

Name: Callum Elley

Student Number: 1902744

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Hayao Miyazaki is a world-renowned Japanese animator, director, and producer. Best known for his works under animation company Studio Ghibli. A powerhouse in the industry, creating and animating over twenty feature films over the last 37 years. With a new film set to be released in 2023. Some of his most popular works include *Spirited away* (2001), *Howl's moving castle* (2004) and *My neighbour Totoro* (1988). This will be an examination of the films by Miyazaki. And how his use of feminism in his films create strong independent female lead characters that challenge the patriarchal societal norms. key films from Miyazaki to better understand the use of feminism and gender representation in his work. How they look away from the "normal" depiction of female characters in cinema and how he makes them work as strong female character leads. *Spirited away*, *Howl's moving castle* and *Princess Mononoke* (1997)

Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli

Born in Tokyo in 1941, Miyazaki began his career as an animator at the Japanese studio Toei Animation, where he worked on several popular television series. In 1979, he co-founded the animation studio "Studio Ghibli" along with director Isao Takahata and producer Toshio Suzuki. Miyazaki would go on to produce over twenty feature film animations and short films and become "Japan's (and one of the world's) most acclaimed and influential animators" (Greenberg, 2018). Using his success. He creates a platform to demonstrate his Strong and complex female characters, to challenge the norms of the patriarchal society.

History of women in Japan

Firstly, this section will briefly examine the way women have been portrayed over the years in Japanese media. Women in Japanese culture were predominantly seen as objects. To provide for the household and family, and that's it. In her book *Transforming Japan* (2011) Fujimura-Fanselow states that in the late 1800's "A woman had very few legal rights. When she married, she entered her husband's family (and his family register), and control of her property was

transferred to her husband. Custody of children was held by the father exclusively" (Fujimura-Fanselow, 2011). She then goes on to state "The Girls' High School Law, issued in 1899, aimed to educate girls to become "good wives and wise mothers." The number of women's secondary schools increased as time passed. However, women were expected to support their husbands, raise children, and not work outside the home." This shows that women were only expected to do their duties to their husbands and the family. Essentially stripping them of aspirations of their own. Japanese women did not obtain the ability to vote or legal equality in marriage until after World War II. (Fujimura-Fanselow, 2011) In which following Japan's defeat in the war brought about change in equality and granted women more rights as equals to man. Although Japan's positive modernisation of equality for women. Women and young girls were still subjected to patriarchal norms and gendered stereotypes, especially in schools. Another issue that prevents young women from pursuing science education or employment is the culture of adolescent youth, which is preoccupied with being "beautiful." (Fujimura-Fanselow, 2011) In Japan, gender stereotypes are strengthened during the formative years of secondary school students, making it virtually impossible to encourage females to improve their science skills and so connect themselves to future jobs in science. (Fujimura-Fanselow, 2011). Instead, there are several publications and other forms of media aimed towards young women that focus on how to be "beautiful" and "feminine." (Fujimura-Fanselow, 2011). Women's periodicals rarely cover science or technology; instead, they emphasise fashion, beauty, and the body. Rarely do female protagonists in the main roles of comic books, animated movies, or television dramas appear in scientific settings (Fujimura-Fanselow, 2011). This is what Miyazaki's films aim to challenge.

The use of female characters in Japanese media. Particularly in animation, has been plagued with stereotypes. Especially the way that women are portrayed physically. Women's physique in anime typically has "enormous breasts" and "slim waistlines." They appear to be exuberant, awkward, and timid in their actions and demeanour. The female characters either follow or change to match heterosexual stereotypes (Palit, 2022). This shows that it is done mainly to appease the male audience. This is also known as the "Male gaze" a term popularised by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey. The Male gaze is where heterosexual men's perspectives on women in the media are used to portray these women as docile objects of male desire. Even if they are heterosexual women or homosexual men, audiences are compelled to see women from the perspective of a heterosexual male. (Sampson, 2015). This use of the "male gaze" in anime especially is quite rampant. The use of one dimensional oversexualized female characters to appease to the male audience as a sort of service. Where the male characters are portrayed as the hero's more often than not. Palit also suggests that if a female character

does not adhere to the male gaze, then they tend to be subjected as the “villain” in the story. “The female characters are frequently influenced to spend money on romance, fashion, or like to elevate the notion of marriage. In Animes, most of the anti-patriarchal female characters are portrayed as opponents or “evil”.” (Palit, 2022).

