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## INVERTING MYTHOLOGY: THEORIZING THE 'DEMONIC' INKANETO SHINDŌ'S ONIBABA

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### ABSTRACT

Kaneto Shindō's *Onibaba*, through its stark portrayal of the animalistic side of human life, engages with the questions of sin and evil. 'Onibaba' are women who have turned to demons as a result of negative karma. As the retelling of a popular mythological tale, the film inverts the traditional story of the 'onibaba' or demon hag who is punished by the Buddha for thwarting a young girl's spiritual ambitions. Kichi's old mother and widowed wife live by ambushing warriors and selling their armour and samurai swords in return for the luxury of a few sacks of millet. A conflict of interests develops between the two women when Hachi, a friend of Kichi's, returns from the battlefield to seek asylum in the old woman's hut and the young woman transgresses the dictates of asceticism expected of a widow. In the original story of the 'onibaba', the role of myth is to protect spiritual ambitions from intervening materialistic influences. By inverting the original myth, Kaneto Shindō eroticizes the text, conveying at once the immediacy of bodily urges. He portrays Kichi's mother as "the onibaba" for the repressive ideology she represents and externalizes her demonic nature through the use of a demon mask that gets stuck to her face.

Keywords: onibaba, mythology, demonic, mask,

### Introduction

Speaking in an interview, Kaneto Shindō once said that people are both the devil and God. It is this same thought that finds resonance in his 1964 erotic-horror classic *Onibaba*, a movie that examines the dark side of human consciousness in startling monochrome. Set in the year 1334 against the backdrop of a civil war that has wrecked Japan, the plot of *Onibaba* centres on the degenerate lives of two unnamed women who are forced to patch together a modest existence following the loss of their patriarchal linchpin, Kichi, to the war.

Myths can be defined as "tales believed as true, usually sacred, set in the distant past or other worlds or parts of the world, and with extra-human, inhuman, or heroic characters." (Bascom 13). The

function of myths is to provide order to the seeming chaos of the universe, explain phenomena in terms of divine will, and to legitimize the cosmic order, with each discrete object being assigned a pre-ordained role therein.

Kaneto Shindō is primarily known for his *Children of Hiroshima*, a travelogue depicting the devastation and atmosphere of disillusionment prevailing in post-war Hiroshima, and for *The Naked Island*, a quasi-documentary about an ill-fated family in a remote corner of the Inland Sea who spend most of their time drawing water to make their land crop-worthy. What strings together Kaneto Shindō's films, running the gamut from *Children of Hiroshima* to *Onibaba*, is the unflinching resolve of his characters to survive against all odds. If it is war and

its aftermath that takes the centre stage in *Children of Hiroshima*, what is of interest in *Onibaba* is the politics of hunger.

#### **Discussion**

*Onibabacan* at best be described as agrisly moviefilmed in a forlorn and eerie-looking field of susuki grass. The featureless grass field billowing out in the wind into a menacing mass reflects the chaotic psychic landscape of the characters themselves. Kaneto Shindō takes as the starting point for the movie a Buddhist parable that was narrated to him as a child: an old woman, who is irate with her daughter-in-law for continually neglecting household chores to go off to a Buddhist temple and pray, conceals herself in the grass along the path and when the younger woman comes along, leaps out wearing a demon mask, with the intention of spooking the impertinent woman and thereby teaching her some manners. The terrified girl cries out in mortal terror and a heavily displeased Buddha punishes the old woman for her trickery and impiety by causing the mask to be glued to her face. The old woman desperately claws at the demon mask, but unable to get it off, prays to the Buddha to lift the curse, and is forgiven, but when the woman pries it off her face, she is shocked to discover that she has wrenched off the flesh along with the mask.

Shindō puts many quirks into this tale. For instance, here the onibaba is one who tries to intimidate her daughter-in-law into subservience and filial piety by constant reminders of the wrath of the Buddha that lascivious women have to endure. The plot revolves around two women inhabiting a swampland, an old woman and her daughter-in-law, played by Nobuko Otowa and Jitsuko Yoshimura respectively. Driven by the fear of destitution, they hide in the long grass, pounce upon Samurai deserters, murder them and strip their bodies of valuable armour and other adornments to sell to a hoarder in exchange for food. The setting of the movie is the war-torn 14th-century Japan. The menfolk have been conscripted to fight in a brutal war, with heavy losses on either side. The battle referenced here is the Battle of Minatogawa which occurred on 25 May 1336 between the forces of Emperor Go-Daigo and those of the Ashikaga Takauji

in which Takauji razed to the ground Go-Daigo's forces. It is to be understood that Kichi and Hachi fled the battlefield in the ensuing confusion. On his way back to safety, Kichi is killed by a horde of angry peasants and his young wife is left a widow. One day, out of nowhere, Hachi, played by Kei Sato, suddenly returns to the old woman's shack. He reveals that he has deserted the army and that since Kichi has been killed in battle.

