



Decoding the Master Code: An Analysis on the Elusive Feminine and the Evasive Moral Agent in Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*

Sudeesh K

Assistant Professor,

Department of English and Cultural Studies,

CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bengaluru.

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Abstract: *This paper looks at the notion of multifaceted and multi-layered reality as it is manifested and constructed in Akira Kurosawa's movie Rashomon (1950). The paper examines the courtroom testimonies of a bandit (Tajomaru), a wife (Masago), the (Spirit) of her husband (Takehiro) who are the main participants in the event and finally a woodcutter who acts as an unseen witness overseeing the whole episode from a distance. The movie offers a riddled choice of action and reaction to the female subject. A symptomatic reading on Rashomon can identify the fissures within the feudal honour code of Japanese Samurai culture, the master code of which sutures the narrative fabric of the movie. Far from substantiating the dialogic nature of meaning and truth, the presence of unreliable narrators and the undecidability of the moral agent of crime reinforce the existing interstices of gender hierarchies. Considering the equations of power relations in feudal Japan, the multiple accounts of reality presented in Rashomon have been critically analysed. In this regard, an attempt has also been made to decode the ideological underpinnings of the master code of gendered social morality which permits the given courses of action and reaction.*

Keywords: *Honour Code, Feudal Japan, Rape and the Agent of Crime, Gendered Perceptions, Narrative Uncertainty, Problematics of Realism.*

This paper looks at the notion of multifaceted and multi-layered reality as it is manifested and constructed in Akira Kurosawa's movie *Rashomon* (1950). In this Japanese movie, psychological and perspectival realism of four major characters is explored in relation to an event of physical assault and murder. The paper explores the themes of reality which is unfolded in this movie as contingent, emotive and relational as it attempts to bring out the problematics of realism. I will be specifically examining the construction of fragile (passive and fickle-minded) femininity in *Rashomon*. Shots and speeches are also be looked at in a way which foregrounds the discursive construction of the feudal masculine as well as the fragile feminine. The paper examines the courtroom testimonies of a bandit (Tajomaru), a wife (Masago), the (Spirit) of her husband (Takehiro) who are the main participants in the event and finally a woodcutter who acts as an unseen witness overseeing the whole episode from a distance while he was passing through the wood. An adumbration of the desire matrix, normative ideals, deviations and fluctuations of a Samurai tradition would illuminate the process in which legitimate and illegitimate subjectivities are shaped and formed.

The movie offers a riddled choice of action and reaction to the female subject. The relativistic realist aesthetics present in the movie can be respectively noted for its modernist and postmodernist sensibilities and the task of the paper is to bring out the political layers of this divergent aesthetic realism which place the enigma

and undecidability of female subjectivity as the driving force of the textual narrative. A symptomatic reading on *Rashomon* can identify the fissures within the feudal honour code of Japanese Samurai culture, the master code of which sutures the narrative fabric of the movie.

The film *Rashomon* depicts the rape of a woman and the murder of her Samurai husband through the widely differing accounts of the bandit-rapist, the wife, the dead man (speaking through a medium), and lastly the woodcutter. The stories are mutually contradictory and even the final version may be seen as motivated by factors of ego and saving one's face. The main reason behind the biased versions of the narratives has been attributed to the egotism that shapes the motive of the witnesses to portray themselves in an amoral sound manner. Apparently, all versions of narrativizing the event of crime scene present the facts of the situation in such a way that it fit well with their ego and situation. Van Es offers a model of egoism to examine the characters as they represent a reality by creating their own moral high grounds:

The film offers an interpretative labyrinth by showing us seven different stories from six perspectives. On crucial points the stories are in conflict. This leads to an unsolvable epistemological problem: we do not know what exactly happened in the woods and who is responsible for what. In this sea of ambiguity people are thrown back upon themselves. The two core themes of the film are the social construction of reality and egoism. (117)

The rape of the wife and the murder of the husband (the Samurai) and the conflicting testimonies of truth make *Rashomon* a dialogic story that harps on the relativistic aspects of truth. It undermines the authenticity of all testimonies where one can never pinpoint the most honest one among all testimonies. On the whole, it gives the viewer an impression that there is nothing called the whole truth. There are only partial truths where what one whimsically wants to believe is passed off as one's reality. There is a cast of doubt on the very credibility and reliability of the respective individual characters who act as available storytellers to decide which one has the strongest argument to believe. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the feudal samurai social fabric in which woman's body is constructed and the manner in which gender roles are assigned in a patriarchal Samurai society call for a symptomatic reading of the ideological background on the otherwise playful movements of the testimonial narratives of *Rashomon*.

Rashomon's woman character, who is the victim of a sexual assault and whose rationalization of the incident is presented as untrustworthy because of the contradictory version from the medium, indicates that the real responsibility of sex crime is eluded from the crime scene. The evasiveness of the moral agent and elusiveness of the moral responsibility of crime is attributed to the very enigma of the feminine. This is the crux of the argument that is being developed in this paper. The failure to assign responsibility can be attributed to the very failure of patriarchal ideology to acknowledge its ideological bias.