Although it is typical for animation in Japan to have these sorts of characters. Miyazaki seldom uses these tropes. If at all. He instead employs the use of strong female lead characters with little to no oversexualisation in their design. Viewing them as actual people and hero's, rather than an object to be sexualized for the purpose of drawing in the male audience. Following this will be a discussion on the four films previously mentioned in the introduction. Looking at them in more detail and how the Miyazaki uses these characters to destroy gender tropes.

Spirited away.

Spirited away is a 2001 Japanese animated fantasy film written and directed by Miyazaki. It follows the story of a young girl named Chihiro who, while moving to a new neighbourhood, stumbles upon a mysterious town inhabited by spirits and supernatural beings. Chihiro is then forced to work in a bathhouse for the spirits in order to keep herself safe and set her parents free from a spell that's caused them to turn into pigs. She befriends a young boy named Haku along the way and learns about the spirit world and its amazing secrets.

Spirited away was a tremendous success. “Smashing the box-office record set by James Cameron's all-conquering *Titanic* it became, and remains, Japan's highest-grossing film” (Blanc and Odell, 2019). Indeed, it was a hit. Although it would get surpassed as the highest grossing film in Japan by *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba – The Movie: Mugen Train* (2020) a year after this quote was written. It remained at the top for almost 2 decades. And is still the second highest in all of Japan.

Chihiro is the main subject of the film. A 10-year-old girl who's lost in a world of spirits. Who's trying to find her way home. Even though Chihiro is only 10 years old. She is portrayed as brave and resourceful who adapts very quickly to the change of scenery she is thrust into. “Chihiro is a do-er, capable and intelligent, she is independent in spirit but does not shun responsibility.” (Blanc and Odell, 2019). Chihiro is forced to work in the bathhouse run by antagonist Yubaba, the witch that cursed her parents and stole her name. But Chihiro never once complains about having to work to survive. She stays strong and does what she has to do. Never losing sight of her goal. “This is the way that Miyazaki's women deal with any crisis – they buckle down and get on with life.” (Blanc and Odell, 2019).

Another thing that makes Chihiro stand out is her design. Typically, female characters in animation have large eyes, and mannerisms that are of the upbeat nature (Crombie, 2019). But instead, Miyazaki gave Chihiro “small features and a sullen expression, as well as a lanky and boyish frame” (Crombie, 2019). To prevent any form of sexualisation. This negates the effect of the “male gaze” that was previously discussed. Going against norms in the industry where female characters are used as sexualised objects. This is a frequent practice in Miyazaki’s characters. None of which adhere to the male gaze and none of them exists to just please the male audience. Further in the film Chihiro must embark on a journey to save Haku, the boy who helped her at the start. In this reversal of typical gender roles in film where the damsel in distress is saved by the prince charming. It is in fact Chihiro who saves Haku. Which is not very common in animation. Typically, in western animation and princess stories its always the man saves the woman. Not the other way around.

But *Spirited Away* even turns the tired narrative about a damsel in distress waiting for her prince to rescue her (and later marry her, naturally) on its old gray head as 10-year-old Chihiro embarks on a side mission to save Haku (McDonnell, 2015)

In *spirited away* there aren’t many male characters. In fact, there’s only about four that have any significance. Haku, Chihiro’s father, Aogaeru a frog in the bathhouse and Kamaji the boiler man. Out of four of the male character listed. Two of them are portrayed as greedy. Chihiro’s father is portrayed as greedy right from the start at the food tent. Where he turns into a pig due to his greed. And when Aogaeru is met by no-face, a spirit that wanders into the bathhouse. Aogaeru is lured in by the temptation of gold that’s provided by No-face. And ultimately pays the biggest price. Letting his greed consume him he gets eaten by no-face and swallowed. With No-face “gaining his capitalist, male attributes.” (Crombie, 2019). This portrayal of men in a bad light is in tune with the switching of gender roles in Miyazaki’s films. Instead of the men being portrayed as perfect and high standard. They are instead weak-willed characters who resort instantly to power and greed when given the chance.

