

FEMINISTS AND SISTERHOOD: RESISTANCE STRATEGIES OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN JAPANESE DRAMAS AGAINST THE PATRIARCHAL SYSTEM

(Feminis dan Sisterhood: Strategi Perlawanan Tokoh Perempuan dalam J Dorama Jepang terhadap Sistem Patriarki)

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Abstract: *This study explores the strategies of Japanese women's struggle against the patriarchal system that has been rooted in Japanese society through the narratives of four Japanese J-Dramas, namely Watashi ga Renai Dekinai Riyuu, Doctor-X Season I, and Mondai No Aru Resutoran. The problem focuses on the attitudes, views and resistance of Japanese women against traditional gender norms. The research was conducted through an analysis of intrinsic and extrinsic elements, Feminist theory. The results of the study in J Dorama Watashi ga Renai Dekinai Riyuu, female characters live independent lives without male companionship through sisterly relationships between women as a form of resistance to traditional dependency. Doctor-X Season I presents a superior female doctor in the medical world which has been dominated by men and demands equality in surgical specialization. In Mondai No Aru Resutoran, women prove their professional abilities in the restaurant world, and fight against the stereotype of traditional women's work. This study concludes that these Japanese dramas showcase various resistance strategies in an effort to fight and seize equality in patriarchal Japanese society.*

Keywords: *Feminism; Gender Equality; J-Drama; Patriarchy; Sisterhood; Stereotype*

A. INTRODUCTION

Women are commonly portrayed as delicate, gentle, emotional, and graceful beings. However, this symbolism does not consistently align with social reality. In Japan, women have often been undervalued, objectified rather than treated as subjects, and deemed inferior to men within the realms of education, career, and status. Such presuppositions have established significant barriers to access for women, especially in higher education and the professional sphere.

In the era of the Tokugawa Shoguns (1603-1868), women were legally barred from property ownership, excluded from commercial activities, and restricted to learning only the hiragana script, while their access to politics and literature was curtailed. The principle of patriarchal socialization stipulated that women were to be subservient to their fathers as children, their husbands as wives, and their sons in old age a doctrine known as the "Three Submissions." This framework systematically relegated women to a subordinate status, compelling them to view marriage as their primary means of economic security (Kincaid, 2019; Sudjiman, 2002).

Following the economic crisis of the early 1970s, Japan began to integrate women into its workforce, not only in the manufacturing and service sectors but also within higher

education, thereby increasing women's roles in the public sphere. Non-discriminatory educational policies reinforced women's access to higher education and alleviated the normative pressure to marry. Consequently, Japanese women are now inclined to postpone marriage to pursue careers and financial independence (Suzuki, 2023).

This shift is evidenced by the rise in the average age of women at their first marriage, which increased to nearly 29 between 2015 and 2019. This trend aligns with the growing participation of women in both education and the workforce. Data indicate an increasing number of single women who delay marriage in favor of career advancement and economic stability (Nippon.com, 2020).

This phenomenon becomes relevant when we review classical feminist theory and the gender stereotypes it challenges (Tong, 2006). Feminism emerged in the 18th century as an ideology advocating for a just society that supports the development of women on an equal footing with men. (Millett, 2002) critiques the stereotypes of women as submissive, ignorant, virtuous, and ineffective. However, despite their high level of education, Japanese women still have limited influence in the public sphere and remain economically, socially, politically, and psychologically dependent on men. According to (Sugihastuti, 2007), the gendered division of labor is not based on biology or reproduction but is a cultural construct that reinforces male dominance. (Muthali'in, 2001) further argues that this construct gives rise to stereotypes that position women as second-class citizens in the public domain. This is underscored by (Rueda, 2007) who posits that women serve as unpaid domestic laborers and bear the burden of family life.

Based on this background, this study addresses the following research problems: How is gender inequality represented in the three Japanese dramas that serve as the objects of this research? And how do the female characters in these dramas project attitudes and views regarding the struggle for gender equality?

B. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative methodology with a narrative approach to explore and understand human meaning and experience through stories and narratives. The narrative approach is particularly suitable for examining women's resistance against patriarchal values as depicted in Japanese dramas, since it focuses on the life stories of individuals or groups and uses narratives as the primary data to understand meaning.

