

Woman in Japanese Cinema: A Comparative Study on the Woman's Film of Naruse and Imamura

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In this essay, I will examine how woman's identity is represented in Japanese cinema by comparing Imamura Shohei's *The Insect Woman* with Naruse Mikio's *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* (*Ascends the Stairs*). I argue that the *The Insect Woman* offers a New Wave intervention into the woman's film of classical Japanese cinema. I will begin with an outline of the Japanese woman's film and proceed to the comparison of the two films in terms of form and content.

The woman's film was a mainstay of the Japanese film industry from the late 1920s to the 1960s (Russell 26). Although Hollywood melodrama of the 1930s and 1940s might have yielded considerable influence on Japanese cinema during the American occupation, the Japanese woman's film also responded to the social historical context and followed cinematic traditions specific to Japan. During the 1950s, the postwar democratic reform brought the issue of women's rights and social roles to public debate. Whereas women demanded recognition in the public sphere due to their widened access to the workforce, the discourse of motherhood and the family was quick to surface in opposition to women's labor movements (27). As a cinematic practice, the Japanese woman's film can be situated in the tradition of *gendai geki* (modern drama) as opposed to *jidai geki* (period drama), and *shoshimin eiga* (a genre in Japanese cinema which focuses on the family lives of the lower middle class or working class people). As a commercial product of the studio system, the woman's film featured and enhanced the images of major female actresses associated with specific film studios and targeted at female audience (28), who demonstrated increasing capacity as cultural consumer.

Naruse is recognized as a major director working in the tradition of the Japanese woman's film. Thematically, his films center on "social injustice, material hardship and emotional turbulence" (Russell 3) associated with quotidian female experience. Sharing with the western melodramas the emotional intensity,

his films nevertheless reject their “gestural, visual and musical excess” (Gledhill 30) and displace it with formal “passivity and restraint” (Russell 3).

Naruse’s *Ascends the Stairs* (1960) can be taken as an example of the classical Japanese woman’s film that deals with the working woman. The protagonist, Keiko, serves as a hostess (*mamasan*) at a bar in post-war Ginza, downtown Tokyo. Middle-aged and widowed, her charm still draws to her constant attention from various male customers, from whom she strives to keep her integrity. To support her needy family, she struggles for a better way out in an honest manner, either by marrying a worthy man or opening up her own bar, resisting the easier option which many others facing the similar condition prefer: being the mistress of a wealthy man. The climax consists of a series of overwhelming incidents that disillusion Keiko: death of a friend, a marriage scam, seduction and abandonment by the man she admires. The denouement puts her back in the original position, where she steps up the bar stairs every day to greet her customers with a heavy heart and a perfect smile.

Imamura Shohei’s *The Insect Woman* (1963), also explores the life of a lower class strong-willed woman who struggles to survive in the modernized urban Japan. Tome is born into a rural family in early 20th century Japan. Raped by her boss and neighbor and leaving a daughter behind with her family, she heads for the more industrialized region to earn a living. She has worked as factory worker, housemaid and prostitute before becoming a mercenary procuress by selling her own procuress out. She also has intimate relationships with different men besides her customer, including, arguably, her retarded father, her boss at the mill and the patron that supports her prostitution business. Tome’s downfall is signified by the betrayal of the girls, which sends her into prison, and by her unworthy patron, who turns to her daughter for sexual benefits. In the end, an aged Tome returns to her village on her patron’s request to get back her daughter, who has decided to make her own living on the farm with her young lover.

Despite produced at almost the same period with common thematic concerns, *The Insect Woman* radically differs from *Ascends the Stairs* in terms of form, the representation of woman and sexuality and the strategies of woman’s survival. In the following paragraphs, I will compare the formal and stylistic features of the two films and argue that the classicism of studio production as exemplified by *Ascends the Stairs* is

challenged by *The Insect Woman*. On the basis of formal comparison, I will then proceed to discuss the difference of the two films in the representation of woman, sexuality and strategies of survival.

The visual composition of Naruse's film is characterized by symmetry and balance, with medium shot as the predominant shot scale. In regular conversation scenes, characters are positioned in the center or symmetrically on the two sides of the frame with minimal on-screen movement. The cutting between the interlocutors draws little attention to itself, as the characters in the subsequent shot occupy almost the same or symmetrical visual areas with those of the preceding one. Naruse's resistance to radical on-screen movement and camera movement results in his reliance on quick paced editing. His editing style is "invisible" and "rhythmic", which attaches importance to the timing of scenes and the flow of the narrative (Russell 6).

