

**THE FIGURE OF THE DEMONISED WOMAN: THE INFLUENCE OF NŌ THEATRE ON  
JAPANESE HORROR FILMS**

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**Abstract**

Nō is a national art form of Japan that has exerted a powerful influence over the cinema produced in the country from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Elements of Nō theatre can be discerned in films as diverse as Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), Nakagawa Nobuo's *The Ghost of Yotsuya* (1959), Kaneto Shindō's *Onibaba* (1964), and Kobayashi Masaki's *Kwaidan* (1965). Audiences new to Japanese horror cinema are rarely aware that the pervasive mood of eeriness and delirious frenzy they encounter on-screen is the result of the films' incorporation of the nuances of Nō theatre. By identifying the features of Nō in Kaneto Shindō's *Onibaba* (1964), this paper attempts to explore the figure of the demonised woman in Japanese cinema. The study proposes to show how Japanese horror cinema captures Nō theatre's marginalisation of women who do not conform to conventional patriarchal structures as endowed with monstrous qualities.

**Keywords:** *Nō theatre, mask, demonisation, J-horror*

The religious, supernatural, and oneiric qualities of Nō theatre have directly or indirectly inspired the making of almost every Japanese horror film. Elements of Nō theatre can be detected in films as varied as Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), Nakagawa Nobuo's *The Ghost of Yotsuya* (1959), Kaneto Shindō's *Onibaba* (1964), and Kobayashi Masaki's *Kwaidan* (1965). Richard J. Hand observes that "Traditional Japanese theatre provides an incomparable legacy upon which horror directors continue to draw" (27). Colette Balmain supports this view when she states that "Nō and other traditional Japanese theatre laid the foundation for Japanese horror films" (41).

More than any other film of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is Kaneto Shindō's *Onibaba* that has helped define the hallmarks of Nō-inspired J-horror films. *Onibaba*, which came out in 1964, is an erotic-horror classic that employs the conventions of Nō theatre to depict as well as to problematise the figure of the deranged woman conceptualised as 'demon'. *Onibaba* is different in tone and style from Japanese films of the preceding generation in the sense that it activates a new aesthetic centred on depicting intense psychological states through the lens of uncontrollable human urges. As Yomota Inuhiko argues in *What is Japanese Cinema? A History*, the 1960s was a period when "the numbers of people watching movies got smaller gradually, but steadily, and by 1963, it was already less than half that, dropping to more than 500 million" (68). The primary cause for this fall in viewership was the spread of television, especially the installation of colour TV sets in almost every Japanese household. The new generation of Japanese directors including Suzuki Seijun, Masumura Yasuzō, Imamura Shōhei, Nakahira Kō, Shinoda Masahiro Okamoto, Teshigahara Hiroshi, and Shindō himself had to fight against not only the influence of their predecessors like Ozu, but also the deleterious hold of television. It was while locked in this twin battle that Kaneto Shindō made his mark as an independent director.

Although Japanese horror cinema predates World War II, the 1950s and 1960s were a period in which there was a great proliferation of films which engaged with the demonic and the apocalyptic. The films of this period can be conveniently divided into two— "the *kaidan*, or ghost story, dominated  
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by the *onryou* (avenging spirit) motif, and the disaster narrative, perhaps best – and certainly most famously – exemplified by the *daikaiju eiga*, or giant monster film” (McRoy 7). *Kaidan* films, of which *Onibaba* is an example, “depicted the incursion of supernatural forces into the realm of the ordinary, largely for the purposes of exacting revenge” (McRoy 7). An essential point of difference between mainstream Hollywood Horror films and Japanese Horror, as Koji Suzuki points out, is that “the Japanese have a belief in the materiality of ghosts” that is very different from Western conceptions which treat of evil spirits as enemies to be exterminated. Japanese horror movies espouse “the notion of co-existence of the world of the living (*kono-yo*) and the world of the dead (*ano-yo*)” (McRoy 7).