Primary data were collected by re-viewing three Japanese drama series that serve as the research objects. The collected data include dialogue, scenes, visual symbols, and the narratives of female characters. These primary sources consist of three notable dramas. The first is Doctor-X Season 1, a 2012 drama by Naoki Tamura aired on Japan's TV Asahi, which tells the story of a freelance surgeon who refuses to submit to patriarchal norms and the established medical system. The second is Watashi ga Renai Dekinai Riyuu (The Reason I Can't Find Love), aired on Fuji TV Japan in 2011, following three single women

in their 30s as they confront challenges in their careers, love lives, and social expectations. The third is *Mondai no Aru Restaurant* (The Restaurant with Many Problems), created by Yuji Sakamoto and released on January 15, 2015, on Fuji TV Japan, depicting the gender injustice experienced by Japanese women as a result of patriarchal culture.

The data analysis followed several interconnected procedures. Key scenes and dialogues were first transcribed to form the foundation of the analysis. This was followed by identifying main themes such as gender stereotypes, subordination, and feminist resistance. The narratives were then reconstructed either chronologically or thematically to reveal patterns and meanings within the dramas. To ensure validity and credibility, the data were verified through triangulation, specifically by examining visual elements, dialogue, and related literature together. Secondary data sources were drawn from specialized books and internet resources related to the research topic, providing theoretical grounding and contextual support for the analysis.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Since the era of modernization and economic transformation in Japan, women have gained increasing access to higher education and greater employment opportunities. However, traditional gender stereotypes which assert that women should be submissive, emotional, or unsuitable for professional roles still persist in society. Dramas, much like other forms of literature, play a crucial role in culture and society by conveying messages, emotions, and ideas (Fairuz & Belia, 2025). The three Japanese dramas analysed in this study *Doctor-X*, *Watashi ga Renai Dekinai Riyuu* (The Reason I Can't Find Love), and *Mondai no Aru Restaurant* (The Restaurant with Many Problems) serve as spaces for reflection and critique of these societal stereotypes by featuring female characters who challenge patriarchal norms. This research explores how these female characters are positioned, experience gender conflict, and undertake acts of resistance against the social obstacles they face.

The findings of this study are presented in a table, followed by a discussion that links the results to gender theory and the broader context of Japanese culture.

Tabel 1. Characters and Gender Stereotypes

No	Character (Drama)	Gender Stereotype Faced	Form of Resistance	Key Scene
1	Michiko Daimon (<i>Doctor X season 1</i>)	Women are considered inferior in the medical field; unable to obtain a doctor's license; not as professional as male doctors.	Takes over a surgery; proves her expertise by diagnosing a condition faster than male doctors.	Episode 1, 45:31-46:07
2	Fuji Emi (<i>Watashi ga Renai Dekinai Riyuu</i>)	Women are seen as weak and emotional; domestic duties; social pressure to get married.	Works in a male-dominated profession; works outside the home; is independent and chooses not to marry.	Episode 2, 18:58-19:05
3	Tanaka & Nitta (<i>Mondai no Aru Restaurant</i>)	Women must remain in the domestic sphere; workplace discrimination; lack of recognition despite high education.	Opens a restaurant; takes charge of the business; works hard despite often being marginalized.	Episode 3, 17:27-00:17:48

1. The Character of Michiko Daimon in *Doctor-X Season 1*

Michiko is an experienced female surgeon who works as a freelance doctor at a university hospital dominated by male doctors. The following dialogue excerpt highlights her character.

Dialogue 1

Okumura : Professor, here is the resume from the referral agency.
 Torii : Please read it.
 Okumura : Daimon Michiko. Graduated from Meiei University in 2001. Joined the surgical staff of the Department of Totei University. Claims to have attended the Cubanacan Medical College in Cuba in 2002. After working as a doctor in rural areas, the military, and on a ship, she returned to Japan.
 Torii : Is that true?
 Okumura : Upon her return, she registered as a freelance surgeon with Kanbara Doctor Referral Agency. Her special skills: surgery, and her hobby: operations.

