, proactive non-victim. Likewise, her calculated and methodical methods do not fit with the vindictive acts of passion typical to the gorgon archetype.

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<sup>34</sup> Clover, 32.

### 2.4.3 The Betrayer and the Destroyer

The point at which Asami turns on Aoyama, becoming an aggressor rather than a passive object, is when he reveals that he has a son whom he loves. Asami takes this as a personal slight, as she had asked him to “love only (her.)” Where she was the pinnacle of Japanese beauty standards, she has now become a violent and sadistic stalker. Schmidt describes the betrayer as a woman who hides her true nature under a kind veneer and who fears the reveal of her perceived inadequacies as a basis for rejection.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, the destroyer has based her life around a binary morality system, who feels she cannot be wholly understood by anyone outside of herself, and thus does not try to explain her extreme actions done in the name of her perceived greater good.<sup>36</sup>

Although Asami seems to rather snugly fit the bill for either of these archetypes, I argue neither leave room for the character to commit extreme physical acts of violence. Likewise, several other traits leave Asami outside of these categorizations.

The first is that the betrayer is a demure figure, the ideal angel of the house. When the audience first meets Asami, this seems to hold true as “she presents herself as nothing less than the Japanese ideal of femininity... a good romantic partner because of her willingness to sacrifice her own needs and defer to the wishes of others.”<sup>37</sup> Aoyama certainly believes her to be so, and any evidence to the contrary is dismissed out of hand. When her contact at a music production company is unable to be reached, she apologizes meekly while playing with her hair, stating that she had never actually met the man, and Aoyama is more than happy to believe her.

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<sup>35</sup> Schmidt, 74.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>37</sup> Hemmann, 114-115.

Likewise, when Aoyama's producer friend Yoshikawa insists that he be careful, Aoyama dismisses his concern. This is in stark contrast to the shots of Asami hunched over in her squalid apartment. Her interior world does indeed seem to be a reasonable basis for rejecting her, and so she must work to keep this part of herself hidden.

However, the main motivator for the betrayer is feeling trapped or overwhelmed with her people-pleasing. Oftentimes, her first and only victim is her husband, whom she feels has trespassed against her boundaries. Her name comes from the surprise twist that the kind church-going lady next door is not the perfect suburbanite she has presented herself to be, betraying the expectations of her community and the audience. The film subverts this trope by readily showing that there is something deeply wrong with Asami. Her unnatural stillness while waiting for Aoyama's call is unnerving, and the snowballing amount of lies she has told him puts the audience on edge. Aoyama is blind to these red flags in his enamored state, but the audience is all too well aware of the dramatic irony to see through Aoyama's rose-colored glasses for long. Similarly, when she is hacking Aoyama's legs into bite-size pieces, she maintains her girlish demeanor and style of speech, presenting the idea that the Asami Aoyama had gotten to know is indeed a core and true part of her personality, not a facade simply put in place to coax him. "Moreover, Asami's quality of innocent adolescence surfaces in the attitude of blithe playfulness expressed by her grinning face as she tortures Aoyama."<sup>38</sup> Although an unsavvy viewer, and certainly to that same point, Aoyama, feels betrayed by Asami's torture, her girlish and graceful nature was not a performance, and the film readily tells its audience that her cuter qualities coincide with her more demonic ones. Likewise, she does not use the delicate touch of poison or a handbag revolver to kill, instead reveling in the act with a child-like joy, explaining to Aoyama

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<sup>38</sup> Hemmann, 117.

just what tortures she will inflict on him with an upbeat cadence someone else might use to describe their morning shopping trip.

The destroyer archetype falls under the same category as the classic “knight-templar” character who has disavowed all things in life that do not further their goal. The destroyer’s goals are often progressive in nature, and the growing pains of bringing in a new order are expected and necessary.<sup>39</sup> This coincides with the gorgon’s desire to correct the wrongs which have been done to her by an unfeeling system. However, where the gorgon usually recognizes the perversion in her desire for justice extended to the undeserving, the destroyer is self-assured in her righteousness, and cannot spare the time to justify herself to a world that will never understand her.