Kaneto Shindō bases the premise of the movie on a Buddhist mythic tale in which an old woman is turned into an “onibaba” or demon hag by the Buddha for setting up obstacles to a young girl’s spiritual inclinations. Myths serve in every culture as a kind of backdrop to the phenomenal world— a backdrop in which cultural constructs, societal norms, customs and real-life objects are explained from the point of view of a divine will so as to validate the way things are and how each entity fills a particular niche in it. As stated above, in the myth of the onibaba or “demon woman”, the old woman finds fault with the girl for circumventing her domestic responsibilities in her pursuit of spirituality. The young girl frequents a Buddhist shrine where she makes offerings and prays devoutly. The old woman discovers the girl’s itinerary and conceals herself one day in the tall grass that grows along the path. When the young woman comes along, she leaps out wearing a demon mask, in order to teach the disobedient girl some manners that will make her reembrace her pre-given feminine roles. The young girl cries out in terror, appealing to the Buddha for intervention. The Buddha takes pity on the terrified girl and punishes the old woman for her jealousy by causing the mask to be glued to her face permanently. The old woman tries frantically to tear off the demon mask, but is unable to get it off. So, she confesses her sin and prays to the Buddha to have mercy on her. The Buddha forgives her, but as a reminder of her sin, the mask leaves marks of disfiguration on her face on being taken off.

Kaneto Shindō does not incorporate the myth into the film as such. He inverts it so as to show the ascendancy of Eros over Thanatos. However, it is not the material benefits of an advanced industrial society or the transcendence of ordinary morality that reconfigures the relation between liberty and repression here, but the Life Instinct as an end in itself. The sexual freedom the young woman enjoys is very primitive in nature and is not the result of the rupture between labour and consumption in which material excesses unshackle libidinal energies. What this inversion does is to re-examine the Eros-Thanatos debate, and the importance ascribed to Thanatos over Eros in Asian cultures, from the perspective of the irrationality of human desires. The connotation is that human beings are never free of the traces of their bestial ancestry expressed commonly in the form of negative traits like greed and lust in fiction and film. The film argues that the transcendence of the so-called baser aspects of human nature through civilizational processes and the immunity from besmirchment or contamination by the monstrous it offers are illusions maintained through the demonization of differences. What Shindō attempts to do in the then film is to peel back layers of social conditioning from the human and present it as it is, when it no longer has the veneer of civilization and creature comforts to hide behind. Unlike the old woman in the myth who takes umbrage at the young woman’s spirituality, the “onibaba” of the film warns her daughter-in-law against letting her carnal desires run wild.

*Onibaba*, like most Japanese films of the period, conveys the existential vacuum attendant upon wars. The movie is set in 14th-century Japan that has been ravaged by the Battle of Minatogawa, which was fought between the forces of Emperor Go-Daigo and those of the Ashikaga Takauji on 25 May 1336. The characters of the old woman and the daughter-in-law in the film, played by Nobuko Otowa and Jitsuko Yoshimura respectively, have fallen into a disreputable life ever since the loss of Kichi,

the old woman's son. Now they earn their livelihood by ambushing Samurai deserters. For this they conceal themselves in the grass and spring a surprise attack on the bewildered warriors, murdering them in the end. Then they take possession of the armour and whatever other valuables they can find on their bodies and sell them to a merchant named Ushi (Taiji Tonoyama) in exchange for food.

Kichi has deserted the battle along with his friend Hachi, played by Kei Sato. However, Kichi is killed by a horde of angry peasants on the way back home and Hachi cunningly evades their wrath. In the meantime, the two women, who are bereft of sustenance, are forced to fend for themselves. Even as the two women live precariously, Hachi makes his appearance at their shack with the revelation that Kichi was killed in battle. Hachi lies intentionally so that the women will not doubt him for Kichi's death. He manipulates the insecurity of the two women and insinuates himself into their midst. The old woman does not take kindly to Hachi's arrival since she fears that her daughter-in-law who has been deprived of sexual pleasures for a long time, will finally fall in love with Hachi. She fears that she will be left alone with no means to support herself if the intruder takes her daughter-in-law away.