Spirited away does a lot for feminism, especially for younger girls. Who was primarily Miyazaki’s target audience. Given them a bright strong kind female character that they could relate to, because at the end of the day. Chihiro is still a child. But nonetheless a strong female child.

"I wanted to retire," he said, "but life isn't that easy. I wanted to make a movie especially for the daughters of my friends. I opened all the drawers in my head they were all empty. So, I realized I had to make a movie just for 10 year olds, and 'Spirited Away' is my answer."

(Ebert & Miyazaki, *Hayao Miyazaki interview* 2002)

Howl's Moving castle

Initially a book by British author Diana Wynn Jones. *Howl's Moving Castle* is a fantasy adventure film directed by Miyazaki. The story follows Sophie, a young girl who is turned into an old woman by a curse and seeks out the help of the wizard Howl. Together, they embark on a journey through a fantastical world filled with talking fire-demons, flying machines, and enchanted castles. Susan Napier, a professor of the Japanese program at Tufts University suggests that *Howl's moving castle* is a film that challenges The American invasion of Iraq. Leading to Howl being given a war storyline by Miyazaki as a consequence of his rage over the Iraq invasion (Napier, 2018). Napier also states that the film could be taken as a critique of social difficulties in Japan. At a time where "the divorce rate in Japan remained far lower than that of the other industrialized countries, relations between the generations grew increasingly negative," (Napier, 2018, p. 226-227) Suggesting that Howl's character slightly resembles a "hikkikomori". A person who "is socially avoidant to the point of staying isolated at home for at least six months without social interaction." (Akre, 2022) Napier goes on to describe Howl by saying "While Howl is hardly a textbook hikkikomori, his narcissism, lack of responsibility, and isolation at the beginning of the film suggest a socially unevolved young man." (Napier, 2018, p. 226-227). Napier also states, "The other characters also initially seem to have little interest in family relationships." (Napier, 2018, p. 226-227). Napier then goes onto discuss themes of family in *Howl's moving castle*. Relating it back to the theory of Howl being a hikkikomori. As the film progresses the cast of main characters start to develop relationships with each other. Effectively forming their own little family. Howl grows less distant to the other characters, and they grow closer. "Howl now faces the world, but this time with his new family to support him" (Napier, 2018, p. 226-227)

When Sophie is introduced, she initially appears to be rejecting the role that tends to be placed on women, restricting, and demanding certain behaviours from young girls, including being charming or flirty. But her transformation into old age gives her the most decisive ability to reject the limitations of young femininity. (Napier, 2018). And then she is turned into an old woman by the Witch of the waste. If Miyazaki were to conform to gendered stereotypes in this film, Sophie would be distraught by this realisation that she's old. But instead, isn't. Because Sophie isn't driven by vanity and the way she looks, she comes to terms with the change relatively quickly. And simply gets on with it. Going as far as to make light of her situation by making a joke that her clothes finally suit her. This shows that Sophie

doesn't conform to gender stereotypes. If anything, she gains a sense of empowerment in becoming old. Giving her the push to set out on an adventure to find help, and ultimately, she finds herself. Something she may have not done if the curse never happened. The fact that Sophie remains an old woman for the majority of the film also challenges gender roles. With Female characters typically being young and attractive to appease the male audience. She stays as old woman for well over a third of the film, showing that a female character doesn't need to be young and attractive to still have an impact on the viewer.

