

Passionate Women, Vengeful Spirits: Female Ghosts and the Japanese Gothic Mode

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Received 26 October 2023 | Revised 22 March 2024 |

Accepted 22 March 2024 | Published online 5 December 2024

Abstract

Female phantasms of the living and the dead that appear in Japanese folklore and literature involve a dual image of women: the representation of a patriarchal ideal of women, and the monstrous double that revolts against that ideal. Representations of this folklore-inspired ideal/monstrous woman can be seen in a wide-ranging array of twentieth and twenty-first century Japanese fiction, from the early cannibalistic spirits in folklore-inspired tales to Romantic and Absurdist works to possession narratives. This essay builds upon extant research from folklorists and cultural anthropologists as well as critical literary theories on the appearance of ghosts in Japanese fiction. I assert that certain feminine ghostly presences in twentieth century Japanese literature may be termed an expression of Globalgothic, especially through ghost stories that demonstrate the subordination of women and their subversive acts via implementation of the supernatural.

Keywords

Japanese literature – supernatural fiction – folklore – comparative literature – cultural studies – Gothic studies

1 Japanese Ghosts and the Gothic Mode

Despite recent attempts to broaden its usage, the term “Japanese Gothic” in twentieth century literary studies remains narrowly assigned to authors who

were strongly influenced by Western literature, especially during the early part of the century, such as Tanizaki Jun'ichiro, Izumi Kyoka, and Edogawa Rampo. On one hand, Henry J. Hughes has noted that the label "Gothic" often functions as an indication of foreign influences on Japanese literature, especially from Britain and America; his work follows other scholars and critics from Japan, such as Higashi Masao, Komatsu Kazuhiko, and Yoshida Yūki. On the other hand, some scholars have begun to broaden the definition of the Gothic in Japanese contexts. Raechel Dumas focuses on J-horror and has limited her discussion of the Gothic to references to architecture and the fear it inspires.¹ Lindsay Nelson takes a broader stance, asserting that a Japanese Gothic might be an expression of affinity of circumstances, despite differing backgrounds: "Japan's Gothic traditions may have their foundations in Buddhism and folk tales rather than novels ... but the tensions at their heart, as well as the characters and tropes that occur with great frequency, are not so different from those found in English-Language Gothic stories."² At the same time, contemporary works of animation, cinema, and manga have been examined for Gothic influences without any such stigma attached. Thus, the word Gothic is most associated with popular culture in Japan such as music and cinema, and not as much with fiction.³

I argue here that the Gothic in Japan is a phenomenon of the global spread of the Gothic motif. Japanese Gothic is a motif of fear, hidden transgressions, and excess that draws upon influences both domestic and foreign. As in "Globalgothic," so termed by Glennis Byron's edited volume of the same name, Gothic as a motif can be attached to specific locations but possesses similar contexts or circumstances for its appearance. Byron indicates that Globalgothic interrogates whether the Gothic is a "more dynamic process of transnational exchange with new forms being produced or old forms revitalized."⁴ Japanese Gothic, so defined, possesses

1 Raechel Dumas, "Monstrous Motherhood and Evolutionary Horror in Contemporary Japanese Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 45, no. 1 (2018): 36, <https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.45.1.0024>.

2 Lindsay Nelson, "Pure Poison: The Gothic Femme Fatal in Japanese Horror Cinema," *Meiji Daigaku Kyōyōronshū* 537, (December 2018): 23.

3 Further, many twentieth century scholars refrained from classifying works of Japanese literature as Gothic for fear that it would devalue the authors. There has long been a tension between so-called serious fiction, or *junbungaku*, juxtaposed against popular fiction in Japanese contexts. They have separate literary prizes and separate criticism. The validity of the tension between the two has been much debated over the past century and increasingly into the contemporary era, which partly explains why depictions of the grotesque and macabre in Japanese literature have often been viewed through the lens of the fairy tale or religion rather than the Gothic.

4 Glennis Byron, "Introduction," *Globalgothic*, ed. Glennis Byron (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 2.

tensions with Japanized stories and indigenous folklore. It is particularly interesting to consider the evolution of a Japanese Gothic from the Meiji period (1868–1912) onwards, a period of rapid industrialization and colonial ambitions, for the historic tensions, both domestic and international, regarding influences from continental Asia, Europe, and beyond. These tensions play out in a number of literary styles, including ghost stories, which historically focused social issues such as economic and gender inequality and had already evolved to encompass and Japanize stories with origins outside the archipelago. For this reason, Japanese ghost stories are already themselves a melting pot, albeit one that is usually seen as having become native, rather than foreign. I acknowledge my argument here may be at odds with some contemporary scholars of Japanese weird and horror fiction, particularly Higashi Masao who has asserted that “Gothic” is from “foreign lands.”⁵ Nevertheless, asserting that there is a Globalgothic modality at work in Japanese literature, both serious and popular, lends Japanese ghosts an additional dimension of interest. In addition, it allows the Gothic motif to be reexamined in Japanese literary fiction beyond its acknowledged presence as an influence from European and American literatures.

2 Female Ghosts in Japan, Confluences and Influences

As previously mentioned, ghosts are an important site of global confluence and influence, both within the text and within scholarship. Regarding Japanese ghosts, there is a tendency in Anglophone scholarship on the ghostly to use some version of Peter Underwood’s eight types of ghosts (elementals, poltergeists, historical ghosts, mental imprints, crisis apparitions, time slips, living ghosts, and haunted objects) in a variety of non-Anglophone contexts,

5 Masao Higashi, “Maegaki” [Introduction], *Goshikku Bungaku Nyumon* [An Introduction to Gothic Literature], ed. Masao Higashi (Tōkyō: Chikuma Bunkō, 2020), 6. By terming Japanese Gothic “nihonteki goshikku” [a Japanese-like Gothic], he also sets up the reader to conclude that Japanese Gothic is both a new and an ambiguous term. He begins the volume with several authors of Japanese nationality who have close ties to British and American Gothic, including essays about how these Gothic works inspired theirs. In the same essay collection, see for example, Edogawa Rampo’s essay “‘Yūreitō’ no omoide” [Memories of “A Woman in Grey”] about his encounters with A. M. Williamson’s fiction (11–14) or a Japanese translation of an essay by Lafcadio Hearn (Koizumi Yakumo), “Monk Lewis and the School of Horror and Mystery” (15–27). Both are widely considered as having been under foreign influences, and thus calling their work Gothic seems acceptable among even conservative scholars because their works have an overtly global context.