Unlike the destroyer, Asami desperately wishes to be understood. Her methodology is unorthodox and extreme, but a main motivation for her character is to express her love to Aoyama, and be loved in return, an act which leaves her vulnerable. It is at her most vulnerable, after she and Aoyama have sex, that she feels her trust has been betrayed. The existence of Aoyama’s son shakes her trust in Aoyama as she perceives his son divides his affection. When she is torturing Aoyama for this transgression, she carefully explains her methods to him, such as how the paralytic drugs work, what she will do to him next, and why she is going to such extremes: “I truly have no one else, but you’ve got others. Now I don’t want to be one of them.” Her desire to be understood by Aoyama and her revenge against him stand in direct contrast to the guarded and unemotional destroyer. It is also worth mentioning that she does not wish to completely destroy Aoyama, only mutilate him into an object which cannot leave her.

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<sup>39</sup> Schmidt, 82.

#### 2.4.4 The Female Action Hero and the Female Mutilator

Outside of the roles of villains, there is another violent archetype that female characters can occupy. The female action hero is a violent female protagonist. Becoming more popular in mainstream media as a direct response of feminist criticism, the “girl boss” fights against her own oppression through violent means, usually in the form of a direct, physical confrontation with a powerful male figure who stands in synecdoche for the patriarchy responsible for oppressing the female action hero. In this depiction, many critics have found a sort of “post-feminism.” Where feminist film analysis focused on the inherent oppression found in a male-dominated art form’s portrayal of femininity and seeing film as a branch of patriarchal systems implicated in the perpetuation of women’s oppression, post-feminism instead focuses on gender as performance, and that gender representation in film can be a complex and fluid practice with ever-changing function and implications.<sup>40</sup> There has been ongoing debate about whether or not the female action hero can truly escape from the male gaze, in that social systems still operate under patriarchal structures and thus will always be influenced by them to one degree or another, and whether the female subject can be re-contextualized outside of the male gaze.

It should be noted that the final girl and the female action hero are two different archetypes. The final girl is much more common in horror media, and while she often gets vengeful justice by slaying the antagonist which has been hunting her, the violence she commits is entirely in self-defense. She is being actively chased, brutalized, or assaulted, and her violence is *reactive*. Were it not for the presence of the antagonist, the final girl would almost certainly have never committed a violent act against another person. She is able to wash her hands of the

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<sup>40</sup> See Yvonne Tasker’s *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*.

encounter because her violence is inherently retaliatory, and so she herself is not deemed as violent per se. Extreme circumstances lead to extreme conclusions, after all. However, the female action hero is *proactive*. There is usually an injustice being done, but the female action hero has taken active measures to stop it. Many feminist film theorists of the 1990's and early 2000's wrote on the empowerment of the female action hero. No longer were women relegated to love interests and damsels in distress. Now they too could punch a villain's teeth out. Laura Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* argues that cinematic language favors only the active male/passive female dichotomy. If a man is a victim, it is because he is too feminine, and if a woman takes charge, she is portraying masculinity. As mentioned above, feminine males are often driven to self-victimization a la Norman Bates. Because they lack the socially acceptable male traits expected of them, they become violent killers. But what of the masculine female?

