

# Analysis of Nippon Konchuki on Feminism

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**Abstract.** Nippon Konchuki is a Japanese movie directed by Shōhei and was first shown in 1963, following the life of prostitutes in Japan after World War 2. The film tells the misery of Tome Matsuki, a rural Japanese woman who had to sell her body for survival. Nippon Konchuki fills the long-standing gap in the film industry and provides a new orientation for academic research - the study of prostitution on feminism. Based on the analysis of Nippon Konchuki, this paper discusses topics such as love and sex, suppression and power, and women's relations from a feminist perspective. Finally, this paper derives the conclusion that Nippon Konchuki honestly reflects sex workers' life in after-war Japan and successfully shows the importance of respecting the cries and opinions from the struggling sex workers.

**Keywords:** Film; Nippon Konchuki; Feminism; Prostitution.

## 1. Introduction

Studying films from a feminist view is not a novelty. According to Smelik, feminist film theory - arguing gender difference is crucial to film meaning creation - came into the public view in the early 1970s and "lived through its heyday in the 1980s." [1] By focusing film analysis on gender, the meaning and ideology behind films for, by, and about women (sometimes even about men) have been reconsidered and changed. [2]

Admittedly, a wide range of movies has been studied or reviewed from a feminist perspective, but I think films about sex workers still lack attention and analysis due to the sensitivity of the subject of sex. However, such films represent and deliver the voice of sex workers, who are usually considered unrespectable. Refusing to pay attention to their voices equals exploiting the rights and opportunities of sex workers to be heard and accepted into society. This form of injustice exists in almost all countries. Even Japan - a country that profits billions of dollars from the sex industry annually - is no exception.

In the following, I will analyze the Japanese film about sex workers Nippon Konchuki mainly from a feminist view, telling the stories of Japanese female sex workers in an era of rapid economic growth and reclaiming the rights and opportunities of sex workers to be cared about, listened to, and admitted into society.

## 2. Overview of Nippon Konchuki

Nippon Konchuki, also known as *The Insect Women* in English, is a black-and-white plot film directed by Imamura Shōhei and starred by Sachiko Hidari. It was first shown in Japan in November 1963. Nippon Konchuki was popular with the public and won many awards at home and abroad: Blue Ribbon Awards for Best Director, Silver Bear for Best Actress, Japanese Kinejun Award for Best Screenplay, etc.

Nippon Konchuki narrates the tragic life of poor Japanese rural woman Tome Matsuki, played by Sachiko Hidari. Tome Matsuki is the daughter of Karasawa (an honest and hardworking man) but is suspected to be the child in her mother's extramarital affair by others. However, Tome and her father Karasawa have a very close relationship of love and care. In order to subsidize the family, Tome is sent to work at the landlord's house but is raped by the landlord's son and pregnant. After that, Tome is abandoned by the landlord and returns to her father to give birth to a daughter named Nobuko. She then takes a job in the factory and has sexual relations with the group leader, who is later expelled from the factory. Having nowhere to go, Tome decides to leave Nobuko to take care of Karasawa, while she comes to the bustling metropolis – Tokyo - alone and becomes a maid in a brothel. Due to

the temptation of money, she starts selling her body. Luckily, Tome's cleverness has won the trust of the brothel owner, who introduces her patron to Tome. With the support of the patron, Tome has her own brothel. But just as Tome thinks her spring is coming, she is arrested for prostitution. When Tome is kept in prison, Nobuko has sex with Tome's patron without informing her finance and finally steals the patron's money to open a farm commune together with her finance in the countryside.

### 3. Historical Context

Wartime prostitution prevailed in Japan in the 1950s and 1960s. The most well-known sexual slavery is the comfort women during World War Two, which refers to a group of females being forced or enslaved to provide sexual service to the Japanese Imperial Army. Different from comfort women (i.e., sex slaves), prostitutes depicted in the movie *Nippon Konchuk* engage in sexual activities for payment, which is very high compared to salaries of jobs such as restaurant waitresses and shop cashiers. That is, despite moral concerns, prostitution was an economically rewarding job chosen by many females at that time. Although police officers were authorized to arrest unlicensed prostitutes during the 1900s, such policies or commands were barely enforced. In the words of Peterfreund, "prostitution however continued to flourish" [3] in Japan.