including Japan. Japanese ghosts do bear some similarity to these eight types, but the comparison does not cover the full extent of ghostliness in a Japanese context, as Japanese ghosts can haunt a particular place, person, or object. As Katarzyna Marak notes, “in both cultures the presence of a ghost might be centered around a place or a person – a haunting, or it may realize the ghosts: personal affair of some sort, predominantly retribution.”⁶ Further, Japanese ghosts possess many characteristics in common with European and European-influenced societies due socio-cultural influences, while also demonstrating how these influences evolved and took on their own meaning in Japanese society. For example, haunting and retribution are both important themes to ghost legends from many cultures. However, some European and American (predominantly Christian) spirit types that take revenge are not truly applicable to Japan, and the way the revenge is enacted can be different. *Yūrei* are not depicted as mere energy manifestations that can harm by the throwing of objects, like the poltergeist. The most important difference between Western ghosts and Japanese ghosts is that the latter can fool the living into believing that they too are alive, make love to them, force them to commit heinous acts, or even kill them. Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962), one of the pioneers of *yōkai* studies, claimed in the 1950s that ghosts could only haunt a person, but monsters haunt a place. His definition was finally officially displaced in the late 1980s with the publication of Suwa Haruo's (1934–) *Nihon no yūrei* (Japanese Ghosts). “Suwa proposed a drastic revision to Yanagita's categories, declaring that anything that appeared in human form after death should be called a *yūrei*, and anything other than a human soul, or even a human soul appearing in non-human form, should be called a *yōkai*.”⁷ Komatsu Kazuhiko (1947–) has further proposed that if a *yūrei* were to lose his or her identity/name, then he/she would merely become a monster, *obake*. Komatsu and Suwa thus ameliorated the linguistic confusion between monster and ghost in Japanese language.⁸

The telling of ghost stories also has its own tradition in Japan: a sort of all-night scare fest called *hyakumonogatari*, it became popular in the seventeenth

6 Katarzyna Marak, *Japanese and American Horror: A Comparative Study of Film, Fiction, Graphic Novels and Video Games* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2015), 19.

7 Kazuhiko Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters, Ghosts, and Outsiders in Japanese History*, trans. Hiroko Yoda and Matt Alt (Tōkyō: Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, 2012), 136–7.

8 But why would it take until the 1980s, well after the Japanese academe had been established in a Western style and the country had industrialized, for Japanese cultural studies scholars to want to clearly differentiate between monsters and ghosts? Was there some problem with these words remaining ambiguous in scholarship? And if so, how much of this was due to the influx of Western attitudes towards studies of cultural phenomena? These are questions worth considering in future studies.

century among samurai, and spread to both the upper and lower classes. The tradition was later replicated among students and professors at Tokyo Imperial University during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Noriko Reider has noted, strange tales (*kaidan*) remained popular because they provided explanations for inexplicable phenomena as well as a way to criticize society.⁹ These criticisms remain important, as seen in the number literary works concerning ghosts and inspired by *kaidan*.¹⁰ These criticisms are also important because they bring certain strange tales, especially those about ghosts and specters, into affinity with Globalgothic fiction. Higashi Masao (1958-), the foremost contemporary scholar of the Japanese strange tale, has asserted that ghost stories are the only type of Japanese supernatural tale that center on literature and theater instead of folktales.¹¹ That is to say, other Japanese stories of supernatural creatures are usually folkloric in origin and then make their way into fiction; just as often, Japanese ghost stories work in reverse: fiction inspires belief in urban legends and creates lore. The perception of ghosts in Japan has developed through the influx and outflux of literature, theater and cinema, feeding images of ghosts into the popular consciousness. This avenue of influence is particularly important when considering the significance of the ghostly to the Globalgothic, as it emphasizes the role of ghosts and hauntings as a site of transnational exchange in Japanese fiction.

The influences of nostalgia for the feudal system and anxiety towards rapid modernization lead to a rise in ghost stories and interest in the supernatural in many localities, and Japan is no exception. However, these influences do not explain the presence of many of the *female* spirits and possessions seen in works of twentieth and twenty-first century Japanese literature. Why so many female ghosts? What about women makes them more likely to become a numinous or ghostly presence? Natsumi Ikoma has asserted that this is because

9 Noriko Reider, "The Appeal of 'Kaidan,' Tales of the Strange." *Asian Folklore Studies* 59, no. 2 (2000): 281, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1178918>.

10 Examples of this include Natsume Soseki's "Yume Jūya" [Ten Nights of Dreams] (1908), which was sold as a work on dreams and the mysteries of the human mind, rather than a work of horror, madness, and ghosts, even though it is functionally both. Kawabata's *House of the Sleeping Beauties* (1961) suffered a similar fate. Further, the latter's theme of older men entrapping and taking advantage of younger women is a major theme in European, British, and American Gothic. These works have often been re-labeled into other genres, but currently hold a place in classic literature, which makes it more difficult to reconsider their place in Japanese literary canon.

11 For a general overview of ghosts in modern Japanese literature, see Higashi Masao, "Kingendai Nihon no Yūrei Bungaku-shi wo Tadoru" [Tracing the History of Modern Japanese Ghost Studies], *Yūrei-gaku Nyūmon* [An Introduction to Hauntology], ed. Shōichirō Kawai (Shinshokan, 2010), 177–193.

female spirits are symbolic of the difficulties women face within patriarchal society.¹² I would add several more specific reasons for this: women are seen as closer to death because of their overly emotional nature, women are victims of industrialization in patriarchal-structured nations, and women are oppressed/silenced by their lack of equality with men in reality as in fiction. In death, and as in life, women are marginalized, like the ghosts that represent them in fiction.

