Cabria Brown
Professor Alejandra Abad
DIG 4026
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Representation of Asian Women in Japanese Media

The representation of women in Japanese media has undergone drastic changes over the recent years, particularly in animation and video games. In Maureen Furniss's "A New History of Animation" she discusses the theme of environmentalism, and the usage of the predominately nuanced portrayal of female protagonists in the works of Hayao Miyazaki, contrastingly different from the often-sexualized depiction of women in Japanese animation, especially within video games. As an avid lover of Studio Ghibli's films, I can attest to Miyazaki's ability to craft heroines that are authentic, resilient, and have a sense of duty and agency in their own choices. This representation of women in animation has progressively inspired many women internationally and gives a human feel to these characters. Conversely, video games frequently cater to the male gaze, presenting female characters as damsels in distress who need to be saved by a man or hypersexualized objects. This dichotomy reflects broader cultural and gender norms that have influenced the media. Thus, by examining the differing portrayals of women in Miyazaki's films and Japanese video games, we can understand how media can challenge the narrative and perpetuate stereotypes, influencing societal perceptions and expectations of gender. This analysis reveals the potential of animation and video games to shape cultural narratives about women, highlighting the importance of diversity in both forms of media.

The economic boom of the 1980s and early 1990s was a prime time for Japan as the rebranding from World War II and creating alliances with the West has helped with their market drastically. Furthermore, the rise of feminist movements challenged the subservient roles traditionally assigned to women and there was a shift of women in the workforce. Miyazaki's appreciation for women shined through as the relationship with his mother reflected in his films by presenting heroines who were complex, authentic, and integral to the narrative. The periods in which Miyazaki movies and Japanese video games emerged significantly influenced their portrayal of women. Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997) was created during a period when there was increasing awareness of women's equality and critiquing of traditional gender roles in Japan. For example, Lady Eboshi in Princess Mononoke is a strong leader who deifies traditional female roles by leading an industrial town, Iron Town, and challenges the gods of the forest by causing war to reclaim their land for resources.

In contrast, the portrayal of women in Japanese video games has often lagged the progressive trends and still is a current problem today. During the 1980s and 1990s, video games began to become one of the most popular mediums since they "had the power... to immerse players deeply in an experience" (Furniss, 268). Historically, the video industry has been predominantly targeted towards young men, women were never considered and were an afterthought. Furniss proves further as she claims," To capture the largest portion of that market, therefore, they create games that they believe favor a male point of view." (Furniss, 293). This was reflected in the creation of female characters who were often sexualized or depicted as a damsel in distress being a love interest for the male protagonist. The prejudice and stigmatism continued perpetuating as American media began to reflect these stereotypes in Hollywood and

after World War II as Western imperialism encouraged ethnocentrism dehumanizing Asians completely. Influencing the West, as the beauty standards set these "unrealistic expectations of attractiveness prized Eurocentric features and devalued Asian features'' (Park, 21) Thus, are exoticized and sexualized which reduces them to disposable objects of desire. This fetishization often manifests through hypersexualized depictions that reinforce the stereotype of submissive, unrealistic body standards, docile and eager to please. An example of this fetishization that Furniss and I agreed deeply on is the distribution of the *Tomb Raider* video game that was released in 1996, this game was extremely successful and was one of the most well-known female representations that were unfortunately as Furniss mentions, "a big part of the character's popularity could be attributed to her unrealistic, sexualized proportions" (Furniss, 294).

The animation techniques and styles contribute significantly to the depth and complexity of his female characters. Studio Ghibli, co-founded by Miyazaki, is renowned for its hand-drawn animation style, allowing detailed expressive character designs often "his detailed background art, revealing the beauty and complexity of nature." (Furniss, 395). This meticulous attention to detail allows his films to feel alive thus enabling the creation of characters who convey a wide range of emotion, and a strong sense of purpose that you as the audience immerse yourself into. For instance, Chihiro in one of Miyazaki's classics *Spirited Away* (2001) reflects this as she follows a young girl terrified of change and newness till, she is *spirited away* to another world. Chihiro though seems scared and filled with anxiety, she understands what a stake is to return home and save her parents refusing to conform to the excessive human consumption around her. Miyazaki allowed Chihiro to be a well-rounded character who displays vulnerability and compassion despite all odds against her.