The Insect Woman radically departs from the formal elegance and restraint of *Ascends the Stairs*. Above all, Imamura prioritizes *mise-en-scène* over editing and camera movement. He repeatedly uses deep space with shallow focus, which allows complex positioning of characters and choreography on different spatial planes. The richness of his *mise-en-scène* demands the audience's active participation in the meaning making process. For example, when Matsunami and Tome address the female workers with the labor union announcement, they are placed at the back of the factory and framed by the operating machines and workers at the front who are out of focus with only part of their bodies visible. The couple's spatial position implies the powerlessness of labor movement discourse against the booming industry and the disinterested individuals. Radical on-screen movements, sometimes rendering characters out of frame, add to the destabilizing effect of Imamura's film. This is well illustrated by the scene in which Chuji (Tome's retarded foster father) fights with the family members who send Tome to the landowner's son. The camera only catches glimpses of their passing, blurry images. Imamura's film is further characterized by ambivalence and uncertainty resulting from the conscious treatment of negative and off-screen space, which is unusual, if not absent, in Naruse's cinema. Both En (Tome's mother)'s and Tome's sex scenes on the farm are presented in off-screen spaces with only the peeping kids visible. Furthermore, Imamura's regular use of low-key lighting renders his characters underlit or even drowned in total darkness. It contrasts Naruse's cinema which predominantly features high-key lighting. In addition, Imamura also adopts a variety of shot scales and does

not avoid extreme camera angles. For instance, the crawling insect in the opening sequence is magnified in an extreme close-up, adding to its discomfiting effect. En's suffering from giving birth to Tome is captured in extreme high angle, which produces physical as well as psychological disorientation. Besides destabilizing visual elements, the narrative flow is disturbed by the insertion of year numbers that reveal the lapse of time and draw attention to the documentary quality of the film medium. Tome's sporadic voice-over, often accompanied by freeze-frame images, introduces further obstruction to the narrative flow. It can be compared with Keiko's voice-over in *Ascends the Stairs*, which is presented with subtlety and calmness that helps build up the internal drama and contributes to the overall atmospheric unfolding of the film.

Imamura's iconoclastic subversion of the established form and style of the studio-produced woman's film can be understood in relation to the emergence of the Japanese New Wave. David Desser points out that most of the important figures of this new generation of directors, including Imamura, began their film careers as assistant directors at Shochiku and consciously rebelled against their mentors (44). He quotes Imamura's comment on his mentor, Ozu Yasujiro, saying, "I wouldn't just say I wasn't influenced by Ozu. I would say I didn't want to be influenced by him" (44). Naruse shares with Ozu similar cinematic style and was regarded as "poor man's Ozu" (Sato 194). It is therefore reasonable to infer that, while making a film about women, Imamura was working in and against the shadow of Naruse's woman's film.

Moreover, Imamura's cinematic representation of woman is related to, while contrasting with, that of Naruse. Admittedly, both of the female protagonists are members of the labor force rather than domestic figures. Coming from a lower class background, they succeed in gaining financial independence in the city and provide for their families. They excel in women's circles and can be loosely identified as matriarch figures, i.e. Keiko as mama-san in Ginza bars, Tome as madam of the prostitution business. Despite all these commonalities, the representations of the two female figures reveal significant differences. Whereas Keiko is presented with unchanged gracefulness, composure, restraint and dignity, which comes close to idealization of womanhood, Tome is portrayed as uncouth, tough, unrestraint and even vulgar, demystifying potential idealization.

Throughout *Ascends the Stairs*, Keiko rarely departs from her signature appearance in quality kimono, *geta* with white *tabi* and with a "matronly" haircut. She is seldom captured doing manual labor. As

a veteran bar hostess, she exhibits refined manners and sophisticated interpersonal skills that testify to her mastery of social propriety. For instance, she never directly rejects customers' invitation to dinner and avoids collecting their debts in person. Except for occasional temper facing her friend and manager Komatsu and her families, she exhibits emotional restraint. The second half of the film witnesses Keiko's physical or mental breakdowns. But even in these scenes, she maintains some degree of self-control and is not portrayed in a degraded manner. For example, she confronts the scam revealed by Sekine's wife with composure. Her exquisite hairdo and clothes also remain largely intact even when she is drunk or forced into sex by Fujisaki. The denouement sees Keiko's restoration to grace and dignity. She returns Fujisaki's stock to his wife with gifts for his child and resumes her duty at the bar with her signature smile and greetings to customers.