Ghosts are of major importance to Japanese literature and folklore, and it is also well-known that many ghosts are women, though not all of these ghosts can be considered Gothic.¹³ Moreover, female ghosts in Japanese contexts are also not like other Japanese monsters because they have strong ties to romantic notions of the ghostly from other localities. As Colette Balmain asserts, "The return to the premodern and oral traditions, a key component of pan-Asian Gothic, can be read as a resistance to the global at the level of the local."¹⁴ In other words, as ghost stories that made their way from other parts of Asia, e.g. China, to Japan and then became accepted as "traditional" Japanese ghost stories insinuate the influence of a pan-Asian Gothic present in Japanese ghost stories. Texts such as *Tale of Genji* (1021) feature spirit possession and subversion of social norms,¹⁵ Edo-period works such as Ueda Akinari's *Ugetsu Monogatari* (*Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, 1776) contain numerous stories of ghosts, some of them inspired by stories originating outside the Japanese archipelago. There is also a tradition of telling strange tales (*kaidan*) that grew in popularity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; these strange

12 Natsumi Ikoma, "Legless Ghosts and Female Grudge: Analysis of Japanese Ghosts." In *The Horrid Looking Glass: Reflections on Monstrosity*, ed. Paul L. Yoder and Peter Mario Kreuter (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2011), 148.

13 While ghosts in wraith, possession, and corporeal/monster form clearly have a role in works of Japanese literature spanning well over a thousand years, they were not considered among Japanese folkloric monsters (or, *yōkai*) until cultural studies conducted at the turn of the twentieth century relabeled them as such. See Kazuhiko Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters, Ghosts, and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 135.

14 Colette Balmain, "Pan-Asian Gothic," *Globalgothic*, ed. Glennis Byron, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 120.

15 Henry J. Hughes has examined three medieval texts, including *Heike Monogatari*, *Genji Monogatari*, and *Konjaku Monogatari*. His reading of *Genji* in particular focuses on Lady Rokujo's haunting of Genji's women as a precursor to many later stories of jealous, obsessive, and vengeful female ghosts. See Henry J. Hughes, "Familiarity of the Strange: Japan's Gothic Tradition." *Criticism* 42, no. 1 (2000): 65, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23125174>. See also Hughes, "Familiarity of the Strange: Japan's Gothic Tradition," 67–68, and Hughes, "Familiarity of the Strange: Japan's Gothic Tradition," 87 note 36.

tales often concern spirits.¹⁶ Academic and authorial interest in ghosts and monsters became more pronounced with the influx of Western stories after the Meiji Restoration, which provided additional manifestations of these horrors to the already vibrant Japanese canon.¹⁷ Stories about Japanese ghosts can be considered Gothic because they often focus on the influence of nostalgia that recalls Japan's feudal past and the disturbances to the social structure as society modernizes, concepts vital to the Gothic.

Female ghosts are also more powerfully connected to a past that Japan's patriarchy would rather remain forgotten (e.g. pre-Shinto religious beliefs based in shamanic ritual and evidence of an historic matrilineal society), and more directly related to socio-cultural problems. Indigenous Japanese beliefs in contacting spirits through female mediums and shamans were marginalized by powerful Buddhist, and later Shinto, authorities over hundreds of years. As Tanaka Takako has explained in her essay "Why are there so many female ghosts in Japan?" it is natural that female ghosts would start to proliferate in the feudal era, considering Japan's shift from a matrilineal society to a patriarchal one, which demonized women who engaged in non-Buddhist or non-Shinto practices and accused women of possessing wicked sexuality.¹⁸ Further, Ikoma has noted that the female ghostly form is almost always influenced by sexuality – women, who cannot attain Buddhahood because of their "unnecessary and unholy attachment to relationships"¹⁹ can find balance only in virginal state – as a young woman, or as a nun. Ikoma asserts "by creating grotesque and sexualized female ghosts, the patriarchal society may have transferred onto women's bodies its fear of mortality and sexuality, in an attempt to control them at the same time."²⁰ Ikoma and Tanaka's claims that presence of female ghosts is related to both issues of sexual control and fears of social subversion may also bring these spectral presences into affinity with a Globalgothic mode. Not only do they become the site of conflict between past and present, through influences from Buddhism, Shinto, shamanistic beliefs

16 These were in turn influenced by religious beliefs from Shinto, Buddhism, and indigenous Japanese religions that predate Shinto and Buddhism.

17 Noriko Mizuta Lippitt argues that translations of Edgar Allan Poe's works, especially "The Black Cat," and "Murders in the Rue Morgue," influenced Meiji authors somewhat, but it was really from the Taisho into the Showa period that authors really considered the meaning of his works and incorporated it. See Noriko Mizuta Lippitt, "Tanizaki and Poe: The Grotesque and the Quest for Supernal Beauty" *Comparative Literature* 29, no. 3 (1977): 221–23, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1769231>.

18 Takako Tanaka, "Yūrei wa naze onna bakari ka" [Why are there so many female ghosts in Japan?], *Yūrei no Shōtai* [The True Identity of Ghosts] (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1997), 44–70.

19 Ikoma, "Legless Ghosts and Female Grudge: Analysis of Japanese Ghosts," 144.

20 Ikoma, "Legless Ghosts and Female Grudge: Analysis of Japanese Ghosts," 146.

and practices, and possible influences from other religions such as Christianity, female ghosts become a site of transnational influence as well.

Japanese ghosts of any gender take two main forms: a human-like form that is often mistaken for a living person (*yūrei*), and a spirit that can possess the living (*tsukimono*). *Tsukimono* can derive from haunted objects as well as the emotion/intention of the dead and the living. Both derive from religious beliefs in demons/gods – leading to a confusion between whether ghosts are the remnants of human emotion and memory, or the remnants of god or a demon that has cursed a family. This contrasts with the wraiths, revenants, and demons that form the basis for the Western tradition dating back to the Greeks and Babylonians.²¹ Instead of being differentiated into several types of monsters or spirits in modern Gothic such as the ghost, the zombie, and the demon as we would see in a British context, Japanese Gothic still treats *tsukimono* and *yūrei* as somewhat interchangeable, as it has done for hundreds of years.

