

Dynamics of the Differently Abled In Anime: Comparative Study Of A *Silent Voice And Josee, The Tiger And The Fish*

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Abstract

This paper will attempt to explore the representation of disability in anime. It will be doing a comparative study of the two anime movies *A Silent Voice* and *Josee, the Tiger and the Fish*. In both the movies, the female protagonists are suffering from different disabilities and the movies present their way of accepting and learning to live with that in different manners. Both protagonists faced various struggles in their daily life and had help from their friends and family. Also, the paper will keep in consideration that both movies are first of all love stories so the analysis will consider the role played by the male protagonists in the two movies. While there are many similarities in the two movies, the most prominent difference has to be the fact that one male protagonist actually started as the bully while the other was kind, if not slightly indifferent, to the female protagonist. But apart from the multi-dimensional characters in the two movies, the paper will also pay attention to the background of the scene and try to unravel the issues of accessibility taken up in the films. There are different locations depicted in the movies and the accessibility differs in every location. The movies not only explore the physical but also the mental and emotional torment of the protagonists via multiple symbols and imagery. This paper, thus, intends to critically compare and contrast these two movies.

Keywords:

Anime; disability; gender; symbolism

Both works- *A Silent Voice* as well as *Josee, The Tiger And The Fish*- are Japanese works; one is a graphic narrative known as manga, while the other is a short story. They were both adapted into animated movies and this paper shall be referring mostly to the anime movie versions of these two works.

A Silent Voice is based on the manga series of the same name written by Yoshitoki Ōima in 2013-14 . It was adapted into a movie in 2016. The creator of this work is quite familiar with sign language and she used her connaissance in this work quite well. *A Silent Voice* follows the story of Shouya Ishida and Shouko Nishimiya, a differently-abled girl, from grade to high school.

Josee, The Tiger And The Fish is based on a short story written by Seiko Tanabe in 1985 and was adapted for the big screen in 2020. The movie version made many minor changes and deviates a bit from the original short story. *Josee, the Tiger and the Fish* movie talks about the lives of Tsuneo and Kumiko who are both above 20 and trying to live successful, independent lives. This paper will start with the analysis of the characters.

Female protagonists

In both the movies, the female characters are differently abled. Shouko was born deaf and also has trouble speaking while Kumiko was born paralysed from waist down. There are no details explaining Kumiko's medical condition and while Shouko is depicted going for checkups, Kumiko has no choice but to simply learn to live with it. Shouko was bullied relentlessly by her classmates but she didn't seem to mind at all and suffered in silence. Only when her mother noticed the signs of bullying, there was some action taken by the school authorities.

However, Kumiko was not the type to suffer in silence. She had a rather different upbringing and was taught to be suspicious of everyone. That explains why she bit the male protagonist Tsuneo in their first meeting. The reason for this could be the huge age difference between the two characters when they first appeared in the respective movies. While Kumiko is 24 years old and heard much about the world from her grandmother, Shouko is only a kid trying to make friends.

But what unites the two girls is the fact that they are both at a double disadvantage. Hiromi Tsuchiya Dollase observes how Kumiko has to be protected from sexual crimes as well

when she is growing up, and Tanabe chose to call her body “troublesome”, “..as a term that summarizes the sense that growing up into a woman simply adds another burden on to her disabled physicality. In other words, a disabled woman is doubly handicapped in society.” (Dollase 35) Similarly, when Shouko tried to talk to the male protagonist Shouya, his female friends felt somewhat jealous of Shouko and bullied her. Once she gets into high school , Shouko’s younger sister takes special care to keep her sister safe from “rats”, or the flirts who she thinks might bother her sister.

Role of Romance

Both movies are essentially love stories and the audience gets to see the female characters through the “healthy, normal” male protagonists Shouya and Tsuneo. They are quite the opposite of the differently abled girls as they are depicted to be quite active, both socially and physically. Shouya was in fact one of the bullies of Shouko but he later on went on to realize he was wrong and carried the heavy burden of guilt for the greatest part of the movie. Tsuneo was offered money by Kumiko’s grandmother to look after her and he viewed it only as a job. But soon they developed a better relationship with the female characters.

Though the creator of *A Silent Voice* refused to depict Shouya and Shouko together in order to not fall in the category of typical shoujo romance and present it as a story of a boy being able to love himself again, it is evident that they develop an understanding beyond friendship. Similarly, in *Josee, the Tiger and the Fish*, Kumiko often refers to Tsuneo as her servant and refuses to acknowledge her feelings for a while but they too end up in a wholesome relationship by the end of the movie. Theirs is a more complex relationship in the original short story but the movie manages to deliver an equally strong point.

When it comes to disabled characters, they are often on the sidelines, let alone have any agency. So by making these movies romantic, there is already a subversion of this convention as the differently abled characters are allowed to show emotions. They not only have agency but instead of being “desired” only, they are “desiring”. Hiromi Tsuchiya Dollase finds a relevant observation of Rosemarie Garland Thomson regarding the disabled women being treated as asexual beings:

“While feminism quite legitimately decries the sexual objectification of women, disabled women often encounter what Harlan Hahn has called “asexual objectification,” the assumption that sexuality is inappropriate in disabled people.... The judgment that the disabled women's body is asexual and unfeminine creates...a

social invisibility and cancellation of femininity that can prompt disabled women to claim the female identity that the culture denies them.²³ (Dollase 37)

Male protagonists

Another thing noted in these two movies is the self-imposed disability of the male protagonists. Shoyo had severe social anxiety. To cope with the guilt, he developed this mechanism in which he simply would not look at other people or even hear what they were saying. Having heard and seen various kinds of looks in childhood after being accused as the sole bully of Shouko, he simply stopped observing the people around him from the fear of persecution. This hampered his social life and he also tried to commit suicide.