Hachi, with his inscrutable sentiments and wily ways, plays the role of the cold-blooded schemer who will stop at nothing to have his life in the fast lane. It is evident that he lusts after the younger woman with an untameable wildness of passion. Kichi's mother-in-law, who has herself been husbandless for years, finds her suspicions growing when the widow begins reciprocating his overtures of lustful intent. She fears somewhat irrationally that Hachi would take the younger woman away with him, leaving her all alone in that desolate field, to kill and plunder alone. In an attempt to vie with the young woman for Hachi's attention, out of a combination of her own sexual deprivation and malice to undermine the couple's relationship, she offers Hachi her own battered body, but the young man laughs off the invitation as the waywardness of a crazed woman.

The old woman, the 'onibaba' or 'demon hag' in the title of the movie is shattered when the couple embark on a sexual liaison, with the young woman patronizing Hachi's hut every night, the fear of abandonment overwhelms her so completely that she begins to taunt her daughter-in-law with reminders of sin and its wages. Even as the old woman is visibly unsettled by the amorous attention her daughter-in-law is getting, she gets an opportunity to get at the latter when a Samurai wearing a demon-mask strays into her field. Although the Samurai could kill her at once, he decides to use her to find his way back to civilization. The samurai boasts that he is so handsome that the fear of disfigurement has forced him to wear a protective mask and that, if she even so much as catches a glimpse of his face, she will fall in love with him at once. The old woman now finds herself obsessed with the idea of unmasking the samurai. This soon comes to pass when she snares

him into the pit and subsequently wrenches off the mask; but to her horror, she finds that his face is disfigured beyond all vestiges of beauty. The disfigurement of the samurai prefigures the old woman's own imminent disfigurement and acts as a signalling device. It seems that the film flings both the war-hungry samurai and the old woman into the same category of evil by awarding them the same form of punishment, that of having their inward nature superimposed upon their external features.

The embittered old woman, yearning to win back her daughter-in-law, through the deft deployment of the machinery of fear, puts on the demon-mask and pursues the young woman through long stalks of whispering grass. She rises portentously from her cover in the grass and towers over the dumbstruck widow with an infernal grin stamped on her masked face. The daughter-in-law, whose mind is already full of misgivings from what the old woman has told her of sinners being punished by the Buddha, thinks it to be a real demon and flies back home. The young woman's passion is thwarted by the demon figure every night and she spends her time in the hut in a claustrophobic environment, racked by doubt, fear and sexual frustration.

Although the widow is intimidated at the thought of having sinned, for which the demon is haunting her, it is evident that she is not ready to give up her bodily desires. Every time she is driven back by the demon, she lapses into a harrowing state; but the next night, her sexual impulses are once again awakened. Hachi is also restless since the widow has stopped paying him nocturnal visits. He decides to find out about her and meets the widow midway in the sprawling field of grass on a rainy night. They make love frenziedly, with the 'onibaba' presiding over their love-making, unbeknownst to themselves. The widow confides in Hachi her encounter with the demon, but Hachi reassures her that there are no demons in the real world. He then returns home to be impaled by a famished stranger. However, Hachi's death does not startle the spectator as it is nothing more than the reversal of the familiar equation, only with Hachi at the receiving end this time.

The widow, on returning home, finds the demon figure slumped over the straw mattress and raises hue and cry. But the figure reassures her that she is her mother-in-law and not a demon. The mask got stuck to her face in the rain and she is unable to take it off now. She also reveals her scheme was to ruin the couple's relationship by using the mask. The young woman agrees to help her take off the mask and breaks it viciously with a hammer. But when the mask is finally pulled off, the old woman's face appears so full of ugly sores that the young woman thinks her to have been transformed into an ogre and runs out through the field of grass, followed by her mother-in-law who hollers, "I'm not a demon! I'm a human being!" The film ends where the young woman leaps over the pit and the old woman is about to follow. The film concludes open-endedly, without explicitly showing the 'onibaba' falling into the pit, in a way that plays with the expectations of the audience.