It is these physically/spiritually powerful female *yūrei* and *tsukimono* that Lafcadio Hearn's work introduced to an English-speaking audience in works like *Kwaidan* and *In Ghostly Japan* at the turn of the twentieth century. While his retellings have been criticized for an orientalist view of Japanese *kaidan*, too romanticized to be authentic, they do reflect the types of ghosts present in Ueda's *Ugetsu Monogatari*, stories popularly told at Tokyo Imperial University via *hyakumonogatari*, and in Japanese theatrical works. Many of these stories did not originate in Japan; they were Japanese adaptations of Chinese stories.²² The most famous example of dangerous ghosts from his collection is from the story "Botan Dōrō" (translated under the title "The Peony Lantern"), which was also popularized in a Kabuki version. This story, too, was Chinese in origin, indicating that Hearn's vision of Japanese ghost stories allows us to see pan-Asian influences, which is important to asserting the existence of an Asian Gothic. In "Botan

21 Roger Clarke explains that the earliest ghosts appear in *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Babylonian texts as somewhere "between human and inhuman" and that the ancient Greeks gave no physical power to their ghosts. He also explains that ghosts were confused with demons and revenants (zombies) during the medieval and Jacobean periods. See Roger Clarke, *A Natural History of Ghosts: 500 Years of Hunting for Proof* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 24.

22 Hearn's interest in Chinese ghost stories and Japanese ghost stories seems linked. Saito Nobuyoshi implies that Hearn sought out stories in Japan that were similar, or the same as, the ones he enjoyed in China. Saito also directly quotes Hearn on his "romance" with Japan. See Nobuyoshi Saito, "In and Around Lafcadio Hearn's Ghostly Country – Fantastic Optics II," *Doshisha Studies in English* 97 (2016): 27–28. <https://doi.org/10.14988/pa.2017.0000015348>. Furthermore, Saito seems to imply that Hearn saw Japan as a haunted space, as he conflated the ghostly with the divine. See Saito, "In and Around Lafcadio Hearn's Ghostly Country – Fantastic Optics II," 37–38. This conflation likely influenced other Anglophone writers and may account for at least some of the confusion between the various types of Japanese ghosts in English.

Dōrō,” a scorned fiancée dies of sorrow and seeks revenge on the object of her affection. She and her servant visit him every night, planning to kill him. The man discovers the problem and seeks advice from a Buddhist priest, who helps him ward his house against her. Eventually, the man’s servant takes down the wards at her behest, and she strangles him. The story is meant to enunciate the power of women’s emotion, even in death. This story fits neatly into Ikoma’s claim that the sexuality of women makes them both grotesque and dangerous for men.

In many of these previous exemplary texts, a thwarted romance was central to the plot; romance would continue to hold importance into the twentieth century for certain depictions of female ghosts.²³ Textbook examples of the early-to-mid-twentieth century romantic female ghost can be found in the works of Kawabata Yasunari (1899–1972). His conception of romantic ghostly women – a drastic change from the fierce emotional attachment that seduces women into returning from the dead for revenge and/or spiritual possession. Kawabata’s female ghosts fit into his image of young women in general, representing the embodiment of his ideal love. According to Makoto Ueda:

... Kawabata used the character of a young woman to embody his concept of ideal love, a longing pure and without stain, impossible to consummate. Obviously this was because he felt that a young woman, more than anyone else, was capable of this type of love. She could love a man, no matter how far away he might be, no matter how unattainable he might be.²⁴

This type of strong yearning recalls the patriarchal themes of Ueda’s *Moonlight and Rain*, exulting women only when they pursue love lacking in dominant

23 Thwarted romance is notably central to the plots of Chinese ghost stories, as it is to ghost stories of other groups. This points to an archetype that exists within and extends beyond Asian contexts, pointing towards the global presence of this narrative. See Katarzyna Ancuta, “The Waiting Woman as the Most Enduring Ghost Heroine,” in *Gothic Studies* 22, no.1 (2020): 81–97. Elsewhere, Katarzyna Ancuta also points out that love stories, particularly stories where lovers are reunited or transference of life energies takes place, as in *Botan Dōrō*, were oft-told in China as well, as *Liaozhai*. It is notable too, that stories like *Botan Dōrō* has Chinese origins but is considered an essentially Japanese ghost story in Japanese contexts, perhaps because of how often it was adapted and how well it was received by the Japanese public over the centuries. See Katarzyna Ancuta, “Strange Ghosts: Asian Reconfigurations of the Chinese Ghost Story,” *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, ed. by Scott Brewster and Luke Thurston (New York: Routledge, 2017), 262.

24 Makoto Ueda, *Modern Japanese Writers and the Nature of Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1976), 181. However, it must be said that Ueda characterizes the image of young women as part of an overall narrative of “longing” in Kawabata’s oeuvre (177). It is here that his reading diverges from mine. Where as I read these young women differently depending on their contexts, especially if they are ghosts, Ueda does not. According to Ueda, these are all part of a single motif. He states that Kawabata typically tried to depict characters that

sexuality and even consummation, which castrates their power (over men). This theme is also relevant to pan-Asian ghosts; it might be a less harmful and more romantic reimagining of Chinese ghosts who died of lovesickness and returned to satiate their sexual urges by draining the energy/life of their love interest.²⁵ Several of Kawabata's *Te no Hira no Shōsetsu* (*Palm of the Hand Stories*, 1971) concern such lovesick female ghosts, including a story called "Fushi" ("Immortality," 1963) in which a young woman is reunited with her childhood sweetheart in death.²⁶ The young woman committed suicide after he left her to pursue education in the city, but he led an unhappy and lonely life without her. In the end, he comes back to the spot where she killed herself, even taking a job working at the golf course there, as he feels closer to her. Neither he nor she realize he is also dead at first, and when they do, they decide to go through a tree to the next world together.