Tsuneo, on the other hand, was trying to save Kumiko from a car accident and got injured. He broke his ankle and was told that he is unlikely to be able to run or do adventure sports like before. Having always dreamt of diving in the Mexican seas, Tsuneo is shattered and gives up on studying abroad for his higher education as well as his dream of diving.

Both the characters developed these “disabilities” themselves and found themselves more understanding of the conditions of the differently-abled female protagonists in the movie. Both characters then find strength to overcome their handicaps after getting support and inspiration from the female characters.

It is often seen that handicapped female characters often serve as a symbol in the media and by the end of the movie or book, they are able to miraculously stand up and join the “normal” society. They serve as the allegory of mental and emotional fortitude and their patience and perseverance is thus rewarded. But in these two movies, this trope is also subverted and all four characters develop and learn together. It was Kumiko's book reading that rejuvenated hope in Tsuneo after which he started taking his physiotherapy seriously and was ultimately able to achieve his dream by the end of the movie. Forgiveness and friendship of Shouko allows Shoyo to grow around his guilt and give himself a second chance with society represented in the school festival scene.

Background and accessibility

There are also many hints given in the background of these movies. When we observe the infrastructure of the grade school in *A Silent Voice*, there are no tactile tiles. The attempt to teach sign language to the classmates of Shouko is easily brushed aside and the staff doesn't take any action against the evident bullying. But when Shouko is shown in the other school after a time leap, one can notice the tactile tiles in the background, along with handrails on the stairs and so on. That school was far more accessible and thus Shouko was content there even if none of these things were of any direct help to her. It is simply obvious from the attempt made to make the school accessible to all kinds of students that this school considers everyone equal and there is no space for bullying.

In *Josee, The Tiger And The Fish*, Kumiko is easily able to get ramps to board the trains. There is also a scene depicting a man bumping into Kumiko's wheelchair at the railway station and rudely telling her to stay aside but Tsuneo stands up for her. However, what's more is that immediately afterwards, the same man bumps into another woman and she tells him off and makes him apologize. This minor act allows viewers to feel that it's alright to take help and let others stand for you as well as be brave enough to stand up for oneself. Kumiko is made to realize after multiple outings to the sea, parks and library that the outside world was not as hostile as her grandmother had told her. In fact, it was her own house which was not accessible to her and that is why she attempted to make it cozier by decorating the walls with her artworks. Tsuneo was the one who made Kumiko's house accessible to her by making a skateboard sort of a thing for her to move within the house and a small staircase to reach the kitchen counter.

Symbolism

When it comes to visual media, symbolism also plays an important role in the narrative. While it is important enough in textual media as well, the adaptation of these texts into visual media of anime adds yet another dimension of images and sound.

The motif of water is prominent in both movies. The flowing water, be it the brook in *A Silent Voice* or the sea in *Josee, The Tiger and the Fish*, is the place where the characters give up their prejudices, pain and the past to form friendships. The flowing water imagery adds value to such scenes and echoes the idea of "Be water, my friend" presented by Shannon Lee in the book *Be Water, My Friend: The Teachings of Bruce Lee*. Also, the only time when stagnant water was shown in *A Silent Voice*, it was in the background of the bullying scene, highlighting the negative aspect of the scene. In Japan, water is considered symbolic of fluidity. The sea is

particularly symbolic of triumph over hardship while brooks and water elements within gardens represent rejuvenation and flow of life. The fish, which can be viewed as an extension of the water imagery, represent the dreams and ambitions of Kumiko and Tsuneo in *Josee, the Tiger and the Fish*.

The fear is depicted in a similar manner in both the movies. In *A Silent Voice*, the amusement park rides are representative of the fear, meanwhile in *Josee, the Tiger and the Fish*, it is symbolized by the fearsome tiger in the zoo.

Conclusions

It can be seen that both movies have subverted the conventions of disability in the media and they take an emotional approach to this topic. The depiction of the psyche of all the characters adds to the understanding of the audience as well. They get to experience the perspectives of all kinds of characters. This allows the audience to analyze the characters and their behavior as well as the choices they made and relate it to the real world and society.

As Sameer Chaturvedi observes, “Available data suggest that narratives of disabled people about their own lives work to problematise concept such as oppressed or normalized, that is often used to comprehend the life of the disabled people. As people do go through both good and bad experiences in their lives that often stem from the relationships the person is surrounded by. Myriad of events in life give way to different kinds of emotions that call for a complex understanding of lives of disabled people” (Chaturvedi 68). Both movies sensitize the audience without affecting the agency and impact of its characters and it is a positive step towards the beginning of the inclusion of the differently-abled.

Works cited

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Author's bio-note

Harshita Singh is a final year student of English literature who is not only fond of English literature but also adores Japanese anime and manga. She is also enamored by languages and linguistics and is currently learning French. Her areas of interest include metaphysical poetry, popular fiction and gothic literature.