Hachi is portrayed as a trickster in the movie. His sole intention is to make his way back into life, even if it means having to manipulate the old woman and the widow. Hachi helps the two women murder two samurai who are seen chasing one another and fighting on horseback. He begins to make sexual advances towards the widow, ogling at her when she washes clothes and offering her fish. The widow avoids Hachi initially, but as her passions grow stronger, she reciprocates his lasciviousness and ends up visiting him in his shack every night once the old woman falls asleep. When the old woman gets wind of her daughter-in-law's nocturnal escapades, she realizes that her existence is in peril. As a way of negotiating terms with Hachi, the old woman offers him her own body if it is lust that has goaded him into the widow's bed. But Hachi sees through her and laughs the suggestion off as the crazed fantasy of an old woman. When her chicanery fails to work, the old woman starts intimidating the widow. She reminds her of her status as someone who is permanently outside the bounds of sexual relationships. But the widow rebels against the old woman's authority and entertains Hachi every night with greater zest. Though she fears that the Buddha might punish her for her sins as the old woman has led her to believe, she cannot bridle her lust.

It is at this juncture that an interesting thing happens in the movie. A Samurai deserter wearing a demon-mask wanders into the field and is met by the old woman. The Samurai, who has his sword drawn, spares her, since he thinks he can use the woman to find his way out of the field to the road going to Kyoto. The Samurai claims that he is wearing the mask since he was afraid of being disfigured in the war. He also brags that his face is so handsome that any woman who saw it once would surely fall in love with him. Despite the old woman's guiles, she cannot persuade the Samurai to take off the mask. However, when the old woman comes to the pit where she ensnares her victims, she jumps over it, leaving the Samurai to take a fall. She wrenches off the mask, but is horrified to discover that the Samurai's face is hideously disfigured.

In a final attempt, the old woman puts on the demon-mask in order to terrify her daughter-in-law. She hides in the grass one rainy night and jumps before the widow as she is running frantically to Hachi's hut, unable to curb her passions. Seeing a demon on her path, the young woman is taken aback. She has already had a similar dream in which she is threatened by a demon and this encounter creates a premonition of the uncanny in her. Initially, she distrusts her senses, but a moment later she realizes that the demon is real and runs screaming through the grass. She runs into Hachi's hands midway in the rain-buffeted field. Despite her protestations that she had a real encounter with a demon, Hachi does not listen to her. He reassures her that there are no demons in the real world and pushes her down

into the grass where they make love even as the onibaba watches helplessly from afar. The old woman now realizes that their mutual lust is so strong that nothing can separate them.

When the young woman returns home, she finds the demon crouching in a corner of the shack. When she starts to cry out, the demon announces herself as her mother-in-law. She explains that the mask got stuck to her face and that she cannot get it off now. She reveals her ruse to spoil the young woman's erotic escapade through the use of the mask. The daughter-in-law, who is livid with fear, at first regains her composure when the truth dawns upon her, and begins to laugh sarcastically at the old woman's helplessness. She can now channel her hatred towards the matriarchal authority the old woman represents without averting her face since the mask has depersonalized the old woman. She cracks open the mask with a hammer, bludgeoning the old woman's head violently in the process. But the feeling of the uncanny returns as soon as the mask is wrenched off and is superimposed on reality so that the young woman truly believes that she is dealing with a demon. The disfiguration of the old woman's face frightens the young woman so much that she runs out into the field, pursued by the former who screams that she is not a demon, but a human being. The film ends open-endedly where the young woman leaps over the pit followed by the "onibaba". The jerky camera movement suggests that the "onibaba" might fall into the pit, but there is no certainty.

Japanese cinema is heavily indebted to traditional forms of theatre like Kabuki, Bunraku and Nō, the themes of which re-enter the film universe in different combinations that evoke the interplay between the stage and the silver screen. *Onibaba*, in particular, borrows a lot from the conventions of Nō theatre which has its origins in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The elements involved in the performance of a Nō play, viz., masks, robes, minimalist props, the stage space, etc. come together to create a feeling of uncanniness in the audience. Unlike other traditional forms of theatre, Nō is an event to be experienced directly and personally. Its personal dimension also means that Nō blends the various elements that compose it into a harmonious whole, thus creating a holistic aesthetic experience. It is a two-way process since there is a lot of responsibility on the audience to watch the performance carefully and respond to it in a personalised manner.