"Immortality" sets the tone for one kind of story told about women ghosts during the twentieth century: they hold on to their feelings for men, even after being abandoned. In turn, men may also hold onto their feelings for women, but this mainly strengthens the female ghost's pull on the man towards death. Kawabata seems to assume that women will not move on from their childhood romances, despite factual evidence to the contrary. He also assumes that women's place in society would not allow the appearance of new, positive emotion towards other men. Further, he implies, very romantically, that the stereotype of men making their fortune in the city is overrated compared to the love of a woman. Kawabata's romantic image of the dying young woman and female ghost are strongly influenced by Japanese literature and culture, but also stands in contrast to his contemporaries, favoring a resolution to the haunting that brings lovers together in death and seems absent of revenge. Though Kawabata's ghosts are

became purer and more beautiful when longing for an idea. Ueda also later explains that the emotions of and related to women are dangerous and bring people closer to death: "... Kawabata's ideas on the relationship between life and art are characterized by his concern with the pure beauty generated from the impossible longing of the romantic mind ... A young woman, Kawabata thought, was the most likely person to do this ... Living for an ideal, while beautiful and pure, is also extremely dangerous; a person, in attempting to attain the unattainable, is risking his life. That person cannot live life to the full without being prepared to die at any time. Death, therefore, looms everywhere in the lives of Kawabata's heroes and heroines; it is a price they have to pay for living intensely" (183-4).

25 See Ancuta, "Strange Ghosts: Asian Reconfigurations of the Chinese Ghost Story," 264-265.

26 Kawabata's fiction is featured among his contemporaries, such as Dazai Osamu and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, in reprints of short stories with supernatural and ghostly subjects. For example, "Immortality," was republished by Chikuma Bunkō in the series *Bungō kaidan kessaku-sen* [A Selection of Literary Ghost Stories].

essentially Japanese, they have those same qualities of desire for modernity and anxiety towards social structures that underpin the Gothic mode.

The female ghost be a way to subvert patriarchal norms in Asian contexts, just as it is in other localities. While it is possible to make parallels between Kawabata's ghostly lovers and ghostly reunions from British Gothic stories, such as that of Cathy and Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), one should also mention the visible influence of subversive ghostliness from other parts of the Asian continent. As Katarzyna Ancuta notes: "Constructed in the image of submissive Asian femininity, the waiting woman has turned her ghosthood into an opportunity to transgress restrictive gender norms."²⁷ Kawabata's use of the a young woman ghost who died for love may be read as a subversion of such norms: instead of the young man forgetting the woman, marrying another, and carrying out the patriarchal ideal of continuing the family line, the young man does not marry and instead returns to the place the young woman died. They go together to the "next world" through a tree, implying that their ghostly relationship is accepted by supernatural forces that govern the natural world in Japan.

3 Mid-Century Proletariats, Absurdism, and Female Ghosts

In Japanese contexts, acknowledgement of the influences of Gothic literature as originating in Britain and the United States is often coupled with a nuanced or over denial that any similar paradigm exists in Japan.²⁸ But if, as I have previously argued, we detach the Gothic from a specific place and time (e.g. the long eighteenth century in Britain), then the possibility of similar paradigms arises. That is to say, Globalgothic becomes a modality we can see in various locations, including in Japan. Essentially it becomes possible to acknowledge that gothic as a motif, not a genre, would then be present in Japanese texts and molded into new Japanesque forms, acquiring extant modalities.²⁹

²⁷ Ancuta, "The Waiting Woman," 94.

²⁸ This is, however, not always the case. Several articles in the magazine *Kwai to Yoo* on the theme of haunted houses bring together recent iterations of ghosts and past interpretations, acknowledging that in the contemporary period, Japanese ghosts can be read as Gothic. For example, see Yūki Yoshida, "Yūrei yashiki ka jikobukken ka," *Kwai to Yoo*, vol. 009 (December 2021): 66–67. Yoshida argues that while *Jikobukken* (cursed houses/homes that are often haunted) are the more appealing explanation, literary fiction of haunted houses has also become popular in Japanese contexts since the 1970s.

²⁹ These similarities to other Asian Gothic modalities, especially to those on the mainland via China, have been taken up by other scholars, such as Katarzyna Ancuta, and deserve further attention. See, for instance, Katarzyna Ancuta, "Japanese Gothic," *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, ed. by William Hughes, David Punter, and Andrew Smith (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 370–71.

Acknowledging global influences at the intersection of the Japanese ghostly and the Gothic allows scholarship to examine authors with well-known non-Japanese influences aside from Hearn and those of his generation, such as Abe Kōbō (1924–1993), whose works bring important insights into Japanese views of the ghostly, and whose interests in writing about transnational social issues, hidden transgressions, and violence make it possible to define a Japanese mid-twentieth century Gothic. Slightly younger than Kawabata, Abe was strongly influenced by European existentialist and surrealist fiction, such as Franz Kafka and Albert Camus. Where Kafka became interested in the monstrous and the liminal, Abe's work veered instead into themes and motifs related to the liminal and the numinous, questioning the meaning and function of belief: in socio-economic and cultural systems, and in the possibility of transcending mortality. At the same time, Abe's works contain elements of a globally understood Gothic, especially the theme that women and lower classes are oppressed by the industrialization (in this case, of Japanese society).

Around the time of the publication of his short story "Shinda musume ga utatta" [Song of a Dead Girl] (1954), he began to develop a theory about ghosts in literature, which he explained in a series of essays and wrote about in short stories and plays, most notably *Yūrei wa koko ni iru* (*The Ghost is Here*, 1957). In these essays, Abe asserts that concept of the ghostly is something that makes us question reality. In "Shibito tōjō – jitsuzai shinai mono ni tsuite" [The Appearance of the Dead: On the Unreal], he states that ghosts are meant to be a reminder of those moments when we think we see something supernatural, but it was really something mundane.³⁰ He further elucidates his remarks in an essay published 4 years later, "Shibito saitōjō" [The Reappearance of the Dead], explaining: "It is not that so-called realists cannot see ghosts, it is that they do not believe in them. They are bound by the dogma that ghosts (non-entities) do not exist, so even if they do see them, they think that it is not a ghost ..." ³¹ (Translation mine). In this sense, ghosts for Abe represent that which we cannot acknowledge as real because we do not want to see it as reality. That is why his female ghosts, representing the morose victims of modernity and industrialization, return from the dead to testify of their mistreatment. They force us to *believe* in them.

Abe's short story "Song of a Dead Girl" begins after the narrator Umeko has committed suicide by taking a bottle of sleeping medication provided to her

30 Kōbō Abe, "Shibito tōjō – jitsuzai shinai mono ni tsuite" [The Appearance of the Dead: On the Unreal], *Abe Kōbō Zenshū* [Abe Kōbō Complete Works], Vol. 5, (Tōkyō: Shinchōsha, 1998), 199.

