Between Sisters and Snakes: 
Views of the Japanese Woman's Struggle

The struggle of the Japanese woman to acquire equality within patriarchal Japan is such a powerful motif that it transcends generational gaps. Regardless of the change Japan incurred throughout its years of shifting towards Western modernity, there remained an internalized belief that women are bound to their pre-established roles. By exploring the 1936 Kenji Mizoguchi film "Sisters of the Gion" and the 2003 novel "Snakes and Earrings" by Hitomi Kanehara we can see how despite a sixty-seven year gap, the desire to crash through these barriers has not changed -- and neither has the belief that any attempt will meet with failure.

The differences between the two works must first be noted, as these differences ultimately become what connects them. "Sisters of the Gion" was directed by a (at the time) 38-year old male auteur while "Snakes and Earrings" was written by a 21-year old female. The large gap between release dates and the world in which the characters are set also differ -- spanning from a Japan in the midst of modernizing to the resulting modern day Japan. At the heart of the works, we are introduced to characters that are fighting against what the world expects them to be. Mizoguchi, despite being of the male gender, is not oblivious to the plight of women in Japanese society and chose to focus much of his career on this "giri-ninjo" drama that would be exemplified in "Sisters." As Tadao Sato wrote on Mizoguchi's works: "Translated into modern terms, the drama of giri-ninjo [...] becomes, in large measure, a fight against discrimination" (Sato 26). Meanwhile, Kanehara tackles a disillusioned young woman's plight to separate from modern society,
but still founds herself in a sub-culture dominated by men. While the physical world these characters live in have changed, the auteurs have noted the perceived roles of men and women have undergone little transformation. Therefore, the difference in the auteurs are only superficial while their observations -- made nearly seventy years apart -- are the same.

"Sisters of the Gion" tackles the plight of women by introducing the conflict of *giri* v.s. *ninjo* through a pair of geisha sisters with differing ideology. Umekichi, the eldest, believes in *giri* or social duty. However, as previously noted, this "social duty" largely develops into a discrimination -- one that is internalized and prevents someone like Umekichi from breaking free of her subservient role to men. Omocha, the youngest sister, rejects this ideology and pursues *ninjo* or indulgence of personal needs and inclinations (McDonald 20). Omocha is the woman taking charge and attempting to break through these gender barriers, even if she has to use manipulation to do so. She justifies her actions in a conversation with her sister, stating: "Any way you look at it, a geisha's only purpose is to give men pleasure. They pay us to be their playthings" ("Sisters"). It is in this observation of woman's objectification by men that underscores the rest of the film. While Omocha's tactics utilize deceit and manipulation, she is the protagonist, yet even to the viewer there is a disconnect. We do not usually associate lies, manipulation, and hate with "heroic" or "positive" figures, but we passively accept the males as merely cogs in a system and do not condemn them for their participation in objectifying women. We feel uncomfortable with Omocha's methods and understand Umekichi's desire to help someone who she sees as helping her. As the sisters struggle
with *giri* and *ninjo*, so does the viewer. Mizoguchi smartly shows us the complexity of
the world these sisters live in, as well as shows us how easily it is to be taken in by the
system -- how easy it is to blame the victim in a patriarchal society.

Mizoguchi's sympathy towards the plight of women does not prevent him from
holding back on what he believes is the tragic result of "fighting back." Omocha is
victimized twice -- emotionally by the system that forces her into behaving as one of the
men (lying, cheating, etc.) and then physically by the men who dominate the system. Her
sister Umekichi fairs no better as her *giri* only ends in the man she was serving
abandoning her, leaving her in poverty. As Omocha lays on her bed, she unleashes her
anger at the world and her sister for maintaining subservience to men:

> You can hold your head high, but what has anyone done for you? Mr. Furusawa
> may be happy, but what about you? Are you living a life of ease? You meekly did
> as you were told and got nothing in return. If we do our jobs well, they call us
> immoral. So what can we do? What are we supposed to do? Why do we have to
> suffer like this? Why do there even have to be such things as geisha? Why does
> the world need such a profession? It's so unfair. I wish they never existed!

("Sisters")

The camera slowly zooms in on Omocha, removing Umekichi from the frame and
allowing these questions to be asked directly to the viewer. In doing so, the questions are
underlined and if we did not see Omocha as a victim before, we certainly can now. It is
only at the end that we get this deep insight to her feelings and that anger towards
subservience and men suddenly has new weight. The real question becomes: "Why didn't
we understand that all along?" Mizoguchi's decision to place this moment at the end of the film serves to inform us of the intricacy of the Japanese woman's situation. The problems are there, but they are often overlooked in favor of criticizing a woman's actions -- even if they are no different from the men of the same world. This is why the film ends on such a tragic note. Mizoguchi here illustrates that by the time we come to understand this problem, the damage has already been done. By juxtaposing Omocha's failure to break free with Umekichi's failure to attain happiness through remaining part of the system, we hear Mizoguchi's message that there is no foreseeable end to this problem. It has been deeply ingrained in the way things are -- and there are so many questions left to answer.