The general positive response of the female action hero hinges on the empowerment aspect of these characters. They are proactive, violent, and often protagonists of their own stories. They are everything the *femme fatale* is not; where the *femme fatale* asks others to kill for her, the female action hero gets her own hands dirty. The *femme fatale* carries sinister intent and works for her own benefit; the female action hero saves the day and her friends. However, where this binary proves tricky is that the female action hero, in the above framework, is also a more masculine character under the male gaze. Her action appears in response to traditional female passivity in film. To applaud the female action hero, is one not suggesting that the best way for a woman to present herself is as more masculine than her peers? Stalwart action heroes like Ripley from the *Aliens* franchise, although physically female, are manufactured with masculine or gender-neutral traits, such as a masculine name, loose-fitting clothes and gender-neutral haircuts. If a female action hero succeeds, it is because of her masculine traits, not her feminine ones. This

is the danger in operating under the female/male gender binary in character analysis. In this patriarchal structure, it is all too easy to accidentally assign positivity to traditionally masculine roles and traits. Although the female action hero and the *femme fatale* are both violent, because the female action hero is more masculine, her violence is portrayed as morally better than her feminine male counterpart, creating a character who “is feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way, a way unapproved for adult males... but not so feminine as to disturb the structures of male competence.”<sup>41</sup>

The female action hero is then almost always the protagonist, despite whatever level of violence she is shown committing, and this violence is always justified within the narrative as necessary to prevent further harm. This flattens the morality surrounding discussion of violent female characters. If she is the protagonist, if the narrative frames her violence as justifiable, then she is an empowered female figure who has reclaimed the masculine narrative in service to overthrowing the patriarchy. But what of the violent female antagonist? As discussed in the *femme fatale* section, there is a general discomfort around women acting evil. Their methodologies are more complicated and less direct than their male counterparts, and rarely is a woman swinging an ax or plunging a knife into a body portrayed on screen. Instead, her cloak and dagger methods allow her to remain attractive under the male gaze. Asami’s brutalization of Aoyama does not allow for this removal of her agency.

The writhing movements of a body in pain and the screams of open mouths frozen in fear are hard coded as belonging to feminine figures in the language of cinema, so the sex of the character rarely matters in the victim position. If they are being brutalized, narratively they are

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<sup>41</sup> Clover, 51.

occupying the role of a female. In many horror films, there are just as many male victims as there are females, but the narrative role these men occupy is the feminine-coded victim. However, just as the femininity of the slasher antagonist is overcompensated by their masculine brutality, the femininity of the male victim is often used to highlight his otherwise masculine traits. The endless parade of fathers, boyfriends, and county police officers who fail to stop the killer in pursuit of his final girl portray that even the most machismo of men are still penetrable. These feminized men, including oftentimes the killer himself, fall to the power of the masculine woman. Here, the inversion of expected gender performance is a strength, not a weakness. The gender-neutral last girl, with her disdain for sex and her bookish sweater hiding her physique, is able to survive because her masculine qualities overpower the feminine weakness of the men around her. She is able to rise *above* her gender where the men are dragged down by their feminine weakness. The man committing violence is acting out against his perceived feminine weakness, and so he is inevitably doomed to fall to the position of the feminine victim.

It would stand to reason that the opposite would also hold true, that women committing violence would then occupy a masculine role in the narrative. This is certainly the case in a feminist reading of the female action hero. She is performing the role of the masculine protagonist using violence as a means of obtaining justice or defending the innocent. She is, as Clover puts it, the point of interest for male viewers who wish to explore vulnerability at a distance, and the point of interest for female viewers as a masculine savior. In both audiences, she is to be emphasized with.<sup>42</sup> However, women who commit physical violence in the antagonistic sense are few and far between in horror films. As noted earlier, female horror antagonists rarely use physical violence and instead are more removed from the harm they inflict

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<sup>42</sup> Clover, 54-55.

when compared to their male counterparts. Asami stands as the exception to this generalization. Her femininity is never questioned by the narrative; when she is in the victim position of the narrative, as discussed above, the camera expectedly gives emphasis to her femininity.