There's a stark contrast between Howl and Sophie. Howl exhibits vanity throughout the film, a trait usually stereotyped to women. While Sophie portrays a headstrong, determined, and courageous character. Character traits typically found in male characters. This switching of gender roles creates a disruption in what is usually "normal" in movies. This switching is obvious when you look into howl's character particularly. "love becomes this point of tension with age and appearances. It is also a gendered experience that becomes reversed. Howl, voiced by Christian Bale, a powerful young wizard, also struggles with his narcissism and becomes the focal point of expectations of beauty" (Delgado, 2021). This is particularly true when howl's hair dye gets mixed up, and he ends up turning his hair a bright orange. Instead of being okay with it, he devolves into a hollow shell of himself at the mere thought of him not being "beautiful" anymore calling himself "repulsive" just because of his hair. This vanity portrays him in a light that male characters are not typically portrayed in. Whereas Sophie's character, much like Chihiro in *Spirited Away* is portrayed as the typical hero to rescue the damsel in distress. Which in this case is Howl. During the course of the film Sophie is trapped in the body of an old woman, but as she starts gaining more confidence and self-assurance. She starts reverting back to her normal age. And ultimately becomes her real age when she fully comes to terms with herself. And by professing her love for Howl, saves him and herself in the process. "Just as Chihiro frees Haku from the spell that holds him captive through the power of love, so Sophie rescues both Howl and Calcifer by the same magically simple means." (Cavallaro, 2006, p. 171)

While *Howl's moving castle* exhibits the least amount of feminist theme's that the other two films in this essay do. It still exhibits strong female characters such as Sophie, and even the films antagonist Madame Suliman. It's use of reversed gender stereotypes that challenge the normal create a sense of empowerment. Not just for the women, but for the male characters too. Giving them insecurities that aren't usually present.

Princess Mononoke

Princess Mononoke is a 1997 Japanese animated epic fantasy film written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki. Set in the late Muromachi period of Japan (Kelly, 2022), the story follows the young Emishi warrior Ashitaka as he attempts to bring peace to the land by ending a battle between the animal gods of the forest and the humans who seek to destroy them. Although the “Main” character of the film, who’s story we follow is indeed Ashitaka. The main plot in fact revolves around two women. San, a woman raised by wolves after being abandoned by her parents at a young age. Who protects the forest to ensure the survival of her wolf mother and other gods that live among her. And Lady Eboshi. The owner of the ironworks in iron town. Whose goal is to protect the ironworks, and her workers that work there. Both of these women are similar in terms of goals. Both wanting to protect what they hold dear by any means necessary. Even if that means the destruction of one another.

At first glance, Lady Eboshi would seem to be the antagonist of the story because she is aggressively hostile and destroying the forest. (Blanc and Odell, 2019) At the start of the film, Ashitaka’s village is attacked by an unknown demon. Ashitaka managed to defeat the demon, but not before getting cursed by it. It is later found out that the demon was the Boar god Nago. And the iron ball that was inside him causing him to turn into a demon was a product of Lady Eboshi. Miyazaki presents Lady Eboshi to the viewers before they even learn her name through the havoc her venture causes. The audience sees the manufacturer of the iron ball as the film’s villain, based only on the iron ball’s involvement in the opening scene (Denison, 2018) The first time we meet Lady Eboshi, she is a very pretty woman, with the standard kimono and hair done up into a bun, very typical of Japanese women in that era. But unlike the stereotype trope of women. She is portrayed as immediately head strong and courageous. While her party is being attacked by the wolves of the forest. Lady Eboshi stands her ground and fires a gun at the charging wolf. All while all her male party members are defeated by either the wolf, or by fear. Lady Eboshi takes the wolf head on. These actions show that she is not a weak woman. Who isn’t overcome by fear and will do what needs to be done to ensure the safety of her party. Also breaking the stereotype of that damsel in distress previously talked about. Where Lady Eboshi didn’t need to be saved, but rather the one doing the saving. This is a common theme in Miyazaki’s work, which has been present in all three titles discussed in this essay. Later on in the film we learn that Lady Eboshi owns the ironworks in the town. The workers of which are mostly Lepers. A people that are suffering from the disease called “Hansen’s disease” or “Leprosy” who were “a maligned part of society” (Blanc and Odell, 2019) and women that Lady Eboshi saved from brothels. Who were once prostitutes, saving them from oppressive environments where they were treated as objects for male satisfaction. These

