

Transformative Narratives: Generational Gaps in Post-War Japan Through the Cinematic Lens of Tokyo Monogatari and Ohayo

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Abstract: The research delves into the profound generational divides depicted in Yasujirō Ozu's Tokyo Monogatari and Ohayo, providing a captivating cinematic exploration of post-war Japan's transformative landscape. Through an intricate synthesis of cinematic narratives and history analysis, it meticulously examines the contrasting attitudes towards material fulfillment, evolving social norms, and shifting patriarchal dynamics portrayed in these masterpieces. Yasujirō Ozu, widely regarded as one of Japan's most influential filmmakers, captured the complexities of generational dynamics and societal transformation during the tumultuous era of reconstruction in the 1950s in Japan. By scrutinizing these themes in depth, the essay offers profound insights into the complexities of post-war Japanese identity, shedding light on the intricate interplay between tradition and modernity during the pivotal era of reconstruction in the 1950s. Through its nuanced examination of these multifaceted themes, the essay provides a comprehensive understanding of the enduring generational gaps that emerged in Japanese society during the 1950s, inviting readers to contemplate the intricate dynamics shaping the nation's narrative during a crucial juncture in its history.

Keywords: Yasujirō Ozu, post-war, cinema

1. Introduction

The 1950s in Japan stood as a pivotal moment in the nation's narrative, a period where the wounds of World War II were slowly healing, and the nation embarked on a complex journey of reconstruction. This transformative era was characterized by profound social, cultural, and economic changes, igniting generational gaps that would imprint a lasting legacy on Japanese society. This essay delves into the transformative cinematic landscape of post-war Japan during the 1950s, examining how these changes, as portrayed in masterpieces like Yasujirō Ozu's Tokyo Monogatari and Ohayo, played a pivotal role in portraying these enduring generational gaps. Far from being mere historical contingencies, these generational divides became integral to Japan's evolving identity.[1] By synthesizing insights from cinematic narratives and scholarly analyses, this essay dissects the divergent attitudes of the younger and older generations regarding desires for material life, ideas of evolving social expectations, and the transformative dynamics of traditional patriarchal authority shown during post-war Japan.

2. Towards the “Bright Life”

Compared to the older generations, younger generations tended to embrace a new lifestyle regarding food and entertainment. This goes beyond making a basic living called “bright life” (akarui seikatsu) [2].

Simon Partner, in his book *Assembled in Japan*, states that “In the early 1950s, consumption had more to do with putting rice on the table than with the pursuit of pleasure.”[3] It is a lens through which we can analyze the historical context of societal values and consumption patterns. Ozu’s films embody the same idea, shedding light on the intricate relationship between generational perspectives and the evolving socio-economic landscape.

The older generations portrayed in Ozu’s films have been through the material hard times during the war, and embody the values ingrained in the pre-war era, where the emphasis on basic survival needs was paramount. The pursuit of pleasure took a backseat to the practicalities of securing sustenance, symbolized by the central role of rice on the table. This historical context reflects the frugality and resilience of a nation recovering from the devastations of war.

The generational divide, then, becomes a historical commentary in *Ohayo* as the younger generation, Isamu and Minoru, expresses dissatisfaction with the same options for meals. Specifically, children are complaining about the traditional fare of dried fish and miso soup. This discontent symbolizes a broader societal shift – a departure from the older generation’s emphasis on simplicity and necessity towards the post-war generation’s desire for a more varied and pleasurable lifestyle. This shift can be linked to the broader economic recovery and growing affluence during the 1950s, signaling a departure from the austerity of the immediate post-war period. Similarly, in *Tokyo Monogatari*, when the two kids’ parents, who represent the younger generation in this movie, plan to take the family out for lunch, they think the children’s lunch from the department store is a desirable choice for the kids. As lunch from outside the home is a relatively new option and the department store represents “modern-lifestyle”, it mirrors the changing economic landscape where prosperity and more opportunities for Japanese consumers in the form of commodity culture.[4] The parents, the younger generation, aspire to provide their children with experiences beyond mere sustenance, reflecting the priorities in a post-war society shifting to the quality of life.