However, it also does not de-emphasize her femininity when the roles are reversed. Thus, we have a physically violent female character who is not the protagonist, yet is framed as sympathetic to audiences, at least to some extent. This makes categorizing Asami into the aforementioned archetypes of violent on-screen women difficult. She was surely victimized by her step-father, and while her revenge against him could be justified, her subsequent violence is anything but justifiable; she is not a Western female villain archetype, for her physical violence is direct and the film is careful not to frame her sexuality as a weapon; she is not a female action hero, for she is not the protagonist, and while her violence is reactive, it is not proportional. Asami consequently finds herself in the rare role of a physically menacing female villain. These characters are few and far between, and Asami's direct and confrontational nature makes her stand out among the likes of Sadako and Kayako, who are archetypal Japanese female villains. However, as discussed in the introduction, these dead wet girls are indirect killers who have no physical agency in the murder of their victims.

#### **2.4.5. Dead Wet Girls, *Yamanba*, and *Onryō***

Having covered Western conventions on female antagonists and violent female protagonists, I turn now to Japanese archetypes which have no Western equivalent. As mentioned in the introduction, Japanese literature and theater has a rich history of female villainy. They often take the form of vengeful ghosts or mountain witches, descending upon the male cast with a powerful presence rarely seen in comparable Western stories. Whether she is

successful or not varies, but that she is threatening at all to her male victims is a large departure from the previously described archetypes. In Western horror films, “the audience often experiences their view of the monster via the gaze of a female victim, for patriarchal society permits the female horror movie victim to enact responses to the monstrous deemed inappropriate for the traditional male hero.”<sup>43</sup> This boundary is more porous in the Japanese film tradition, which instead favors the female body as an abject site of horror, rather than the recipient of it.

*Onryō* (lit. “vengeful spirit”) have long been a well-established trope in *kabuki* and *noh* performances, with many of the most popular plays revolving around her presence. *Aoi no Ue*, *Dōjōji*, *Yotsuya Kaidan* and *Izutsu* all feature a female villain predominantly. Her spirit wanders the mortal plane to right a wrong, usually an unfaithful husband, her lost youthful beauty, or her unfortunate death. Her favored method of revenge is psychological torment, driving her target to madness and, if she is not appeased or exorcised, eventually his suicide. Her appearance has become standardized to a white burial robe, long matted hair that covers her face, and a pallid complexion. As she continues to enjoy popularity in the traditional theater forms of Japan, she has also gained a successor in Japanese horror films as the dead wet girl.

The term has been popular in “J-Horror” (Japanese horror, an abbreviation coined in the early 2000’s) circles since the genre’s inception but has recently been academically studied as an archetype by scholars such as Raechel Dumas and Jennifer Yoo. The most prime examples are Sadako of the *Ring* franchise and Kayako of the *Ju-On/Grudge* franchise. Both are multimedia, highly successful franchises which rely heavily on their female antagonists. Their appearance is

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Crandol, *Nightmares from the Past: Kaiki Eiga and the Dawn of Japanese Horror Cinema*. 2016. U of Minnesota, PhD dissertation, 65.

based heavily on traditional *onryō*, sharing the long unkempt hair and white clothing. They have also inherited the method of violence as they very rarely lay a hand on their victims. Instead, they kill them through intense psychological torture and inciting suicide or a heart attack. Where they differ from their ghostly predecessors is how much the narrative blames their fate on their own actions; modern dead wet girls are “characterized wholly as a victim who resorts to aggression in reaction to her wrongful torment rather than by willful choice, thus justifying her acts of supernatural violence.”<sup>44</sup> The results may be extreme and the violence unfounded, but her desire for revenge is at least flimsily justified by the narrative.

This is true for Asami; although her reaction is entirely overblown, the audience can still sympathize with being lied to, as Aoyama undeniably lied to Asami. She also shares her long dark hair with Sadako and Kayako, as well as her propensity for wearing white. However, that is where the similarities end. Sadako and Kayako do not physically harm their victims; their violence is not subjective, only implied (save for one particular boxing match between the two of them in the 2016 film *Sadako vs Kayako*, which as a whole does not bear thinking about). The horror that stems from their presence is from the abject feminine body. What is supposed to be inviting, penetrable, warm, and nourishing is instead, cold, wet, dead, and contorted. Thus, the dead wet girls become a projection of social anxiety, of objective violence, rather than of immediate subjective violence.