On the other hand, Japanese video games often use more stylized and exaggerated character designs either by allowing the player to customize their avatar or by having a default character for the player to escape from reality. However, the use of 3D modeling and graphics in games that showcase female characters like Ming Xiao from "*Vampire: Masquerade Bloodlines*" (2004) and Kasumi from "*Dead or Alive" (1996)* were iconic examples of Asian women in video games, both women had the skill and the ability to defeat their opponent with special combat. However, both women were dressed in traditional Asian clothing, yet with a revealing twist showing cleavage and due to the beauty standards resembled Caucasian women more than Japanese women. The tropes these women embodied were either ''dangerously seductive manipulators or obediently delicate sweethearts with no in-between." (Capistrano, line 17-20). Hence, why this focus on visual appeal and physical attributes can reduce these female characters to objectification, reinforcing more harmful narratives as most of these female characters lack substance and are usually eye candy for the predominantly male audience.

Miyazaki's films often explore themes of environmentalism, pacifism, Japanese nationalism, and interconnectedness of all living things with female characters predominantly playing the lead in these roles narratives. In my favorite film, Princess Mononoke, San fights to protect the only home she knows, the forest from industrial exploitation. Though she was orphaned by her adoptive mom, Moro raised her as her own and instilled the concept of how "man" can destroy and pollute. This narrative is symbolism for ecological preservation and harmony is essential to keep nature safe. Miyazaki's storytelling approach emphasizes the importance of female voices showcasing how the characters have inner harmony in a

disharmonious society as an example, addressing these complex societal and environmental issues.

Conversely, many Japanese video games action on action, adventure, and combat, with female characters relegated to a secondary role. The narrative structure of games like Final Fantasy and Street Fighter prioritized male protagonists and the female characters served as love interests or sidekicks. An example of this trope is Princess Peach from the *Super Mario Bros.* series, as Princess Peach has been consistently kidnapped by the villain, Bowser, and locked away in towers [for Mario to save her](). This narrative approach not only limits the representation of women and reinforces gendered expectations.

Contrasting portrayals of women in Miyazaki's films and Japanese video games have a significant influence on cultural perceptions of gender. Miyazaki's heroines challenge traditional stereotypes of women in animation by allowing them to be unobstructed by inner struggle, empowerment, and strength. This progressive representation can inspire viewers to critique and desire to redefine societal expectations of gender roles outside of animation as well as the next generation of animators to follow Miyazaki's example.

In contrast, the portrayal of women in many Japanese video games can reinforce harmful stereotypes such as "Asian women are viewed as expendable objects" (Park, 20). Park writes this with pain from her own experience as an Asian woman before she was even of a consenting age and was asked "Do Asians have tight pussy?" (Park,20). Asian features are only valuable if commodified or sexualized, thus highlighting how harmful stereotypes are engrained at a young

age." Since most children play video games till adulthood, this normalizes unjustified violence and abuse towards Asian women. This should not be the norm, presenting women as objects of desire or secondary characters contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequalities and marginalization of women. In recent years, video game studios have been striving to create empowered female characters like Miyazaki's work thus creating a shift of this narrative. For example, one of my favorite games: *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017) by Guerilla Games features a young hunter, Aloy who sets on a journey to uncover her past in a world overrun by robotic creatures in a post-apocalyptic land. The next generation of video game developers are changing societal attitudes towards gender a mist the gendered norms that do exist in amination.

In conclusion, the representation of women in Miyazaki's animation and Japanese video games offers valuable insights into the cultural and societal attitudes towards gender in Japan. The past represents and helps us model our future. By examining these differing portrayals can better understand the role of media in shaping cultural narratives about women within animation and the importance of the ever-evolving representation of women thus limiting any need to perform any gendered expectations placed on womanhood.

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