In "Snakes and Earrings," we see that Mizoguchi's concerns are justified, or at least echoed in modern times. Kanehara's story centers on Lui, a young, modern day Japanese woman who attempts to rebel against the norms of society. As the decades have passed, it would seem that what has really changed for women is the extremes they feel they need to go to in order to reclaim control over their lives. Like Omocha, Lui lies and manipulates the men in her life, but she also goes one step further. She attempts to take charge over her body via piercings, tattoos, and using sex to what she perceives to be her advantage -- but no matter what she does, Lui describes a feeling of "emptiness" (Kanehara 81). Lui is where Omocha was in her last scene -- discovering that there is nothing she can do in order to breech society's walls.

The choices Lui makes are at best an illusion that the men in her life allow her to have and at worst, non-existent. The story starts with Ama suggesting that Lui should
give tongue-splitting a try, to which she nods "by instinct alone" (Kanehara 1). Within
the opening, we've already established Lui has been indoctrinated in the patriarchal
system. A man suggests she does something and on instinct, she agrees. Even when she
decides to get a tattoo and "chooses" the designs, they are inspired by tattoos belonging to
the two men in her life. She is fighting an uphill battle for self-identity and freedom, but
is very incapable of reaching that level. This conflict can be seen most distinctly when
Shiba-san requests payment for the tattoo with sex and she accepts. It is both a choice,
the exertion of her will -- and yet it is also the subservient role of the geisha, performing
duties for the pleasure of a male character. In "Women's Roles in Asia", the authors
acknowledge this duality in Asian women's literature:

[...] throughout almost all of Asia, sexuality is all about the "patriarchal control
exerted over the female body" through the tradition of the obedient and docile
woman or wife [...] Women writers through the centuries therefore have wrestled
with particular issues at particular times in women's literary history. Many times,
they have succumbed to the stereotypical images presented by male literary
artists; at other times, they have rebelled. (Nadeau and Rayamajhi 144)

The role of sexuality is therefore complex. It is both the means women can exert control
and the way women are controlled or used by their male counterparts. Here, Lui enjoys
sex with Shiba-san, but is also submissive to his whims. Shiba-san at one point asks her
what should he does if he finds himself overcome with a desire to kill her during sex to
which she responds: "Then that would be that, I guess" (Kanehara 63). On some level
this suggests Lui is conscious regarding her subservience and helplessness in the face of a
dominant male.

By the ending of "Snakes and Earrings," we understand that Lui's struggle to achieve an identity that is her own was as doomed to failure as Omocha's. By modifying her body and utilizing it as a form of commerce, she presumed her body to be hers and only under her control. However, by the end of the book, Lui has drawn a comparison between her sexual encounters with Shiba-san and his rape of Ama. In the original Japanese, the word "okasu" (rape, violate) is used to describe Shiba's sexual violation of both Lui and Ama (Dinitto 464). In drawing this conclusion, Lui begins to understand her helplessness and that her body has, in fact, not been her own. There's a melancholy sense of acceptance of this fact as in the end she decides to stay with Shiba-san -- though the last scene of her discussing her dream of being surrounded by men angry with her speaks volumes to how she now understands her role in society (Kanehara 120). She may have started out as Omocha, but by the end she has given into subservience and has become Umekichi -- and we know that that road breeds no more happiness.

This problem, whether perceived or actual, persists in the minds of the Japanese. Mizoguchi spent a film career focusing on the struggles of Japanese women to survive, flourish, and achieve equality with men. Kanehara is a young woman in modern day Japan who chose to write about a woman in search of herself, surrounded by male figures that alternatively and simultaneously protect and threaten her well-being. In both works, the women find themselves the victims of men, and any attempt to break the cycle is met with harsh results. The physical abuse of Omocha and the abandonment of Umekichi in "Sisters", as well as the treatment of Lui as the spoils of war in "Snakes and Earrings"
show that despite a push towards modernity, there is a fear that the roles of the past have not changed. The fear is that like Lui's piercing and tattoo, the change is only cosmetic. It has not reached into the soul of the problem and the fear remains after seventy years that it may never do so.

Works Cited