Asami’s method of violence is shown in intimate detail as being subjectively physical. Although many claim that Asami is another example of male fears of objective retaliation projected onto a female form, she differs from the previous examples in that her violence is

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<sup>44</sup> Yoo, 203.

horrific whether it stands for a social issue or not. Sadako and Kayako rely on objective fears. Sadako comes out of a television and her killing spree is spread via watching a video tape. She is the manifestation of the fear of rapidly spreading technology and its impact on modern living. Likewise, *Ju-On* was filmed and produced several months after the Aum Shinrikyo sarin attack in Tokyo's subways. Thus, it is a commentary on the fear of just being at the wrong place at the wrong time, becoming a byproduct of a mindless act of impersonal violence.

Asami can stand for a multitude of systemic ills, such as the growing economic inequality in postwar Japan, male guilt over their treatment of women, a general fear of intimacy, etc. However, her subjective brutality sets her apart. Sadako murders her victims through psychically induced heart attacks, which early in the narrative are hand-waved away by authorities because heart attacks are (usually) a natural cause of death. In the film versions of *Ring*, the victim's faces are often unnaturally distorted and paralyzed in grotesque fear, but the methodology of their murder remains distant. Likewise, Kayako mutilates her victims; we see several shots of bloody corpses and one victim briefly ambles about without a jaw. However, we never see her commit the acts that leave her victims in this state. Although it is heavily implied to have happened just off-screen, the audience is not privy to seeing how Kayako commits these acts of violence. The dead wet girls' involvement in her victims' deaths removes them from the active agency required of committing physical subjective violence on screen.

Whether or not she is a vessel for systemic fears, Asami's physical violence is terrifying because Aoyama's torture is unable to be removed from the subjective nature of it as it is not abstracted. An audience member can go home and rest assured that it is physically impossible for a dead wet girl to climb out of their television, no matter how spooked they are. The same is not true of Asami. Any woman is capable of drugging a man and cutting off his legs. The threat is

very real, if uncommon. What makes this physical subjective violence even more disturbing is that it is done by an attractive young woman.

The last archetype I will examine here is that of the *yamamba*, or “the mountain crone,” one of the few female archetypes allowed to commit subjective violence. She is an elderly woman living on the fringes of society, high in the mountains, who often has cannibalistic tendencies. Unlike the *femme fatale*, the *yamamba* is not sexually attractive to her male victims; indeed, because of men’s assumptions that older women are not sexually appealing to *them*, that likewise the women themselves lack any hunger, another example of male projection onto female bodies. However, the *yamamba* often proves to be insatiable, keeping the piles of bones of her victims in the back room of her small mountain hut. Since the very creation myth of Japan itself, womanhood was intrinsically linked to carrying children and giving birth. Because the *yamamba* is elderly and past socially acceptable child-rearing age, her femininity itself is disregarded, and so her behaviors expand past social norms for women as “the *yamamba* represents all that lies outside the social norm... She is a woman without a family, a woman who does not conform... Her freedom figured as terror.”<sup>45</sup> Conversely, *yamamba* can also represent female excess in the opposite direction, being able to birth thousands of children. In whatever way she presents herself, her position outside of social male control presents her as a threat to the establishment.

The socially acceptable woman is docile, young, fertile, simultaneously a good wife and wise mother, sexually available yet blind to her own sexuality. This is the reason Aoyama seeks only new talent in his auditions; a woman who is too aware of her own beauty and talents is

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<sup>45</sup> Copeland, 23.

much less easy to model and shape into a subservient housewife. A woman must be beautiful, but unaware of her beauty. This strangling dichotomy breaks as soon as the first condition is not met. A woman who is not considered beautiful no longer needs to conform to the baggage of her beauty. Because the *yamamba* is not concerned with conforming to this mold, she becomes the site of womanhood for womanhood's sake, without the interference of male expectations. "The female persona, the archetype of female nature, thus becomes a repository for the containment of the male viewer's own self-loathing and fears."<sup>46</sup> Her presence on the outskirts of society means she is free to act on her desires, which may or may not include the consumption of male flesh.