(Episode 1, 17:21-17:50)

Michiko demonstrates her professionalism by successfully handling a surgery. This scene establishes Michiko as an intelligent and competent surgeon, simultaneously illustrating female superiority in the public sphere, despite the Japanese patriarchal system's view that women should only be homemakers and are not permitted to work in the public domain (Borovoy, 2005).

In one scene (Episode 1, 45:31-46:07), Michiko's excellence is showcased when she identifies that a patient is suffering from a latex allergy faster than her male colleagues. This demonstrates Michiko's intelligence and perceptiveness, surpassing that of men, and simultaneously challenges the female stereotypes namely, submissive, ignorant, virtuous, and ineffective posited by (Millett, 2002). Conversely, Michiko is intelligent, assertive, and effective.

Dialogue

Michiko : You over there, get out of my way. She is my patient.
Kinko : Daimon san...
Wartawan : This female doctor again?
Wartawan : Direktor Director, what's going on?
Direktur : Daimon kun, stop interfering with the professor's surgery!
Hijkata! Get out of the operating room!
Michiko : No! Because she is my patient.
(Episode 7, 02:14:48 - 02:15:12)

Patriarchal conflict is evident in the dialogue above, as the hospital attempts to transfer Michiko's surgical duty on Professor Torii to Professor Hijkata, simply because she is a freelance female doctor without a formal license. In an act of defiance, Michiko reclaims her task. This action reflects female resistance against male dominance and demonstrates that professional competence is not determined by gender.

Michiko's actions are a representation of a woman's struggle against Japanese patriarchal society. She proves that women can compete with, and even surpass, men. This aligns with (Mackie, 2003) view that Japanese feminism asserts women's position as independent, empowered individuals who no longer submit to traditional, restrictive constructs, as described by Millet (2002).

2. The Character of Fujii Emi in *Watashi ga Renai Dekinai Riyuu*

Fujii Emi, a 30-year-old woman, works as a lighting technician in a male-dominated company. This profession challenges the gender-based division of labor that confines women to the domestic and non-public spheres publik (Handayani, 2006; (Sugihastuti, 2007). Several scenes show Fujii Emi performing tasks typically done by men, coordinating work, and solving problems without relying on men. This highlights her skills as a competent and capable leader and refutes the stereotype of women as delicate and emotional. Regarding relationships, Fujii Emi enjoys her solitude. For her, love is a burdensome commitment that comes with rules, and she is not interested in finding a partner, choosing to remain single instead.

As the only female field lighting technician, Fujii Emi is entrusted to lead a major event, a Halloween festival. This demonstrates that the gendered division of labor is a social construct, not a biological one, and that women can compete with men if given the opportunity. The scene in Episode 2 (18:58-19:05) exemplifies the equal rights movement in the workplace. Fujii Emi is capable of performing a man's job and even becomes a leader, directly opposing the gendered division of labor. According to (Sugihastuti, 2007), women's jobs are often concentrated in service sectors, roles that are closely related to caregiving, serving, and supporting, such as teachers, nurses, secretaries, and flight attendants.

Even though Fujii Emi's work is perceived as difficult for other women, she proves that a woman can compete with and even surpass men despite her perceived weaknesses. According to (Adachi, 2013), when a woman enters and excels in a male-dominated field, it challenges stereotypes and opens up the possibility of re-categorizing that work. In other words, Fujii Emi's actions are not just an individual case but also represent the potential for a shift in gender norms in the workplace.

Dialogue on Age and Marriage:

Tamura : That's true, Takahashi, but there's no need to rush. Your life is still at 7 a.m.
Takahashi : 7 a.m.?
Tamura : Right. Your life clock. Divide your current age by three and then look at a 24-hour clock, and you'll know where you are now.
Takahashi : Oh, I see. My age is 21, so that puts me at 7 a.m.
Fujii : Hasegawa and I are 27, so that's 9 a.m.
Yuu : Still early, isn't it?
Fujii : Yes, it's still early.

(Episode 2, 08:57-09:42)

This dialogue between Takahashi, Tamura, Fujii Emi, and Yuu about the "life clock" metaphor is linked to their ages. Tamura, who is married, advises Takahashi not to rush into marriage because she is only 21, which is analogized as 7 a.m. Fujii Emi and Hasegawa, both 27, consider themselves to be at "9 a.m.," while Yuu emphasizes that this age is still young.

