

Gender roles of anime



The world of anime is extremely diverse, exploring many different themes and issues. This essay will be looking at the female role and the image that is portrayed in Japanese anime. Focus upon the suggestion of transformation from young girls to adulthood will be discussed in reference to Sailor Moon and in order to realise the 'idealised / fantasised' aspect of anime, comparisons will be made to society and the stereotypical role of women in Japan.

At first glance Japan appears to be a country where traditional hierarchy and formalities still stand with great importance; a dedicated, industrious nation where the men are the dominant breadwinners working for large corporate businesses and the women are shy, submissive wives, yet wise, over-ambitious mothers fixated on their children's success in education. However, since the 1980's and 1990s women are moving away from this stereotype, relying less on their husbands to bring an income into the household and as a result, becoming more independent both financially and socially. (footnote susan napier - page 76). In comparison to Japanese women twenty years ago they are now marrying and giving birth much later, which has been suggested is due to the bid by the Japanese Government to increase equal opportunities in employment and education. As a result there are now more career-oriented women which are attending higher education. (footnote Professor Sumiko Iwao)

Considering education is important when addressing anime as this is where many relationships, friendships and emotions are explored. High school students in Japan have to compulsory attend two hundred and forty days a year at school; on top of this students tend to spend over two hours a day at

after-school clubs, be that sport or academic related, as well as daily commuting to and from school for up to four hours. Foot note (Johnson and Johnson). Clearly education in Japan takes up a significant amount of adolescents' time and so it is no surprise that many anime are centralised around students and school life. Due to the pressures placed upon school children to succeed and attain the best grades at school, high stress levels, feelings of despondency and entrapment are all emotions that are can be often associated with adolescence. Therefore the fantasy world that is presented in manga and anime could be seen as a way to escape the complications and miseries of mundane everyday life.

A lot of Japanese anime stems from the still imagery of manga which is aimed at women just as much as it is at men (footnote susan napier). As a result of this, the Japanese animation industry is also targeted both towards a male and female audience. In comparison to the Western animation industry where the vast majority of the programs seem to be aimed mainly at young boys, the Japanese animation industry appears to cater for both sexes across a very wide age bracket too. This includes animation for children, as well as for teens and adults, which can range from simplistic stories to beautifully complex storylines addressing many difficult issues, to romance, action, and even pornography. As a result, anime is very popular as there is something available for everyone, making it very appealing to the masses and an important aspect of Japanese culture.

One anime which has proved to be popular not only in Japan but in America too is Sailor Moon

Sailor Moon was a popular series that aired on Japanese television from March 1992 to February 1997, only a month after the first issue of the manga was published. Compared to many other Sho-jo anime, Sailor Moon redefined the concept of the magical girl genre, (footnote Paul Gravett) since previous anime did not use their powers to fight evil. Sho-jo anime is the term given to the intended market audience, and although Sailor Moon is popular amongst boys the main target audience is young girls, typically referred to as the Sho-jo in Japan. (footnote) Written by Naoko Takeuch, the story of Sailor Moon is a humorous, mysterious and action filled journey fused with typical Sho-jo elements of love interests and friendships. The 200 episodes follow the development of a young fourteen year old girl, Usagi Tsukino, who upon learning of her superpowers from a talking cat, has the ability to transform into a super heroine Sailor Scout. Along with four other girls, they try to fight the evil Negaverse, and save Earth as well as humanity from destruction.

The characters of Sailor Moon, as well as many other animes, appear to have no set nationality. Usagi has long flowing blond hair, pale skin and large blue eyes; an image which could possibly be described as appearing more Western than Japanese. This image, coupled with the American cheerleader style outfits of the super heroines, certainly suggests that there is a strong influence. The long toned limbs, short skirts and the tight, figure hugging costumes of conventional American super heroes, accentuates the legs, the small waists, large hips and in particularly the fully developed breasts of the characters, suggesting a more mature sexualised form of the young girls once they have transformed. Whenever the Sailor Scouts transform, the

image illustrated is very suggestive of the characters being naked; they are literally being stripped in order to be reborn with new identities, that of fighters, but ultimately stronger, confident women.

The transformation scenes raise contradicting issues concerning whether females are purely sexual objects to be looked at and fantasised over by men, or if it is showing that developing young women are becoming freer and liberated in modern society.