Asami, however, is young and beautiful. Her charms captivate Aoyama, and their meeting is predicated (unbeknownst to the female aspiring talent) on Aoyama finding a sexual partner, making Asami explicitly sexually available to him. Her small Tokyo apartment does resemble a *yamamba* hut in that it is cramped and filled with unattached body parts, and the shots of her sitting alone, hunched over the telephone, are reminiscent of descriptions of *yamamba* toiling over a boiling pot or loom. Asami, unlike the *yamamba*, does however try to partake in social constructs, at least somewhat. Where the *yamamba* is excluded from social norms due to her liberation from male expectation, Asami still outwardly conforms to them. She lies to Aoyama about her hobbies, and she carefully maintains her appearance and mannerisms to be attractive yet humble. She continues to perform socially acceptable femininity, even when pricking his face with needles.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 24.

## Chapter 3: Conclusion

When a female is presented as subjectively violent in cinema, there is a rush to give her an objective justification. She is fighting against the patriarchy which suppresses her, she is the symbol of oppressive motherly love, she is a culmination of men's fear of retaliation, and so on. This justification is entirely gendered. When Freddy Krueger stabs people in their sleep, we understand that he is synecdoche for a social fear, be it real world instances of serial killers or a more abstract anxiety of repressed ego. The film surrounding him is communicating to the audience a more visceral version of these social fears. However, there is still a willingness to shrug and say of Freddy himself that he is just sick in the head, and there is no need to justify his violence on an interpersonal level. Where a masculine entity can commit horrific acts of subjective violence, a female character must be given a degree of removal from her crimes. She was *forced* into the position of aggressor by an unjust society or by the actions of powerful men abusing her in her childhood. Society remains uncomfortable with the idea that women, too, are capable of horrifying acts of physical violence.

Asami is by no means an exception to this rule. She was brutalized by her stepfather, and her violence against men is certainly a reaction to that trauma. However, the narrative does not try to sanitize Asami's violence against men, and her subjective physical violence leaves her in a position that is rarely occupied by female characters. Although literature and film are littered with female antagonists, Asami stands outside of currently accepted violent female archetypes. She is not a protagonist, and she is not one of the archetypes usually bestowed upon female antagonists. While it then would be tempting to place her in a male category, her femininity is constantly highlighted by the cinematography and narrative, and thus is integral to her character.

Simply casting her as a displacement of male fears and fantasies removes the potential power that can be granted to a female villain who is simply *bad*, and if Asami's singularity is anything to go off of, films and audiences are still very much afraid of simply bad girls. There is a compulsion to sanitize or justify violence committed by women, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because we lack the language to identify these characters, they mistakenly fall into archetypes that flatten or poorly fit their character.

The term "subjectively violent female antagonist" does not roll off the tongue like "dead wet girl" or "female mutilator," and so I feel compelled to give this term a more manageable, catchy name as Yoo and Stopenski have done. However, I admit that my penchant is for analysis, not nomenclature, and so it is with hesitancy that I approach this matter, yet I fear that if this term is to receive any decent amount of usage, I must give it a proper name. I therefore submit the title of "lady killers," reclaiming a phrase historically couched in misogyny and metaphorical body counts rather than physical ones. My hope is that, in naming this archetype, it becomes more common and recognizable within discourse. For too long women in film have been sanitized and precluded from the most visceral positions in films, even though we are just as capable of violence as anyone else. To deny this is to deny women agency, depth, and power. Not all female empowerment should be positive. There is power, too, in being unabashedly bad.

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