women then take on roles in the ironworks typically taken on by men. These charitable actions create contrast in her initial portrayal as “the evil villain.” (Denison, 2018) says “Where she fails to take care of nature, she steps in to take care of those who are shunned by the rest of society.” This gives her character much more depth. Instead of having a “villain” who wants to destroy the world and use it for her benefit. It shows a woman who is just doing what she can for her people. Whatever means necessary to protect her town. Much like what San is doing in the forest. Lady Eboshi’s attitude towards her workers is an act of feminism itself. Having her women do jobs in the ironworks such as blacksmiths and labourers is a clear act of gender reversal in society. Typically, these roles are done by men. To do hard labour and other such “manly” work. But *Princess Mononoke* instead proves that women can also do the job just as well, if not better. Going against patriarchal standards in the industry and reversing stereotypes that women are placed in. “Without a doubt, she firmly believes that they are just as strong as any group of men.” (Manal, 2021).

San on the other hand is a woman born to parents that abandoned her in the forest at a young age. Leading to her being raised as a part of a wolf pack. As a dweller of the forest, she is the nemesis of our first main female character Lady Eboshi. But in turn, San is depicted as the “good” character in contrast to Lady Eboshi is depicted as the “bad” character. Because San is fighting for the forest, the audience’s immediate assumption is that San is the heroin of the film, to try and beat evil that is Lady Eboshi and her industrialisation of the forest. But instead, you see remarkably similar characteristics in Both these women’s, actions. Firstly, her appearance. We first see San by the riverside with the wolves after Moro (the wolf god) gets shot by Lady Eboshi on the mountain pass. We see this feral animal girl dressed in fur and facial markings whose mouth is covered in blood and after sucking at the wound from the wolf. Immediately this destroys female gender stereotypes by not having her as a conventional “pretty girl” but instead a rough and “feral” woman with cuts and grazes all over her. With rough hair and ragged clothes covered in blood, but also jewellery and a slight feminine look to her “The presentation of her character blends the fierce with the feminine, never dismissing one in favour of the other” (Denison, 2018). San, much like Lady Eboshi also possesses the qualities that are typically used to characterise masculinity in male characters, such as bravery, independence, and aggression. San, though, is also sympathetic in her desire to defend her mother Moro and preserve the forest. Like Lady Eboshi, she possesses both negative and positive traits. (Manal, 2021).

There are many similarities between the two female leads. San and Lady Eboshi. While there being a stark contrast in, they're beliefs. The actions that both these women take are more similar than not. The argument of having a villain and a hero in this film is disrupted by the use of two female lead characters who both have things they want to protect. Creating a sort of discourse in who the audience think is "the real villain." By creating two strong female character with different views yet similar goals. Miyazaki creates two extraordinarily strong female characters that protest patriarchal norms and show you can be a strong leader and fight for what you believe in as a woman.

Conclusion

Using the three films discussed in this examination of Miyazaki's work. The use of feminism in these three films clearly show Miyazaki's respect for women and what they're capable of. He uses these characters to a great extent and creates brilliant and magical stories with women at the forefront. His strong female characters step out of the limelight and outperform his male characters at every turn. It is clear that his female characters are able to break down that wall of gender stereotypes designed by the patriarchal society. To empower women and show that women can also be headstrong leaders and heroes without the need of men. From Chihiro's ability to survive in a world unknown to her and face the dangers as a 10-year-old child. To the strength that Lady Eboshi has to make challenging decisions to ensure the survival and prosperity of her people, even if they come at being labelled as "the villain." His characters provide a much-needed break in the regular telling of female characters. Empowering them and setting them apart from what the patriarchal society wants them to be. "Similarly, the women's roles in Miyazaki's films often deviate from gender stereotypes, his female characters showing strong convictions and determination" (Blanc and Odell, 2019).

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