The spread of television provided a new way for entertainment and further exacerbated the gap between the two generations in addition to socio-economic changes. With the advent of the “three sacred treasures” of the 1950s, television, electric washing machine, and refrigerator,[5] coupled with the burgeoning popularity of sumo wrestling culture, television has ushered in an entirely new era of entertainment for the masses. In *Ohayo*, the children always get together at the neighbor’s house after school, forming a communal space to collectively enjoy televised wrestling matches. This shared activity became such a focal point that some children went to the extent of deceiving their parents by feigning the intention to study while secretly visiting the neighbor's house for the sole purpose of enjoying television. Their intense eagerness to watch sumo wrestling became a symbolic representation of the younger generation’s enthusiastic embrace of this novel form of entertainment. Also, in the analysis of the purchase of electrical devices in Japan during the 1950s, a notable incident should be discussed in the film. Isamu and Minoru, two brothers, displayed an intense enthusiasm for watching sumo wrestling on television. In their fervor, they went on strike against their parents, refusing to talk until their parents agreed to buy a television. Furthermore, when the two brothers are eventually found after their brief disappearance, they are discovered engrossed in watching television at the station, reinforcing their passionate engagement with the medium.

Contrary to this, at one point, when two kids’ father met with his friend at the pub one night, he explicitly voiced their concern that TV would turn millions of Japanese people into idiots. The expression of “idiots” reflects a deep-seated opposition rooted in the fear of cultural erosion and the

potential influence of mass media on societal norms. This contrasting attitude represents a generational clash, with the older generation resisting the changing landscape of entertainment. The advent of television is not merely a shift in entertainment preferences but symbolizes a broader transformation in communication and cultural dissemination. The father's apprehension can be interpreted as a resistance to the perceived erosion of traditional values, showcasing a poignant struggle against the potential influence of mass media on societal norms, which is completely different from the younger generations.

3. Stands on Social Expectations

Older generations are more likely to follow the traditional social expectations regarding filial duties and the relationships among neighbors, while the younger generations are challenging the old socially expected norms.

In *Tokyo Monogatari*, the cinematic portrayal of the older generation, embodied by Shukichi and Tomi, encapsulates a steadfast commitment to societal norms deeply rooted in pre-war Japan. Their trip to Tokyo takes on the significance of a symbolic pilgrimage, filled with expectations for familial warmth and respect, reflecting the enduring values of the past. Japanese society historically leaned towards collectivism, emphasizing group harmony and interconnectedness.[6] Family bonds were considered paramount, and individuals were expected to prioritize the well-being of the family unit over personal desires. Set against the backdrop of post-war Japan undergoing profound societal transformations, the film starkly portrays a generational divide. The post-war period saw seismic shifts in societal structures and values, as disruptions caused by the war and subsequent urbanization and industrialization strained intergenerational relationships. Women entering the workforce further altered the traditional family dynamics of women at home waiting for the men.[7] Shukichi and Tomi's expectations echo a yearning for the persistence of traditional Confucian values in a society grappling with the aftermath of war and the challenges of modernization.

As the narrative progresses, a disheartening reality surfaces, laying bare the widening gap between the expectations of the older generation and the reality of their children's lives. The adult children, absorbed in the demands of contemporary urban life, are unable to maintain the expected familial bonds. For example, when queried by customers, the daughter refrained from disclosing her parents' identity in the countryside, only revealing they were fellow villagers. Additionally, due to a seminar being hosted at home, she chose not to expend her children's funds unnecessarily, resulting in the premature eviction of her parents who had returned early from vacation, leaving the elderly couple without shelter on the streets. This stark contrast serves as a microcosm of the broader generational gap, reflecting the tension between the traditional values upheld by the elderly couple and the evolving familial structures in post-war Japan.

The disappointment experienced by Shukichi and Tomi becomes a powerful metaphor for the challenges faced by many families during this transformative period. The film underscores the complexities of bridging generational gaps in the face of societal changes, where the older generation grapples with a shifting cultural landscape and the younger generation seeks autonomy and individual aspirations. Similarly, in *Ohayo*, these desires for autonomy and individuals are shown in daily conversations. When Isamu and Minoru express their desire for the family to purchase a television, their father dismisses the idea with a curt remark, stating, "That's too much talking." In response, Minoru challenges the conventional notion of excessive communication by asserting, "It is adults who speak too much," particularly in the context of unnecessary daily greetings. This rejection of the traditional greetings and their belief in the redundancy of such formalities stand in stark contrast to the values upheld by the older generation. Consequently, they adopt a form of silent protest, choosing to stay unspoken as a means of challenging the established mainstream greeting cultures. This intentional shift in communication style becomes a symbolic expression of the younger generation's

resistance to conforming to traditional societal norms, adding depth to the exploration of generational dynamics in the film.