Honour, valour, ritual suicide and honour killing is a trope which is popular in many Asian countries, the honour code of Samurai society is noticeably distinct in *Rashomon*. From the various versions of testimonies itself, we can see that the story of *Rashomon* is all about honour and dishonour. Masago, the wife of the Samurai husband, as a victim of rape is the master code through which one can decode the ideological construction of honour in a Samurai system of Japan. Masago represents the symptoms of conventional gender roles and all the male testimonies are attempts at victim-shaming. Tajomaru and Takehiro should be feeling enmity and hostility towards each other. Strangely enough, their version appears to be complimenting each other and the fact that the bandit Tajomaru raped the wife of the samurai is relegated to the background. Tajomaru appreciates Takehiro's skill in sword fighting: "And he fought really well. We crossed swords over twenty-three times. Think of that! No one had ever crossed over twenty with me before. Then I killed him." Takehiro is presented as a man who needs to be sympathised with as his wife has been raped. Adding injury to insult, his wife turned to be unfaithful to him. Masago even asks Tajomaru to kill him if he wants to own her as she realizes that life would be difficult for her when her husband Tajomaru is still alive. She cannot imagine a future life where she lives with the guilt and shame of having two men know her dishonour.

In feudal Japan, it can be noted that Tajomaru, the bandit and a notorious outlaw, is the total other of honour codes of the samurai society. He comes from the wood as a traumatic real that disrupt the moral foundation of the samurai honour code. For him,

it was about stealing her from the samurai and this is emphasized in his line “The sight of her made me jealous of that man; I started to hate him. I wanted to show her what he looked like, all tied up like that. I hadn’t even thought of a thing like that before, but now I did.” His jealousy represents the repressed otherness as well as the vindictive spirit of the bandit towards the hegemonic symbolic order of the samurai civil society as such. Furthermore, the bandit’s version of the crime scene tries to suggest that he too is a man of principles and sentiments. His prime motive was the unquenchable lust for the woman owned by the Samurai. Furthermore, he just wanted to humiliate the samurai husband, not to kill him. It was the wife of Samurai; the sole woman character, upon whose instigation, triggers the sword fight, the declaration that she would be with the man who wins the duel. To be alive as a shamed woman, that too being disgraced before two men is something unimaginable for a woman of her stature.

The account of the dead man, the samurai husband, is presented through a medium which can contact and recall the dead world. Strangely enough, the medium’s speech resonates well with normative ideals of naturalized gender roles. According to the version presented by the medium, the husband was helpless as he was tricked by the bandit. He encounters the pressure of a samurai warrior lineage. He grapples with his injured status as Samurai when his wife allegedly cheats and betrays him. Just like the Hindu mythological character Lord Rama who had to face the scandals towards his wife Sita, the lineage of a warrior Samurai would be blemished when the public comes to know that he could not protect the honor his wife. Therefore, it can also be argued that the woman

who acts as a medium of the dead husband follows the predominantly hegemonic moral code of feudal Japan. The medium makes an effort to further scandalize the wife of Samurai as she weaves the narrative of moral crises in which the Samurai husband presents himself as a victim of his wife's infidelity and moral depravity. Overall, the medium's speech shows the frustrations of a Samurai whose ego ideal is primarily defined by valour and feudal masculinity.

The samurai's wife had her own version to present. Her 'modesty' has been violated by a bandit and the shame over this sexual assault is evident in her version. She pleads her husband to kill her for what she has just happened to her instead of looking at her in a disapproving manner. Her husband's cold expression crushed her soul so much so that she fainted with the dagger in her hand. The wife's version that she fainted on the spot and that, her husband had died when she got up is contradicted by the medium. It recounts the samurai's version, as told by him from the world of the dead, as the wind howls. The samurai is heartbroken and his wife turned out to be a villainous and deceptive woman when she pleaded the bandit Tajomaru who had raped her to kill her husband. But the bandit Tajomaru ignores her and feels one with the plight of the husband. Tajomaru leaves the scene and cuts the samurai loose. Because of the trauma of what has just happened, he commits suicide just as any Samurai man of honour would do when faced with such a humiliating experience. The Britannica entry on Samurai tradition provides the details regarding the prestige occupied by the Samurai. The Samurai held the social rank of the aristocratic

military nobility during the medieval and early modern Japan. Regarding the ideals of Samurai, Britannica states:

The ideal samurai was supposed to be a stoic warrior who followed an unwritten code of conduct, later formalized as Bushidô, which held bravery, honour, and personal loyalty above life itself; ritual suicide by disembowelment (seppuku) was institutionalized as a respected alternative to dishonour or defeat.

Therefore, the medium presents a different version which projects the wife as guilty of infidelity and fickle-mindedness. A samurai's honor depends on the fidelity and chastity of his wife. In other words, a samurai's wife is a delicate possession to be guarded if he wants to live as man of pride and dignity. The moment she is sexually shared by another man, his honour code crumbles.