In contrast, *The Insect Woman* depicts the female protagonist Tome as uncouth, unrefined and even vulgar. She engages in different kinds of manual labor and is often dressed in coarse clothes with disheveled hair and a dirty face. Even in *geta* with white *tabi*, the film chooses to show her clumsy misstep in the mud that breaks her *geta* on her laborious journey back home, which contrasts Keiko's graceful steps up the bar stairs. Moreover, Tome's manner and voice remain largely unpolished throughout the film. And her experiences and expressions are represented in extreme and excess, which is diametrically opposed to the restraint and control of Naruse's cinema. For instance, the camera observes her suffering when giving birth to Nobuko or having an ectopic pregnancy. Working for George and Midori, Tome's lust, expressed by eavesdropping, causes their daughter's death. Taking over the role of madam, she exploits her call girls out of unchecked avarice. Reaching the nadir of being a prisoner, Tome is caught in astoundingly unkempt appearance and wretched condition. Contrasting with Keiko's poetic and pensive voice-over, Tome's voice-over based on her diary is indulged in out-of-place self-pity and sentimentalism. For example, carefully counting and obviously treasuring the money she earns from prostitution, she laments, "For the sake of my child, I spur my weak body on to toil. I count my money through bitter tears." I side with Sato in considering these expressions of grief hackneyed, mundane and even laughable for the audience (Sato 83).

Imamura's radical reversal of Naruse's image of woman can be partly explained by his particular interest in the peasantry, contrasting Naruse's focus on the lower middle class. While *Ascends the Stairs* reveals Keiko's family home as a traditional Japanese house located in Tokyo suburbs with the brother being

an insurance salesman, *The Insect Woman* constantly returns to Tome's shabby rustic cottage accommodating the whole extended family, most of whom engage in agrarian work. For Imamura, peasant women are "more unpredictable, less rational, physically stronger and more tenacious". In them he locates "the greatest potential for independence of spirit and strength of character" (Mellen 301).

In addition to the different focus on social class, Naruse's and Imamura's woman images reveal their particular creative intention and approach. Naruse's woman's films are largely commercial products aimed at immediate consumption. Even the director himself insisted that the best films were those that made money and that his work was more or less disposable (Russell 7). Naruse's woman image corresponds to his intention to address female audiences and elicit their identification. Laura Mulvey's discussion on narcissistic visual pleasure sheds light on this issue. She argues that the cinema image parallels the function of the mirror image of a child, which is "conceived as the reflected body of the self", but whose "misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ego ideal" (840). Keiko, with her dignity and grace through hardships, fits in the role of the star identified by Mulvey. The star produces for the audience an ego ideal through the operation of likeness and difference, as seen in the glamorous impersonating the ordinary (840).

The Insect Woman does not offer an idealized image for audience identification, but rather a primitive and naturalistic account of women that distantiates and detaches the audience. Critics have viewed Imamura's approach to the Japanese woman as that of a cultural anthropologist studying the ethnography of his own people (Mellen 301) or of a scientist microscopically studying of insects (Sato 260). Such understanding corresponds to the film's original Japanese title translating as "Entomological Chronicle of Japan". Dennis Lim points out the film's documentary quality and the sense of Tome as a specimen under glass conveyed by the periodic use of freeze-frames. Viewed in this light, the extreme and excess of *The Insect Woman* does not mark a return to the western melodramatic strategy or the exteriorization of Naruse's withheld emotional intensity, but a conscious parody of the emotionalism of the traditional woman's film.

Despite their difference in representing the female protagonist, both films explore woman's position in the gender hierarchy, in which woman is vulnerable to male domination, manipulation and exploitation. Both Keiko and Tome work in lines of work that serve male customers, namely water trade and prostitution.

Their female body is a desired object of exchange value. Both of them are coerced or seduced into sexual intercourse with unworthy men, namely Keiko with Sekine and Fujisaki, Tome with Matsunami and Karasawa.

However, by problematizing the male gaze, both films refuse to present their women as merely sexual objects. While *Ascends the Stairs* resists and diverts the male gaze, *The Insect Woman* exposes voyeurism. In Naruse's film, the acts of sex are never explicitly presented. One typical allusion is when the woman remains in bed (almost perfectly dressed) and the man arranges his tie before the mirror, e.g. Komatsu with Junko, Fujisaki with Keiko. The motif of man arranging a necktie recurs when Keiko buys a tie for Sekine, which should be considered as carrying sexual connotation. When Keiko is forced into sex by Fujisaki, the camera shows her foot with white *tabi* and a glass moving on the ground, serving as a metaphor for the violation of female integrity. Moreover, Naruse seldom captures his characters in point-of-view shots. Even when a character is talking in the direction of the camera, his/her eyes slightly miss the audience's gaze. For example, when Keiko confronts Komatsu near the end of the film, she looks towards but never looks into the camera. I disagree with Russell that the reason for Naruse's avoiding matching eye lines is because direct eye contact is impolite in Japan (12). The characters do look at each other at times. It is the camera that refuses to identify with a looking subject, especially in a voyeuristic manner.