31 Abe, "Shibito saitōjō" [The Reappearance of the Dead], 35.

by her boyfriend K and is standing over her own dead body. She notices other ghosts around her with terrible wounds: a student, two soldiers, a vagrant, all presences representing those that society mistreats, ignores, or takes for granted. These ghosts do not want to interact with her, and so she decides to travel to each place that contributed to her suicide, a journey exploring her feelings of blame toward the people responsible for her death. She was a young girl from the countryside whose father fell ill with tuberculosis, and she was forced to leave school to work in a factory to support her family. She never questioned her parents' motives in sending her away and making her work instead of her brother, who was instead allowed to go to school. She never questioned the cruel factory overseer, even after he fired her, or the manager who duped her with his scheme of sending her to Tokyo to work as a maid, forcing her into debt for her room and board, and then pimping her out as a prostitute to make her repay her debt. As Umeko reaches her final destination, the factory, she meets other dead young women who met the same fate. Together, they sing and dance, and hope their voices will reach the living factory girls, to warn them.

"Song of a Dead Girl" thus emphasizes what might be seen as the triumph of the proletariat, a vengeance against both the patriarchal structure and the oppression created by a capitalist system, one of the major themes of Gothic literature in America and Britain.³² In consideration of Japan's past socio-political structure with emperors and warlords, and in consideration of its structure during Abe's lifetime, a corrupt democracy, Abe brings both of these ideas together in the ghosts of Umeko and the other factory workers. Like many Gothic ghost stories from Britain and the U.S., too, the story's denouement clearly shows a distrust that the proletariat might achieve social

32 For example, Michael Parker has argued that American Gothic is implicitly haunted by the country's economy. See Michael Parker, "Uncanny Capitalism: The Gothic, Power, and the Market Revolution in American Literature." Order No. 3366214, The University of Arizona, 2009: 20–22. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/uncanny-capitalism-gothic-power-market-revolution/docview/304846176/se-2>. Parker argues that many thinkers, including prominent Americans like Ralph Waldo Emerson, were well aware of capitalism's ability to create a repressive hierarchy that could replace the hereditary title, wealth, and monarchical system of Europe and make of the United States a newly oppressive and problematic system. See also Parker, "Uncanny Capitalism: The Gothic, Power, and the Market Revolution in American Literature," 26–28. On British Gothic, see Robert Adrian Herschbach, "Gothic Economies: Global Capitalism and the Boundaries of Identity," Order No. 3076338 (University of New Hampshire, 2002): 13, <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/gothic-economies-global-capitalism-boundaries/docview/305535685/se-2>. Herschbach has asserted that British Gothic has a preoccupation with the "corruption of the estate" by modern and urban forces.

justice. Umeko's revenge is thus not a monstrous possession or a scheme to murder the men who wronged her, but a transcendence of the demoralizing situation that plagued the girl throughout her life. As Susan Napier asserts, the "monstrousness" and unassimilable nature of the dead in "Song of a Dead Girl," "becomes an important trend in postwar fiction" for both radicals and conservatives because it "links the political and the alien."³³ She further points out that Umeko's ghostly power is not directly vengeful. Instead, her dead presence serves as "an eternal comment on an oppressive and exploitative system."³⁴ Her ghostly travels are meant to criticize the discrimination which functions in an intersectional manner: both her low socio-economic status and her gender put her in an impossible position. As a ghost, she might also evoke empathy in the reader, even more so than if the narrator were still alive and suffering. In death, she is shown together with other wronged women, and their actions imply that they would warn their female friends about trusting powerful men. Their song indicates that the system could be changed, perhaps their deaths prevented, if living women joined forces against those who would harm them.

Abe does not limit his ghosts to women, but his ghostly subjects are usually the victims of some social injustice. This, too, is important to the Gothic, which concerns itself with motifs of hidden transgressions, violence, and inequality. In that sense, it is also worth mentioning Abe's short story "Yūrei no haka" [The Ghost's Grave] (1956), which is about a failed double suicide, and bears some resemblance to Kawabata's "Fushi," if only in reverse. The survivor is the young woman, not the young man; the rest of the story sees the young man try to deal with the absurdity of being a ghost and being unable to travel to the next place or life (whatever that might be). The precipitating event for the suicide is the young man's despair at being a disabled veteran and being unable to work. There are strong parallels between the young man "Yūrei no haka" and horribly wounded ghosts of dead soldiers that Umeko sees shambling around when she first awakens as a ghost after her death. These indicate that Abe sees female ghosts as part of a broader narrative of hauntology in which the dead criticize the social structures of the living. As ghosts often function this way in Gothic fiction, we might term Abe's ghost stories in affinity with the Globalgothic mode.

33 Susan Napier, *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature: The Subversion of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1996), 133.

34 Susan Napier, *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature: The Subversion of Modernity*, 133.

4 Possessing and Vengeful Ghosts of the Living: the Long Mid-Century

Up to this point in my essay, I have dealt mainly with stories that concern *yūrei*, ghosts of the dead, but there are other forms of ghosts and naming of ghosts common to the Japanese Gothic mode. Ghosts of the dead are interchangeably referred to as *obake*, *bakemono*, and *yūrei*, though I have shown preference for *yūrei* in this essay, as it is the term most familiar to Anglophone audiences. Other terms for ghosts include the aforementioned *tsukimono* that featured in *Genji Monogatari*, possessing spirits (of the dead and the living), and *yōkai*, a word sometimes translated as demons or monsters. *Yōkai* may also have characteristics that correspond to the English word “ghost,” but are not considered ghosts in Japanese contexts.³⁵ Vengeful ghosts are also sometimes called *mononoke*, the sub-categories of which are *shiryō*, *onryō*, *ikiryō* (also known as *ikisudama*, *seirei*, and *shōryō*).³⁶ This confusion of terminology and plethora of descriptive words implies a confusion of states of being and of socio-cultural norms. One novel that deals with this confusion as a central theme is Enchi Fumiko’s (1905–1986) *Masks*. *Masks* uses *tsukimono* depicted as spirit-of-the-living possession in the novel, and its relation to the powerful emotions of women, especially of love and envy. It is important to note that due to blurring between terms in modern contexts, spirit-of-the-living possession in this novel might also be called *ikiryō* or one of its synonyms, depending on the scholarship. The novel thus provides a contrast with Abe’s and Kawabata’s female ghosts, which are in *yūrei* form and are not vengeful. *Masks* and stories like it are formative to twentieth century Gothic because they function as reinterpretation of long-established depictions of women as potentially monstrous. These women and the ghosts associated with them have the power to secretly disrupt or even end a patriarchal lineage without men’s knowledge of their actions.