The female character is caught in between the bandit who tried to blemish her honour as well as the injured pride of her Samurai husband. He makes no gesture of reassuring and consoling his wife who has just faced a traumatizing attack from an outlaw. With utmost bitterness, the Samurai husband goes to the extent of disowning his dishonoured wife. Now, she has to choose a course of action that would ensure her a secure life. For the dispossessed wife, it is truly a choice between dishonoured life and death or survival. The samurai code of conduct does not apply to the woman character when the situation becomes this dire. Furthermore, the rationalization of the rape incident from the predominant gaze of patriarchy is quite evident in the perspectives in which masculinity

and womanhood has been defined by the underlying value systems of Samurai culture. In this context, it would be worthwhile to recall Laura Mulvey's study on the cinematic conventions of classic Hollywood. Mulvey's article entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" brings out the psychic investments in female representations:

The paradox of phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world. An idea of woman stands as lynch pin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies. (6-18)

In his article "Film style and narration in *Rashomon*", Nick Redfern makes the following observation with regard to stylistic aspects of visualization:

This active/passive distinction is also evident in the use of camera angles: the use of high and low angles in the bandit's and the wife's versions contribute to their narration by defining relationships between characters in terms of their dominance and sub-ordination to one another, whereas the high frequency of neutral angles in the husband's narration refuses to establish these types of relationships for the viewer. This distinction also reflects the level of agency of the characters within the film: the bandit initiates events in the forest through his sexual desire for the wife while the duel for her honour is fought at the wife's

insistence, but the husband has no such power and is forced to react to the other characters. (21-36)

The bandit rapist Tajomaru and his version of the incident portrays him as a man who is virulent, smart and romantic. He is capable of separating a married woman from her own husband even after raping her. Alongside this, Tajomaru appreciates the grace in which the Samurai husband fought for his wife. After raping the wife of the samurai husband, the bandit pleads with the woman to be his wife. She replies to this by saying, "But, how could I answer? How could I, a woman, answer a question like that?" It clearly shows that the choice is a self-defeating and humiliating choice on the one hand to choose the bandit rapist and to choose her husband who is on the verge of abandoning her. It is indeed a tough choice.

Each individual character presents different versions of the crime scene; the bandit claims that he had no other option but to win over the Samurai husband in a brave sword fight as the wife demanded the two men for a duel to save her from dishonour. This version of story is further substantiated by the woodcutter as he describes the cowardly sword fight between them, with slightly modified details. The wife's account brings out her helpless attempts to retain her dignity when her husband rejects her following the rape, while the husband's account brings out the injured ego of a Samurai, a lost man who would even pardon the atrocity committed by the bandit. What leads the Samurai to his ritual suicide is the unfaithful manner through which his wife responded to the traumatic event of rape.

The final account of the woodcutter, who does not want to initially get involved with the crime and who acts as a hidden eye witness to the whole episode, presents the two men as weak and cowardly. He contradicts the bravado of their sword fight. They were fighting a frantic fight with no mastery of sword skills. As a bandit and as a samurai husband, Tajomaru and Takehirowere initially reluctant to even take a duel for Masago's sake. The woodcutter further testifies that it is only because of Masago's instigation and mockery of their masculinity, they finally resolve to fight a duel, that too in a clumsy manner. The flaming words of Masago trigger the male ego of both Tajomaru and Takehiro:

“It's not me, not me - it's you two who are weak. If you are my husband then why don't you kill this man? Then you can tell me to kill myself. That is what a real man would do. But you aren't a real man. That is why I was crying. I'm tired, tired of this farce. I thought that Tajomaru might find some way out. I thought that if he would only save me I would do anything for him. But he's not a man either. He's just like my husband! Just remember.....that a woman loves only a real man.”

Prior to this instigation from Masago, Tajomaruwas not even ready to injure himself in a sword fight so that he can win the heart ofMasago. Likewise,Takehiro is not bold enough to take revenge for what the bandit Tajomaruhas done to his wife. Both men were initially confused and bewildered. They could overcome their cluelessness when the woman character challenged their masculinity.

The absence of a strong condemnation of the event of rape and the emphasis on the conflicting points of view makes *Rashomona* movie of indeterminate moral responsibility in which each version of reality is pushed to the domain of inauthentic and unreliable world. To sum up, it can be reasonably surmised that the existing stereotypes about gender roles have shaped the narrative logic of *Rashamon*. Far from substantiating the dialogic nature of meaning and truth, the presence of unreliable narrators and the undecidability of the true agent of crime reinforces the existing interstices of gender hierarchies. Considering the equations of power relations in feudal Japan, the multiple accounts of reality presented in *Rashomon* have been critically analysed. In this regard, an attempt has also been made to decode the ideological underpinnings of the master code of gendered social morality which permits the given courses of action and reaction.

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