The Insect Woman, on the other hand, explicitly deals with erotic scenes and voyeurism. Examples include Chuji sucking Tome's pus and breasts; close-up of Matsunami feeling Tome breasts under her clothes during Hirohito's surrender speech; Tome taking baths with Karasawa and both of them are naked; extreme close-ups and freeze-frame of Nobuko and Karasawa's sex scene. Unlike the mainstream films which portray "a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy" (Mulvey 839), *The Insect Woman* self-reflexively exposes voyeurism. Both En's and Tome's sex scenes in the barn are observed by kids. When Chuji sucks Tome's pus, Rui watches. Tome eavesdrops (and the audience watches) the sex scene of George and Midori. In addition, the observed are themselves aware of being peeped at, which undercuts the illusion of voyeuristic separation of the audience. For instance, Tome tells her father that "Rui is watching" and Midori opens the door to expose Tome's eavesdropping.

Contemplating woman's predicament in the gendered society, the two films resort to different survival strategies, indicating their different understandings of womanhood. Whereas Naruse valorizes the repression of desires, Imamura sees a necessity in their unreserved outlet. Keiko has been withholding her affection for Fujisaki and the wish for a worthy husband, which creates a "blockage to expression" characteristic of the narrative mechanisms of melodrama (Gledhill 30). Her temporal breaking through the "reality principle", i.e. accepting Sekine's proposal and giving in to Fujisaki, results in bitter failure. Although the guilty and the innocent are identified and the film "sides with the 'good'," it "articulate opposing principles, with equal, if not greater, power" (33). Such principles are embodied by the irresponsible, privileged men in *Ascends the Stairs*. Thus, with the moral dilemma unresolved, female repression and sacrifice of private longings are essential strategies of survival. Potentially critiquing the patriarchal suppression of female desires, *Ascends the Stairs* nevertheless inspires sympathy and admiration for female restraint and endurance.

In contrast, Imamura's characters are much more straightforward in expressing desire and the pursuit of self-interest. Traditional social norms and ethical obligations are overridden by the pleasure principle and a social Darwinistic picture of natural selection. Although explicit portrayal of violence and sex is a global tendency of the 1960s due to the lifting of censorship and a competitive commercialism (Sato 229), Imamura's intention to capture the authentic Japanese women should also be taken into account. Referring to the Japanese women, he says, "they are strong, and they outlive men" and "self-sacrificing women like the heroines of Naruse's *Floating Clouds* and Mizoguchi's *Life of Oharu* don't really exist" (Desser 123). Imamura suggests that the energy for survival lies in the inexhaustibility of their natures (Mellen 301).

Given the different understanding of womanhood and survival strategies, Naruse's hopeful picture of female alliance is virtually nonexistent in *The Insect Woman*. In *Ascends the Stairs*, Keiko supports her rival, Yuri, and even helps her family repay debts after her death. When Keiko is sick, her boss brings her turtle soup and money. And Sekine's wife takes pains to reveal her husband's scam to every woman on his address book. In contrast, the relation between women in *The Insect Woman* is marked by mutual exploitation and betrayal. The old matriarchs are complicit in sending Tome to the landlord's son as mistress. The brothel madam openly refuses to help pay Tome's medical bill, contrasting the benevolence of Keiko's boss. Having

betrayed her madam, Tome turns to exploit her call girls, scalding and beating Hanako, who eventually betrays her. Consequently, the moral polarities characteristic of melodrama, i.e. guilt and innocence, victim and persecutor (Gledhill 32), which evoke and legitimize emotion, are thoroughly dismantled by Imamura.

Neither film attempts to provide an adequate answer to women's problem. They see the advance of their protagonists, witness their downfall and eventually place them in the seemingly original position, i.e. Keiko returns to the bar with the familiar welcoming smile and Tome embarks on a journey back home. Although both films' narrative structure comes close to a full circle that signifies the entrapment of women, *The Insect Woman* nevertheless offers a possible alternative. When the old Tome stumbles in her *geta* unsuited for the mountain, Nobuko operates a tractor in her long-wished and hard-earned farm with her beloved man, who is willing to take care of a baby which may not be his. Played by the same actress Yoshimura Jitsuko, Nobuko is reminiscent of Haruko of *Pigs and Battleships*, who outlives her lover, finds her way out of being American soldier's mistress and heads doggedly toward a new life in the urban labor force. Imamura may be more like Nobuko. Albeit working in the same field as the older generation, he/she recognizes the inevitability of the change of time and social conditions and avails him/herself of new strategies to struggle ahead. Considering Imamura's original understanding and representation of woman and sexuality in addition to his distinct form and style, it would be difficult to put *The Insect Woman* under the traditional category of the Japanese woman's film. Yet, the image of a strong woman with the vitality of an insect foregrounds Imamura's concern with the modern womanhood, signaling a possible New Wave attempt at redefining woman in the Japanese cinema.

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