The intriguing development of breaking the silence through the eventual purchase of a television set provides a deeper insight into the historical context of post-war Japan, underscoring the pivotal role of societal expectations in shaping generational dynamics. Partner's observation that decisions regarding television purchases were often influenced by the younger, less "rational" family members aligns seamlessly with the broader societal shift toward embracing modern conveniences.[3] Admittedly, the younger generation emerges as key catalysts for change within the family unit, actively challenging established norms. However, a more crucial element in buying the television in this scenario is the introduction of a new salesman, coincidentally a neighbor, which adds an additional layer to the interpretation of the social expectations. In post-war Japan, the significance of societal bonds within neighborhoods cannot be overstated. As advertising played a crucial role in electrical goods companies' efforts to stimulate consumer demand, Japanese companies initiated door-to-door sales as a strategic approach to better convince consumers.[3] The decision to acquire a television set, particularly with a neighbor assuming the role of a salesman, reveals a nuanced interplay between personal choices and communal expectations. During this period, the older generation, burdened with the responsibility of upholding societal norms and fostering harmonious relationships within the community, may have felt a heightened sense of obligation to align with the popular trend of acquiring modern amenities. The television purchase, therefore, evolves into a multifaceted decision, influenced not solely by children's irrational desires, but also by the weight of communal expectations and the collective well-being of the neighborhood.

4. Patriarchal Dynamics Across Generations

The generational gaps can also be detected from the attitudes towards traditional patriarchy, specifically shown in the contrasting relationships between children and fathers, females and males.

In *Ohayo*, despite being bestowed with the television after striking with silence and hunger, the two brothers persist in defying their father's expectations for maintaining silence. *Ozu* employs deep space dynamics to vividly portray the generational gap between father and sons, with Minoru and Isamu seated at the end of the hallway while their father stands with his back to the camera, out of frame. The low camera position centers the brothers, and the introduction of the television effectively acts as a visual separator, accentuating the evolving distance between them.[8] Even after a stern warning, Isamu remains defiant, prompting his father to acknowledge defeat and exit the frame. This poignant representation encapsulates the decline of traditional patriarchal authority, leveraging television as a poignant symbol of the widening generational chasm between father and sons. The persistent resistance exhibited by Minoru and Isamu resonates with a broader post-war societal issue, fueled by the substantial loss of young and middle-aged soldiers, creating a significant void in Japan's social fabric. This sentiment aligns with the 'sun tribe' (*taiyozoku*) movement, marked by a rejection of patriarchal authority, the celebration of sexuality, and resistance against Western influence.[9] The movement is intricately connected to Japan's resounding defeat in World War II and its profound impact on the reconstruction of Japanese masculinity in the post-war era.

The active resistance demonstrated by the younger generation against traditional patriarchal norms stands in contrast to the submissive behavior of female characters, evident in both films. In *Tokyo Monogatari*, the depiction of the mother, Tomi, encapsulates a submissive role, embodying a quintessential representation of patriarchal authority. She faithfully follows her husband's words, displaying a lack of active self-expression. Even after being expelled by her daughter, Tomi dutifully complies with her husband's decisions, maintaining a subordinate position within the patriarchal structure. The film's narrative culminates in a poignant moment where the mother, despite joyfully visiting Tokyo to see her children, succumbs to illness upon her return and ultimately passes away at

home. This narrative arc symbolizes the complete muting of her character, underlining the pervasive influence of patriarchal norms on her individual agency and illustrating the broader societal dynamics depicted in the film. Similarly, in *Ohayo*, the female characters, particularly the mothers, show a similar pattern of subservience. The societal pressure to maintain decorum and adhere to traditional expectations is vividly depicted through the gossiping women in the community. Also, the satirical element arises when the director uses the misconception of a mother interpreting a fart as a directive from her husband, cleverly juxtaposed with the children's playful fart game. When analyzing the cinematography language, both films consistently position female characters behind male counterparts in the frame. This visual motif underscores Ozu Yasujiro's conscious emphasis on a "patriarchal supremacy" family perspective, reflecting deeply rooted societal norms in Japan during the depicted era. The traditional Japanese value of "everyone should take one's proper station"[10] confines female characters within the gaze of male characters, existing in a state of aphasia or absence. This formed a completely different attitude compared to the resisted younger generations.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Tokyo Monogatari* and *Ohayo* vividly reflect post-war Japan's generational shifts, highlighting the clashes between tradition and modernity embodied by the younger and older generations. These masterpieces delve into the clash between tradition and modernity, offering insights into the evolving societal landscape. The pursuit of a "bright life" by the younger generation, evident in changing lifestyle preferences and the embrace of television, symbolizes broader shifts in post-war Japan. The narratives also explore tensions in social expectations, portraying the struggle to reconcile traditional norms with evolving familial structures and connections among neighbors. Additionally, patriarchal dynamics undergo scrutiny, revealing the decline of traditional authority and the resistance exhibited by the younger generation. The two films serve as captivating windows into the complexities of post-war Japanese identity, portraying the resilience of a society navigating reconstruction and modernization.

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