Kaneto Shindō said that the mask represents the negative and acquisitive side of human personality. It externalizes human jealousy and rivalry. Its effects—the repulsive and frightening sores it produces on the face—echo the disfigurement of the victims of the Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The film also contains elements of the Noh theatre, a classical Japanese dance-based musical drama that employs masks to represent the roles of ghosts. Noh theatre usually uses masks to demonize jealousy and allied emotions. Kaneto Shindō was influenced by the techniques used in classic Japanese theatre and his use of the demon-mask in *Onibaba* derives indubitably from this influence. The mask represents the moral degradation of human beings who are forced to live like animals in an exceedingly hostile environment. Kaneto Shindō, inverts the mythological story of the mask, giving it an erotic dimension. If in the original tale, the old woman is punished by the Buddha for hindering the young woman's spiritual aspirations, here the old woman gets punished for repressing Eros. By punishing the old woman who represses the sexual urges of the widow, the director appears to put in place a quasi-religious vindictive system that brings curses upon the head of the wrong-doer, but he

does not offer any readymade resolutions, and leaves the ending dangling in uncertainty.

Commenting on sexual repression in totalitarian states, William Reich says,

The compulsion to control one's sexuality, to maintain sexual repression, leads to the development of pathologic, emotionally tinged notions of honour and duty, bravery and self-control. But the pathology and emotionality of these psychic attitudes are strongly at variance with the reality of one's personal behaviour (47).

The same repressive mechanism can be found at work in the movie, with the old woman acting out the role of the dictatorial repressor. But the young widow is not compelled to bridle her sexual urges. Whatever check there is works only temporarily. The film asserts the directors belief again and again that sex is an expression of human vitality and not a vice. The onibaba, the repressor of Eros, has no silver streak to salvage the flaws entrenched in her character. In a way, it can be said that what she suffers is the probable outcome of her own actions, which comes about without the tawdriness of any *deus ex machina*.

### Conclusion

The director's reaction to the killing spree the two women embark on as a means of warding off hunger is not completely denunciatory. He does not take sides with either the ravenous women or the ill-fated samurais, preferring to look at both impartially, as products of a flawed system of values. The acts of violence the women turn to are for survival, but the undercurrent of greed reveals the psychic forces at play in the absence of a binding social structure, with its hierarchical structure being toppled by the war. It is also an indication of what man really is in the absence of civilization. Deprived of all sense of right and wrong, man is forced to wander around in a hellish landscape, traumatized by the savagery of the war and fatigued by the constant struggle for survival, with no light to guide him. Greed is the only force driving commerce and all niceties of sentiment and social grace have been annihilated by bloodshed.

The pit has a pivotal role to play in the diegesis of the movie; it is something that is

shunned, feared and elided over. The women are wary to leap over it; the samurai succumb to it. The pit is a form of final resolution that enwraps the futility of the entire human enterprise—an eventuality that forces half-hearted confrontation with the Truth into a headlong plunge into the vortex of Realization. It symbolizes all the baser human emotions to which human beings never come face to face with— all those emotions which are deep down somewhere in the unconscious, but are rarely brought to the surface and examined in a way that rips apart their vanities. Finally, the pit shows how deeply ingrained man's selfhood is.

In conclusion, it can be said that Kaneto Shindō's focus in *Onibaba* is more on the drama between the three principal characters than on the historical background, with the intention being to draw out the implications of the demonic along with its ethical and sociological underpinnings. The field with its breadth of grass is the perfect locus for pinning down three characters whose relationship is based on the negotiation of distance. Space functions in the movie not as something naively natural, but as something which is culturally-loaded. As Henri Lefebvre in his *Production of Space* says,

Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology or politics. It has always been political and strategic. There is an ideology of space. Because space, which seems homogeneous, which appears as a whole in its objectivity, in its pure form, such as we determine it, is a social product (78).

Hachi and the widow are forced to maintain a safe distance between them; their sexual urges are categorized as sinful and in need of repression. The grass that separates them represents not only geographical space, but the social space of family values which stipulate that a widow should not have a sexual reawakening. But the more effectively the mechanism of repression strives towards its goal of managing space, the more intense the urge to shatter it becomes. Finally, the problem of managing space develops into the question of how the old woman transforms into an 'onibaba'— through repression of Eros. It is also possible to deny the movie's quasi-religious overtones and look upon the sores from a purely scientific perspective. The

director too might not want to look upon the old woman's disfigurement as a direct vindication of the couple's basic instincts, but the inversion of the original story of the 'onibaba' and its undertow of 'sin and its wages' reverberates unmistakably here. Even after the film ends, what linger long afterwards are questions of moral certainty in a time of brutality and ruthless competition for survival.

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