This scene reveals a resistance to social norms regarding the age of marriage for women in Japan. According to (Iwao, 1993), women who remain unmarried after the age of 25 are often socially stigmatized, labeled as *urenokori* (unsold goods) or *too ga tatsu* (overripe fruit). In Japanese patriarchal culture, these labels serve as a mechanism of social control to pressure women into marrying by a certain age. However, in this dialogue, Fujii Emi rejects this stigma, even though she is past 25. She considers herself to still be in the "morning" of her life, at 7 a.m. This mindset demonstrates that Fujii has a male-like perspective, prioritizing delaying marriage and emphasizing independence. It can be said that this scene reflects a shift in the meaning of age for contemporary Japanese women.

The following dialogue discusses communal living, a concept known as sisterhood.

Dialog

Saki : By the way, we're both going home alone. Just you and me.
Fujii : Hey, hey. Don't lump me in with you.
Saki : But we're the same.
Fujii : Well, yes, but...
Sakii : I'm just sad to go home to a dark place every day.
Fujii : What? That's surprising! I didn't know you felt that way, Saki.
Saki : Let's live together. Let's share a place!

Fujii : Share a place?
Saki : We won't be alone. And we'll get a better place than we have now! And we can split the rent and save money!

(Episode 1, 11:28-13:30)

The dialogue above depicts a form of solidarity and freedom among single women. Saki, feeling lonely, invites Fujii Emi to live together, not just as a solution for lowering living costs but also as a form of emotional support between women. The decision to share a home demonstrates a choice to live an independent life, in direct opposition to societal expectations that women must marry.

This phenomenon is linked to the feminist concept of sisterhood, which refers to the solidarity among women who support each other in the fight against patriarchy. According to (Tong, 2006) sisterhood is an emotional and political bond among women that strengthens them in facing gender-based discrimination. This concept aligns with (Hooks, 2000), view that sisterhood is not merely friendship but a collective strategy for women to support one another in the struggle for equality.

Fujii Emi's decision to live with Saki also demonstrates a form of resistance against the stereotype that women must marry to be considered socially successful. By building a network of mutual support, Fujii Emi and Saki assert that women can be independent without the presence of men in their lives. In this context, sisterhood functions as a safe space that allows women to negotiate their identities, build independence, and reject patriarchal dominance.

Furthermore, as (Sugihastuti S. , 2010) emphasizes that women are still in a subordinate position in terms of education, work, and social roles, the concept of sisterhood that appears in this scene is not just a representation of companionship. Instead, it is a feminist symbol of the importance of female solidarity as a strategy to fight for freedom, independence, and gender equality.

3. The Characters of Tanaka and Nitta in *Mondai no Aru Restaurant*

Similarly, Nitta, a top graduate from Todai University, is placed in a subordinate role, such as serving coffee during meetings. Nitta works as hard as she can on tasks assigned by her superiors, even though her position does not reflect her education and competence. This demonstrates that a high level of education does not guarantee women will attain equal standing with men in a patriarchal society.

The stories of Tanaka and Nitta highlight the enduring patriarchal culture in Japan. The stereotypes of women as gentle, emotional, and suitable only for domestic work are deeply ingrained in society. Women are not allowed to hold business positions above men. Society perpetuates the notion that men are more important and that women are inherently inferior.

Harassment against Tanaka and Nitta, as women working in a male-dominated field, is a frequent occurrence. They often experience gender discrimination at work. Nitta's job at the company is associated with domestic duties, such as serving drinks during male employees' meetings. Although this is not a written rule, this task has become an expectation for female employees, regardless of their primary job functions. This reflects a gender bias that perpetuates injustice.

The belief that women are unfit to work in the public sphere, such as managing a restaurant, leads to Tanaka's presence being a threat to the male hierarchy, which views men as superior and women as inferior. As Handayani (2006:5) argues, social constructs portray men as strong, rational, and powerful, while women are seen as gentle, beautiful, emotional, and motherly. While most women work in domestic and non-public fields, Tanaka successfully establishes a restaurant without male interference. Despite being categorized as a "weaker sex," Tanaka is able to work and open a restaurant, even competing with well-known establishments. Tanaka's actions challenge the gender concepts that have long confined women.