Although *Masks* concerns female ghosts and issues women face in patriarchal society, it is not narrated by women. Instead, it is narrated by two male academic characters, Ibuki and Mikame, who research Heian literature and psychology respectively. Despite the narration, the novel’s gaze is entirely

35 However, *yōkai* are not considered ghosts because of their non-human shape and because they live on the edges of human civilization. See Kenji Kajiya, “Reimagining the Imagined: Depictions of Dreams and Ghosts in the Early Edo Period.” *Impressions*, no. 23 (2001): 98. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42597894>.

36 This distinction was likely much clearer in past eras. For a discussion of terminology from the Edo period, see Kenji Kajiya, “Reimagining the Imagined: Depictions of Dreams and Ghosts in the Early Edo Period,” 98–102.

on women: structurally, the novel is split into three parts titled with the names of female masks from Noh dramas, and the plot focuses on two women, Mieko (a poet) and her daughter-in-law Yasuko (an amateur researcher). Ibuki, Mikami, Mieko, and Yasuko are bound together by their interest in spirit possession and séances, and by their association with Togano Akio, Yasuko's deceased husband and Mieko's son. Akio's research concerned such spirit possession, and Yasuko continued it after his death at Mieko's request.

Masks contains no real apparitions. But the characters, especially Mieko, believe three types of ghosts haunt them: historical ghosts in the form of *tsukimono* that curse the familial line, haunted objects that call forth the powers of the *tsukimono*, and ghosts of the living that can possess others. The mixture of these three types of ghosts, as well as the influence of the Western academe in the form of studies of séances, make the female ghost, her passion and her vengeance, the central motif of the story. Mieko has a long-term interest in spirit possession, especially those from Japanese Noh theater and *Genji Monogatari*. She is also fascinated with a minor character in the novel, one of Genji's lovers, the Lady Rokujō, whom she sees as a woman too strong for men's control. The Lady Rokujō takes the form of a vengeful ghost, often assigned the category of *ikiryō* while her body still lives and *shiryō* after she dies.³⁷ In either case, her spirit wanders to avenge itself.³⁸ Mieko describes her obsession with the Lady Rokujō as the curse that inspires her to take a lover to revenge herself on her cheating husband and his jealous mistress, their housemaid who attacked her and caused her to miscarry. This curse inspired her to bear her lover's children, twins Akio and Harume, while giving them her husband's family name. Later, this same "curse" impels her to ensure her lover's filial line after her son Akio's death by forcing her physically and mentally disabled daughter Harume to bring her baby to term after she is raped. Harume dies soon after giving birth, but this enables Yasuko to raise the child as her own. The story ends with Yasuko remarking that the child looks exactly like the one she imagined she'd have with Akio, while Mieko stares at the Noh mask representing old women, *fukai*.

37 For an analysis with illustrations of the Lady Rokujō, see Kajiya, "Reimagining the Imagined: Depictions of Dreams and Ghosts in the Early Edo Period," 98–100.

38 The distinction between *shiryō* and *onryō* is oftentimes blurred for the modern reader. *Ikiryō* are ghosts of the living; *shiryō*, and *onryō* are ghosts of the dead. *Onryō* are the souls of the angry, vengeful dead; *shiryō* are simply dead souls. But all three, under the heading of *mononoke*, might appear to take revenge on the living (or the dead). And all have the power to possess the living. Nevertheless, *shiryō* sometimes make an appearance as vengeful ghosts. For example, in *Tōno Monogatari* (1910), one of Yanagita Kunio's collections of folktales, the ghost of a father, termed a *shiryō*, appears and attempts to abduct his daughter.

Masks might be considered a twentieth century Gothic tale because Mieko and Yasuko are both sexually manipulated by men, and because the story primarily concerns the continuance/disruption of the patriarchal line and its replacement with a matrilineal line. On one hand, this motif bears great resemblance to one numerous mid-century Anglophone Gothic texts that center on women, familial relationships, and inheritance. On the other hand, it may have connections to the image of ghostly women in Asia, like the aforementioned Waiting Woman, who, when thwarted or made jealous, turns vengeful. Further, like their Globalgothic counterparts, the women in *Masks* act together: while Mieko seeks to destroy the patriarchal line of the Togano family, Yasuko is complicit at every turn. This is not a statement on Yasuko's lack of free will, or Mieko's overwhelmingly strong influence. Instead, it indicates Yasuko wants to be part of this anti-patriarchal plot. After Harume becomes pregnant, she even tells Mieko, "... I'm excited as you by the prospect of a baby with Akio's blood in its veins. That instinctive feeling underlies all the strange things I've done. You and I are accomplices, aren't we, in a dreadful crime – a crime that only women could commit. Having a part to play in this scheme of yours, Mother, means more to me than the love of any man."³⁹ Yasuko has acted the part of a medium for Mieko's desires, first by taking Ibuki as her lover, and then by going along with the plot to impregnate Harume, but Yasuko had also been a willing participant all along.

The purpose of the eponymous masks in the novel is dual: to invoke spirits and to blur the line between life and death, between *ikiryō* and *shiryō*. *Noh* masks, like the Ryō no Onna, or vengeful female spirit, become haunted objects to Mieko and Yasuko, representing the return of the dead and the duality of human nature. When Mieko views these masks during *Noh* performances or when visiting *Noh* practitioners, she sees the wronged women that remind her of how men easily harm and manipulate their lovers and wives. In contrast, Yasuko believes that sees the reflection of her dead husband. Doris Borgen claims that the use of *Noh* in *Masks* is significant because both spirit medium and *Noh* mask should be considered types of possession. She states that "ordinary individuality is transformed as the actor or the possessed person is united with the aggrieved spirits of the dead (*shiryō* 死霊) or the living (*ikiryō* or *ikisudama* 生霊). The audience witnesses a liminal state of two personalities in one."⁴⁰ While Yasuko thinks she sees her dead husband in the masks (in an almost Abe-esque moment, she is not sure what she saw), Mieko clearly sees

³⁹ Enchi, *Masks*, 126.