The transformations begin with a 360° view of the characters in their naked form which once again portrays the characters in a rather sexualised yet somehow innocent manner. They loosely resemble the body of bare Barbie doll, which of course is related to childhood and thus connected to the Sho-jo culture. A leotard is then materialize, which highly resembles the swimsuit worn during a Miss American Beauty Pageant, suggesting that these girls have the perfect body to which impressionable young girls should be striving to achieve. Their bodies are then wrapped in the cheerleader style, sailor uniforms of their super heroine character. The sailor outfits, along with any other style of school uniform, are a popular fetish item regardless of whether the viewer is Japanese or not making this transformation sexualised once again. Finally, the girls appear to be raised up in the air, almost as if they are flying.

“ It is in images of flight that the possibilities of escape (from the past, from tradition) are most clearly realised”

Susan Napier page 156

This gives the viewer the impression that the girls are breaking free from the bonds that are restricting them, liberating themselves, which in turn suggests the possibility of freedom, change and redemption both in context to the anime situation but also society. The transformations that the Sailor Scouts undergo, inevitably force the girls to grow up quickly when they should be enjoying their childhood. Also, Sailor Moon is the 'chosen one', meaning that involuntary changes are going to happen to her and that responsibilities are going to be thrust upon her. These are issues that any teenager encounters during puberty regardless of sex or nationality and so can be easily related to.

The transformation scene therefore poses the question of whether these images are for pure sexual gratification appealing to men and intrigued adolescents of both sexes; a cheap attempt to boost audience viewing figures with the notion of "sex sells"; or whether it is to increase the empowerment of women. Whichever way these images are viewed, the transformation scene of the girls is opposing the traditionally upheld expectations of women being shy, subordinate and obedient to men in society.

The fighting stances that each of the girls adopt certainly suggests a sudden growth from giggling adolescent school children into more confrontational adults. Sailor Moon stands with her legs wide apart and a hand on her hip appearing fearless as well as dominant; Sailor Mercury adopts a slightly more submissive position than that of Sailor Moon with her legs bent at the knees, and, in the tableau of the warriors together she is crouched on the floor suggesting the possibility of sexual submissiveness; Sailor Mars, like Sailor

Moon, is stood with her legs wide apart but looking back over her shoulder at the viewer with a hand on her hip suggesting a more temptress nature to her character; Sailor Jupiter also has a wide leg stance and during her first transformation the viewer is actually able to catch a glimpse of her bottom under her skirt possibly suggesting that this Sailor Scout is more sexually mature. Throughout all of the transformations and the majority of the fight scenes, the skirts of all of the Sailor Scouts, including Sailor Venus are blown up by the wind, resulting in the viewer catching a tantalising display of upper-thigh from the teenage girls.

The eroticism and idea of strong women in Sailor Moon are effortlessly incorporated into the series even though the intended audience is for young girls, which significantly contrasts with the preconceived expected behaviour of women within Japanese society as being subservient. It is interesting to note as well that all the protagonist characters of Sailor Moon are female, be that good or evil, and the male characters are either the women's subordinates under their order and control, or their sidekicks. All these factors contribute towards challenging the traditional hierarchy values of Japan upheld by some men and women.

One scene in particular which challenges this notion and consequently addressing the awareness of equality between men and women is during Episode 13 entitled " Girl Power! The End of Jadeite" in a battle between the Sailor Scouts and Jadeite, who is part of the Shitennou of the Dark Kingdom.

Jedetite: Your trusty Tuxedo Mask is dead! Cry and Wail! Can you do

nothing without the help of a man?! Women are such foolish creatures in the end!

Sailor Mars: Only old men think men are better than women these days!

Sailor Mercury: That's right! Scorning women is positively feudalistic!

Sailor Moon: Down with sexual discrimination!

Jedetite is openly sexist towards women, frequently claiming how females are unable to match his power or intelligence. It is ironic then that it is the Sailor Scouts who defeat Jedetite, resulting in Queen Beryl placing him into an 'eternal sleep' as punishment for losing the battle. Jedetite and his chauvinistic opinions are in other words silenced by women.

Usgai has very feminine traits, that of wanting to nurture and heal people which are seen once she discovers the use of the Moon Healing Escalation. In order to defeat many of the monsters she faces Sailor Moon has to first heal them. (develop)

The constant mentioning of Usagi's body weight throughout the series raises the question of whether the writer and consequently the programme is being nurturing and understanding to its target audience, reassuring girls of any age about their body and encouraging them to be happy, or whether it is actually making young girls feel more self-conscious and obsessive over their own weight issues. The issue of the body appearance, especially in the Sailor Scouts transformations as already discussed, would certainly suggest the latter.