A scene in Episode 3 (17:27-00:17:48) confirms Tanaka's abilities in planning and promoting her restaurant. She demonstrates her skills in attracting customers and introducing her new establishment. Her strategy shows that women can be agents of change who challenge male dominance in the workplace. This aligns with (Bishop, 2004), view that women's involvement in the workforce contributes to achieving gender equality, particularly in recruitment and promotion. Thus, the characters of Tanaka and Nitta reflect the experiences of women in Japan: their struggle against discrimination and their great potential to fight for gender equality in the public sphere.

The following dialogue is between Tanaka and Ameki (the director of the restaurant Symphonic), who offers Tanaka a large sum of money and to become his "mistress" with the intent of taking over their restaurant.

Ameki : Tanaka will you be my mistress?

Tanaka : Please leave.

Ameki : I'll give you 3 billion every month. I like you, Tanaka. Your company seems to be having a tough time; I'll help you.

Tanaka : Ameki, all the employees at this restaurant have their own unique feelings. Our goals are also different. There's someone who ended up here while searching for a place for herself. There's someone who decided to work for the sake of her child. There's someone who works as if they are rebelling against something. I am doing this to make my friend's dream a reality. She was frustrated and frustrated, and could only cry, which is why I want to make my friend's dream come true. Her dream is to get revenge on you, Ameki. I started this restaurant to avenge her disappointment.

Ameki : Oh, I see. So, you're saying you'll defeat our company, which has an annual business of 30 billion yen?

Tanaka : Yes, we will win.

(Episode 5, 08:24-10:25)

The scene above shows Ameki's offer to Tanaka to become his mistress as a means of male control and dominance. It can be argued that violence is fundamentally linked to power, and acts of violence are generally perpetrated by men. Male dominance over women demonstrates the power of men to act as they please toward women. However, Tanaka refuses and asserts that her motivation for building the restaurant is not for personal gain but to realize her friend's dream and to challenge a major corporation. Ameki's offer reflects an aspect of patriarchal power: economic control and positions of authority are used to dominate women, not through overt violence but through moral and financial pressure.

Tanaka's refusal is a powerful form of symbolic resistance; she rejects submission to norms that exploit women's gender roles. Furthermore, the team led by Tanaka operates within the public business sphere, affirming that women can occupy strategic positions in the economic realm. This aligns with (Walby, 1990). concept of patriarchy as a power structure that not only regulates domestic roles but also controls women through institutional structures and social norms. Tanaka not only rejects subordination but also represents the possibility of re-forming gender norms, where women take an active role and are not merely objects of control. The entry of Tanaka and her female friends into the restaurant business shows a commitment to the idea of gender equality and refutes the notion that women are second-class citizens. As women, they refuse to submit to a patriarchal culture that positions them as inferior. Tanaka's defiance is a struggle aimed at dismantling the patriarchal dominance that confines women.

D. CONCLUSION

This study shows that traditional gender stereotypes such as women being perceived as "weak," "submissive," or more suited for the domestic sphere remain relevant. However, the three analyzed dramas present various forms of female resistance against the patriarchal system. The character Michiko, with her medical expertise and professional independence, demonstrates that women can surpass men in the medical world. Fujii Emi, through her career choices and decision to remain single, rejects the social pressure to marry. Finally, Tanaka and Nitta showcase their leadership and courage in the public domain, despite facing gender discrimination.

Their acts of resistance go beyond simply performing "masculine" jobs; they also change societal perceptions through their public roles, decision-making, leadership, and willingness to take social risks. These dramas also reveal that education and competence alone do not guarantee gender equality; they require active engagement and defiance from female characters.

In addition, the drama *Watashi ga Renai Dekinai Riyuu* illustrates the concept of sisterhood, or the friendship and solidarity among women. This shows that women can

support one another to face social pressures, alleviate loneliness, and build independence without relying on men. The concept of sisterhood, as Hooks (2000) affirms, serves as a key feminist strategy to strengthen women's position in confronting the patriarchal system. Overall, all three dramas successfully depict that gender stereotypes can be challenged and that women can practically achieve equality. While not all obstacles have been overcome, media representations like these are a vital step toward more tangible gender equality in Japanese society.

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