⁴⁰ Doris Borgen, "Twin Blossoms on a Single Branch: The Cycle of Retribution in *Onnamen*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 46, no. 2 (1991): 151–152.

her revenge. Their vision reveals the impetus behind their actions, indicating that masks both function to physically hide one's face and force one to face one's desires because one is alone behind the mask.

In addition to the Noh masks, numerous references to the Lady Rokujō recall the history of women's animosity when the patriarchy pits them against each other. According to Kenji Kajiya, *Genji Monogatari's* inclusion of the Lady Rokujō is significant because it marks one of the first times a ghost or spirit is featured in a literary text in Japan.⁴¹ The connection between the modern Mieko's obsession with this character is and the fact that *Genji Monogatari* is a central text in Japanese literature is important to understanding how generations of hidden transgressions play out in the text, implicating a Gothic plot. Moreover, Mieko feels that after her husband betrayed her early in their marriage, the Lady Rokujō entered her and helped her act out her revenge by making the line of Togano succession her lover's instead of her husband's. In other words, the literary text acts out a kind of spirit possession; the past inhabits the present, a shadow or dark presence that influences our behaviors. Mieko's essay on the Lady Rokujō also explains the existence of female ghosts as a shadow:

Just as there is an archetype of woman as the object of man's eternal love, so must there be an archetype of her as the object of his eternal fear, representing, perhaps, the shadow of his own evil actions. The Rokujō Lady is an embodiment of this archetype.⁴²

The duality of women as both objectified by men and representing men's actions is perhaps a disempowering way of describing the Lady's Rokujō vengeful power. At the same time, it is accurate to the archetype that Mieko sees for women – an archetype that through her own obsession with the Lady Rokujō she has decided to change by involving Yasuko in her revenge against her husband. In this way, Mieko and Yasuko share the revenge and its outcome, Harume's daughter.

In *Masks*, the otherness of women is subverted in two ways: through the study of spirit possession and through the breakage of the patriarchal family line. Women, taking control through deception both bodily and spiritually, create a female identity based in resistance rather than balance. This is a significant shift away from the ghost in Abe's "Song of a Dead Girl," which

41 Kajiya, "Reimagining the Imagined: Depictions of Dreams and Ghosts in the Early Edo Period," 98.

42 Enchi, *Masks*, 37.

identifies the existence of the marginalized but provides balance only in death, or Kawabata's "Immortality," which perpetuates women's marginalized state without pointing out. It is in novels and stories like *Masks* that the Japanese female ghostly finds its place in Globalgothic as different to, but also appropriative of, other Gothic conventions. Interpreting ghostly resistance as subversion of the social order instead of as karmic forces compels not only a reinterpretation of the behavior of women oppressed by the patriarchal order as passionate instead of vengeful, but also of characters from canonical Japanese texts such as Noh plays concerning *ryō no onna* and *Genji Monogatari* from which Mieko and Yasuko draw inspiration. Locating *Masks* within a larger transnational Gothic trend aids in understanding how Mieko and Yasuko may be considered part of the long tradition of Gothic women who subvert the social order. Women and their ghosts in *Masks* also point the way towards future trends in Japanese Gothic and horror: their subversive nature, anti-social behavior, secret machinations, and obsession with literary and theatrical works would come to typify revenge in the here and now and from beyond the grave.

5 Conclusion

Gothic should be considered a literary mode or motif that elicits fear and creates horror for similar reasons, regardless of location. This juxtaposition of global-local is particularly interesting in Asia and most especially when considering the ghostly. As Colette Balmain states: "... a close examination of pan-Asian gothic demonstrates that the relationship between East and West is not one of hierarchical dominance, but one in which the relationship between the local and the global is complex, conflicting and continually changing and one that demands a new way of thinking about the gothic in an age of globalization and cosmopolitanism."⁴³ Balmain's claim, that the relationship between the socio-cultural and political constructs of East and West are "complex" and "continually changing," is particularly significant for Japan. Moreover, as Japan developed throughout the feudal period and into modernity, especially after the Meiji Restoration (1868) and into the twentieth century, the increase in interactions between Japanese and non-Japanese created a fascinating tension that changed the way Japanese viewed literary influences, especially

43 Balmain, "Pan-Asian Gothic," 119. Balmain also usefully points out the connection between folklore and the gothic in Asian contexts, as well as locating the ghostly in Japan in the WWII and early post-war periods. See also Balmain, "Pan-Asian Gothic," 120–121.

regarding ghosts. The pan-Asian Japanized ghost became acquired European and American elements, especially from Anglophone Gothic fiction, bringing the Japanese ghostly in affinity with an even broader Globalgothic motif of specters and the supernatural.

Within twentieth century Japanese Gothic fiction, the figure of the female ghost symbolizes criticism of patriarchal and industrial systems that oppress women through sex, marriage, and work. They wreak vengeance through spiritual possession, as seen in stories like Enchi Fumiko's *Masks*. They engage in haunting behavior in order to testify about the wrongdoings done to them as in Abe Kōbō's "Song of a Dead Girl." In the modern and contemporary periods, with the influence of Romantic and Gothic literatures from Europe and America as well as the industrialization of the Japanese nation, depictions of female ghosts have continued to change, shifting away from the virginal/demonic and towards the realistic/complex. In reconsidering the trajectory of influences on the Japanese ghost story, I believe there is a need to reanimate the discussion about how representations of female ghosts changed drastically as women moved from being treated as commodities to having their personhood recognized in Japan. Academic discussions on the Japanese Gothic should include the post-war period as well as the contemporary period after the burst of the economic bubble in the late 1990s. Since the Gothic arises from an anxiety towards the modernization of society and radical changes to its social structures, and since ghost stories proliferate exponentially during these periods of anxiety, further research should be done to reread Japanese fiction from the mid-twentieth century to the present through a Gothic lens.

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