The turning point was reached in 1956. The Prostitution Prevention Law was passed and rendered prostitution illegal not by stringent legal clauses but through the education of prostitutes. Arrested prostitutes would be sentenced to the Women's Guidance Home, where they obtained knowledge and skills to improve their miserable circumstances. [4]

Furthermore, in the 1970s, a group of women who called themselves fighting women received inspiration from their sisters in other capitalist nations and strove to liberate women in postwar Japan. [5] Emulating feminists in other countries, fighting women-initiated movements of liberation, participated in politics, attempted to reform education, etc. Among all the advocacies of gender liberation and women's human rights, strongly resisting commercialized sex or sexual exploitation was the main one. According to Mackie, campaigns around prostitution "focused feminist attention on the interaction between systems of gender, class, 'race', ethnicity and sexuality." [6]

Albeit people in the adult entertainment industry could still take advantage of legal loopholes to offer well-paid sexual services, with the change in Japanese women's views of themselves, they transitioned (at least began to) from selling their bodies to skills in the late 1900s.

### 4. Movie Themes

In this section, I will summarize, analyze, and develop the main themes or messages that *Nippon Konchuki* tries to deliver, considering the social background, economic climate, and political environment of the film.

#### 4.1 Tragedy and Absurdity

In *Nippon Konchuki*, director Shōhei did not narrate tragedy epically but absurdly. The tragic color is well reflected by the storyline and the background music used, such as a woman's sorrowful chant. However, such a sad and dismal atmosphere is broken or shifted by pop-up subtitles and corresponding voice over. These two components disturb the original narration of the film. Namely, events that happened in *Nippon Konchuki* are not sequenced smoothly but are fragmented artificially. It is this form of fragmentation, sudden shift, or split that makes the plot more dramatic and generates an absurdity.

Moreover, the absurdity, which usually evokes the audience an image of comedy, is now found in a tragedy. This counter-intuition can lead to a sense of unreality, falseness, or illusion. But it is known that the events which seemed unreal and ridiculous did truly happen to Tome in the film. With this contrast, the audience will be more deeply shocked by what happened in the movie. Furthermore, this

feeling of shock will then result in the audience's empathy toward Japanese women in the 1970s and feelings of anger toward society.

Besides the effects caused by the absurdity on the audience, the idea of telling tragedy absurdly also implies the director's satire on reality. Specifically, by dramatizing the stories of Tome, Shōhei turns the documentary - like film into a drama - the real into the unreal. Such a shift or transformation delivers a message: Japanese society in the mid-19th century was so absurd, unjust, and chaotic that women's lives were like a play or game to please others in a darkly humorous way.

## 4.2 Love and Sex

In *Nippon Konchuki*, love and sex were completely separate. Based on the plot, the sexual relationship was not initiated by love and affection but by benefits. Particularly, whenever Tome has sex with a man (both voluntarily and involuntarily), money or other interests underlie the sexual activity. For instance, Tome is raped by the landlord's son to retain the work opportunity and has intercourse with her patron to obtain funds to open a brothel. Also, Tome calls her patron "daddy" in the film. To me, the word "daddy" may hint at sugar daddy, which signifies a wealthy but old man who gives money to a young woman in return for sex, perfectly corresponding to the relationship between Tome and her patron. In addition, the sexual relationship was sparked by primitive desire. When Tome's patron is having sex with Nobuko (Tome's daughter), he does ask for loyalty—a fundamental component of a caring relationship—from Nobuko but only for sexual service to satisfy his naked need.

Furthermore, in the movie, women are depicted as a tool for catharsis. However, director Shōhei does not focus on the organs that show reproductive capacities when shooting a scene about sexual activity. To simplify, no reproductive organs are exposed. Rather, Shōhei focuses on the faces of the actor and the actress, showing their emotions and feelings. In detail, men always carve the look of enjoyment yet also dissatisfaction. "Enjoyment" refers to pleasure whereas "dissatisfaction" reflects that the pleasure gained is not enough, implying that men long for more. On the contrary, women's faces are drenched with sweat, and they are moaning weakly, showing their tiresome and pain. Thus, men and women gain different and even opposite experiences: one is pleasure, and the other is pain. In the process, women's experiences are not considered important and cared for by men. Women simply serve and please men in the film.