Nō plays generally last between one and two hours. They are generally slow-moving and the actors seem to glide over the stage with a surreal motion. The delivery of dialogues happens in tune with certain song types and singing styles that are either declamatory, recitative, nonrhythmic, or rhythmic. Nō plays draw on episodes from classical texts as well as folktales that feature historical, mythological, or legendary figures. Minimalism and simplicity in the design of stage props and storyline imbue Nō plays with a characteristic austerity. The props, though crucial to the performance, are often represented by skeletal frames made out of bamboo stalks. The small cast in Nō combined with a rudimentary plot provide Nō spectators a deeply satisfying experience verging on the mystical. Dialogues in Nō are limited, since the actors are required to vent intense emotions through subtle movements and the expert use of Nō masks.

The Nō mask, in particular, is an important prop in expressing emotional intensity, for "when the mask is moved and the light changes, or when it is seen from a different angle, it can mystically take on an infinite variety of expressions" (Komparu 229). The mask is more than a mere prop since it comes alive during the performance in accord with the actors' movements. The alternating play of light and shadows on its intricately carved features brings out different layers of meaning not capable of being realized through language. Masks representing humans are slightly smaller than the face, with eyeholes restricting vision and those representing demons are exaggerated. Owing to its minimalist nature, a Nō play leaves plenty of room for imagination. Often each spectator leaves the play house with his own interpretation of the play.

There are five types of Nō play based on the kind of character that is portrayed in each, viz. gods, warriors, beautiful women, mad women, and demons. *Onibaba* belongs to the category of Nō play that deals with lunatic women and the consequences of their actions. Usually in a Nō play, such women go mad as a result of an excess of some negative emotion like avarice or envy. Also important is the character transformation from human to ghost/demon in a way that obscures the real identity of the character and portrays her as a combination of the human and the inhuman. The demon mask or “hannya” this character wears serves to highlight the double nature and eventually the blurring of the divide between human and monstrous states when the character degenerates completely. The mask features sharp horns, metallic eyes and a leering mouth. The mask represents the souls of women who have become demons as a result of their jealousy.

*Onibaba* follows the conventions of Nō closely not just in relation to the *mise en scène*, but also in that the dialogue is minimal and corresponds to extreme mental states.

The elements of Nō present in *Onibaba* depict the figure of the deranged woman as ‘demonic.’ Nō is fundamentally patriarchal since it depicts women as weak and subservient to men. The trope of the broken woman who must lean on a man for sustenance appears again and again in Nō. In *Onibaba* too, the old woman and her daughter-in-law are depicted as desiring male support. Although they look out for themselves after Kichi’s death, subconsciously they crave the presence of a male in the household. That is why when Hachi arrives, they restructure their former independence around his coarse masculinity.

The fiendish women in Nō are eventually transformed into vindictive ghosts through an excess of jealousy and petty grudges. Nō seems to align the essential nature of women with the Freudian ‘Id’ which is ‘dark’, ‘primitive’ and ‘unbridled’. The demonisation of women is introduced in Nō at the point where they are rejected by patriarchal authority figures. In the film, this happens when Hachi declines the old woman’s advances. Once rejected, the demonic transformation happens quickly. This is facilitated in the film by the demon mask the samurai deserter wears. The mask externalises the old woman’s status as what Barbara Creed (1993) calls the “monstrous-feminine” (72). Whereas in Nō, such demonised women are saved by men eventually, the film inverts the traditional closure by having Hachi killed almost accidentally. In the final episode, as the two women battle it out, we do not yet know whether the demonic elements have been redeemed or not. Another difference is that whereas the female ghosts in Nō often attain Buddhahood after the male priests pray for them, *Onibaba* this by the absence of a messianic male character at a time when it is most required.

It can be argued that although both Nō and Japanese horror films present men as saviours and women as victims who must be rescued from the grips of demonic forces, *Onibaba* subverts such relations. Unlike in Nō theatre where the performance serves as an allegory of negative human emotions in a way that still makes it possible to tell the character and the overlay of the demonic elements apart, in the movie, the mask fuses with the old woman’s flesh in manner that metaphorically obfuscates the distinction between the human and the demon. The implication of the mask fusing with the old woman’s face can be that the demonic is already part of the human and that an attempt to valorise the human as a matrix of unadulterated values can be problematic. Moreover, the easily distinguishable qualities of men and women in a Nō play are replaced in the film with a lot of grey areas where male castration anxiety meets female demonisation in a liminal space that offers no easy resolution.

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