

Women in postwar japan essay



The study of women's role in society is a growing literature in recent history. Many have been said about them and a lot of studies were conducted in the aim of identifying such developments. Women are seen as having various characteristics depending on the situation and conditions they are in and such characteristics or roles have evolved over time. Japanese women are not exemptions to this.

Through the years, evolution has played its part in the development of Japanese women and the most dramatic changes happened after the World War. The changes that took place, although not instantly, were significant to modify the roles that women play in the society. However, not all Japanese women embraced the changes, thus even today, traditional characterization of Japanese women are still manifested. This paper aims to identify the different characteristics that define postwar Japanese women and to analyze how much development has taken place over the years. It will also try to illustrate women's relationship to traditional and modern times using two acclaimed Japanese movies; *Ugetsu* by Mizoguchi Kenji and Teshigahara Hiroshi's *Woman in the Dunes*.

At the end of the paper, it will be evaluated how much impact the changes that occur had on modifying Japanese women's role in the society. In analyzing the thesis, it is therefore important to identify the characteristics associated with traditional Japanese women, or how they were seen prior to the World War, so that there would be a basis for comparison. In a paper written by Seth Friedman (1992), he traced the condition of Japanese women going back in the middle of the 20th Century.

He stated that women who lived under Tokugawa Shogunate (1602-1868) do not exist legally. They cannot own properties; they have limited access to education and in general are subordinate to men. In the years preceding the War, despite the fight for equality of classes, which was corollary to women's rights, there came only a very miniscule change in women's role. Although they can contribute economically, they still had no right to vote and they remained subservient to their husbands.

They remained subordinates and can be easily disposed at their husband's wish. However, Friedman claimed that things changed after the Second World War. Women's role started to change during the war when many of the male population started serving the armed forces taking away a huge percentage from the working population. Thus, with men out of the different industries, women started taking charge; working in places earlier dominated by men. Wives started to become the main head of the family with their husbands out in the war field.

They started to make the decisions for the family and were in complete control. Women were no longer just at the side stream; instead, they became the key players doing two to or more things at once. After the war, women also gained other legal rights including enfranchisement and they made use of that wisely by positioning their likes on different posts. Moreover, since the 1950's, they also began finding ways to provide for themselves. Among the most significant changes that occur, however, was their changed attitude towards marriage and family. Many women sought different means on how they can start a family of their own without intervention from other members of their family.

They also decide for themselves on whom to marry, how and when they would want to have their own family. They became independent deciding and living their lives the way they wanted it to be (Koyama, 1961). Then again, one should not mistakenly generalize that all Japanese women succumbed to the changes. Despite the apparent changes in many Japanese women, studies still showed that a large number of the population still adhered to the traditional practices.

For example, in 1982, 40% of Japanese marriages are still arranged; this shows that even with the opportunity given them, there are still those who choose to preserve tradition and many would still cling on to it to perpetuate it (Friedman, 1992). Japanese women's roles and the changes that they have gone through are presented in many academic and even literary pieces. Many also made documentaries and movies about it for better demonstration. It is through these ways that one can deduce how people perceived the changes and to know how they reacted to it. Here, we will examine women's roles as presented in two of the most highly acclaimed Japanese films: *Woman in the Dunes* and *Ugetsu*.

In Hiroshi's *Woman in the Dunes*, the woman character was not given a name but was characterized in the point of view of the main character Niki Jumpei as somewhat backward and innocent. She complies with her society-given role doing strenuous work daily and live in her sordid condition. She occasionally flirts with the main character although the motive given in doing so was not clear. At the latter part of the story, it was shown that she can actually pose a strong personality specifically during that instance wherein

she was threatened to be molested in front of other people and when she fought Jumpei when he was about to bring the house down.

Then again, despite that, what really surfaced as the woman's main characteristic is being submissive. One can see that if she really wanted, she can break out from the situation she was in as manifested in her will to fight for the house and her virtue. However, she chose to submit to the present situation doing everything in honor of the community. She do things she was told to do, she complies with the rules others have imposed upon her. Acquiescence is also in the way she treated the protagonist.

She obeys his command and rarely spoke back even if he was often wrong, she washes and nurtures him and when he feigned sickness, she attended to him. In the end, all of the good things that the man witnessed made him decide not to leave and embrace the life he has with the woman in the dunes. On the other hand, in the movie *Ugetsu Monagotori*, Mizoguchi Kenji portrayed women quite differently because he presented the contrasting views of traditional and modernity. It was traditional in the sense that he seemed to reinforce the common conceptualization of women in the early times and at the same time, a modernized approach because it touched certain aspects of radical feminism. At the beginning, it showed how they were instrumental in the ego-boosting activities of their husbands, which is an inherent characteristic of the Japanese patriarchal society, which is seeking pride at the expense of women. In a more profound analysis, one would observe that the movie is a representation of society's oppression to Japanese women.

Eventually, however, the story progressed in a manner wherein women empowerment is manifested. Then again, the representation of women empowerment was limited to what they can do in relation to their husbands. Thus, it can be said that Mizoguchi actually viewed women to be nothing much without men, and that their success is dependent on the effects it has on their partners. Although it was shown in the movie how the female characters managed to fulfill their pursuits, on the other hand it illustrated that what women are wanting can always be found in men. Thus, it can be said that the illustration of women in the movie was still enormously built on the traditional characterization despite the fact that he tried to empower them in the movie by showing that they can stand up against the oppressive society. It can be seen in these two films how, despite the changes of times, women are still tied to their traditional classification - as a subordinate to men, dependent and submissive.

In the first film, women symbolize the innate characteristics of women to be the nurturer and care giver. In a sense, it seemed to depict how women were in the earlier times. The latter, although there was an attempt to break free of the conventional identification of women, fundamentally was still anchored on it. Nevertheless, it was still quite successful in somewhat showing women's relation to modernity, which is being able to act up on things based on their own choices.

Japanese women indeed have gone a long way since the mid 20th Century until after the War. They have become more empowered; they became more instrumental in the development of the society and are very essential contributors in the growth of the economy. However, despite the changes,

many still chose to embrace and preserve the traditional Japanese women spirit. Then again, that could not totally be considered a bad thing because in spite of the negative connotation, it cannot be denied that it helped develop and shape the Japanese society and culture.

What the country is at present can still be greatly attributed to its past and the innate characteristics of women instilled in them by their history are in certain ways essential for the country. In conclusion, it can be said that dramatic changes indeed have taken place with the role of Japanese women if one is to compare the years before the war and the post-war period. There was indeed a redefinition of the roles that they play in the society as apparent on what they can do before and after the war. Women became more empowered because they now have a sense of equality with men; they are now able to decide on their own, they can participate in economic development and political activities, there are no more limits to what they can learn and in general they became more independent. However, inherent in them are the traditional characteristics of Japanese women, so despite the liberation, many still adheres to old practices.

But then again, the combination of the two only made the present definition better because there become a mixture of the best characteristics that they have before with the progressive ones they are able to develop recently, thus their significance to the society is magnified.