Besides, the sex scene is dim. The audience can only see the faces and some parts of the nude, which hints that the activity being carried out is sex. Different from exposing the topic of sex violently, this form of sexual hint creates ambiguity, suspense, and tension, which makes the audience feel furtive, embarrassing, and voyeuristic, painting a negative color on such activities.

## 4.3 Suppression, Confession and Power

Sex - a virtually universal taboo - is suppressed in society. It is usually regarded as impure, [7] and people always attempt to avoid sex in public discourse. In *Nippon Konchuki*, there is a scene where Tome confesses her shameful sexual behavior in a religious meeting. While confessing, Tome is hesitant and ashamed for verbalizing all the guilty acts (i.e., sex) she has participated in and performed, and men listening to Tome murmur, gossip, and judge her. Additionally, Tome sits in the center and men surround her. In this way, she is excluded or separated from the circle as the center target of blame for what she has done and begs forgiveness from the men. According to Foucault, requiring one to confess his/her sins, or approaching the truth, and having the authority to condone someone is power. [8] Based on the scene, this type of power is dominated and exercised by males in the film. In other words, men are so powerful that they can easily repress, blame, and forgive women.

However, women are not the lowest class or the least powerful in the society described by the film. Women suppress other groups as well. For example, a male customer wants a virgin, and several prostitutes hence kill a cat to use its blood to fake their chastity. This scene may suggest the idea that once women obtain sufficient power, they will also repress others just like men do, or at least take advantage of their power to benefit themselves at the sacrifice of others. This is ironic in the sense

that groups being suppressed are transferring their sufferings and pain to other groups through repression and hurt. Namely, women have become the group that they hate the most. While on the other hand, in order to please customers and gain money to survive, killing that cat seems inevitable and necessary. Women do not have other choices except play the game in which rules are already set by men. Under this logic, the cat-killing scene becomes tragic.

#### 4.4 Relations among Women

It is intuitionally believed that women will unite together to pursue freedom when being suppressed by males. Nevertheless, this is not the case in *Nippon Konchuki*. In the movie, the female brothel owner exploits her female workers through wage deductions, and they unite not to fight against men but please men and satisfy men's needs as best as they can to gain money. Thus, relations among women in the brothel are not maintained by emotional bonds. Instead, they are based on interest links. Specifically, when Tome does not give enough money to workers in her brothel and later gets arrested for prostitution, all of Tome's workers leave her decisively, showing that women's relations in the movie are employment relationships rather than a womance, referring to a friendly relationship between women.

Moreover, women use each other as money-making machines in the movie. For instance, Tome pays for her maid to have cosmetic surgery so that the maid can be more popular among male customers, creating more monetary benefits for Tome. In this film, relations among women are mercenary and cold-blooded. Yet women's apathy or indifference is not innate but forced by society. If women do not strive to make money, by all means, they cannot even subsist. It is not women who are lascivious and desire to sell their bodies actively but have to trade their chastity and self-esteem with resignation merely for a survival opportunity. Instead of portraying the prostitutes in the film to be wrong and sinful, they are more like and truly are victims of the patriarchy.

### 5. Conclusion

Japanese plot movie *Nippon Konchuki* reflects the circumstance of women in post-World War II Japan by following the development of the life of a poor rural woman named Tome. Through Director Shōhei's camera, women are seen as objects of sexual desire and are reduced to tools for money-making, which further lies the director's disapproval and satire of Japanese society in the mid-1900s. What ensues is the audience's empathy toward females who sell their bodies to subsist and anger toward patriarchy.

In summary, *Nippon Konchuki* is a very incisive, realistic film in terms of describing the struggle faced by sex workers. It successfully makes the audience resonate with a group of people that most of them originally despise, speaking up for females that have to yield to fate and life.

### References

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