

**Breaking Stereotypes: A Feminist Analysis of Female
Representation in the Animated Worlds of Satoshi Kon and
Hayao Miyazaki**

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requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

Department of Arts and Humanities

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

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2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
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Abstract

This thesis examines how renowned Japanese auteurs Satoshi Kon and Hayao Miyazaki challenge and subvert traditional gender stereotypes through their respective anime movies. Taking Satoshi Kon's *Perfect Blue* and *Millennium Actress* and Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke* as primary texts, it shows how these auteurs construct complex, empowered female-centered narratives that challenge normative gender roles. Using Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as critical lenses, it offers a feminist reading of the said films, focusing on narrative structures, characters, and visuals. This textual analysis demonstrates that both auteurs use anime as a means to provide powerful feminine representation that goes beyond breaking stereotypes about women in anime. It also reveals their visual and narrative techniques offer alternatives to traditional cinematic storytelling regarding gender, identity, and perception. The study will employ textual analysis to investigate how these films reflect, resist, or reinterpret traditional portrayal of female characters in anime.

Keywords: Identity; gender stereotypes; patriarchal conventions; male gaze; reimagining femininity; anime

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Japanese animation, otherwise known as anime, has emerged as an interesting visual culture within both Japan and around the world. Animation is a filmmaking technique which combines multiple art forms such as visual, auditory, and narrative. By combining all these art forms, it creates moving images that can evoke various emotions in the audience. In the past, animation was only seen as suitable for children and we already know them as cartoons. However, in today's world animation can be suitable for any age demographic because "animation is gradually becoming a medium that can profoundly affect the emotions and feelings of its audience" (Cai 2024). Particularly, anime has become famous worldwide. Barışkan Ünal stated, "Anime as a commercial art form, especially feature-length films, actually started to rise organically and voluntarily after the postwar period of Japan in the 1950s and 1960s" (11). Since then, it has become a popular culture in both Japan and the West.

Over time anime has become a form of narrative art rather than just mere entertainment. Susan J. Napier in her book (2001) argued that, "the issues it explores, often in surprisingly complex ways, are ones familiar to readers of contemporary "high culture" literature (both inside and outside Japan) and viewers of contemporary art cinema" (4). One such prominent issue is gender. Before the 1990s mainstream anime portrayed female characters either in stereotypical roles such as- passive love interests, damsels in distress, or objects of male desire such as *Sally the Witch* (1966), *Cutie Honey* (1973), *Urusei Yatsura* (1981), *Golden Boy* (1995) etc. The god of anime and manga Osamu Tezuka (1928-1989) worked with a female lead in his anime *Princess Knight* (1967) which is considered as the first shojo (young girls') anime. But this was just made

for children without including any serious themes. Go Nagai's *Cutie Honey* also has an empowered female character but she is sexualized in the anime which only demonstrates the femininity idealized by male fantasy. However, these early works set the stage for famous Japanese auteurs Satoshi Kon and Hayao Miyazaki to explore female characters and reimagine femininity in a way that empowers women. During the 1990s, Kon and Miyazaki brought a significant shift in the anime industry through their female representation. They emerged as influential figures both within Japan and around the world, who subverted the traditional female representation of that time into a more empowering representation. Both the auteurs positioned female figures as active subjects rather than sexual objects or side characters. Thus, this thesis seeks to examine how these two directors reimaged femininity in anime by subverting or breaking traditional patterns in female representation through their films- *Perfect Blue*, *Millennium Actress*, *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke*.

1.1 Satoshi Kon: Blurring the Boundaries Between Reality and Illusion

Satoshi Kon (1963-2010) is a Japanese film director, animator, screenwriter, and manga artist. He is regarded as one of the most influential directors in Japan for his acclaimed animated films. He only ever made four movies in his lifetime: *Perfect Blue* (1997), *Millennium Actress* (2001), *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003) and *Paprika* (2007). In a blog post shortly before his death, he regrets that he can not do more for cinema. "I haven't been idly waiting for death, even now I'm thinking with my weak brain of ways to let the work live even after I am gone." (*Satoshi Kon's Last Words* | *Makiko Itoh: Not a Nameless Cat*). In his relatively short life, Kon created a new realm of cinema by experimenting with his visual techniques which he does through seamless

transitions, jump cuts and framing. He has a distinctive way of storytelling where he uses these visual techniques to blend reality and fantasy. According to Ywain Tomos, “His films contained multi-layered narratives as reality, fantasy and memory blend into one another, often from the point of view of the main character” (222). Both *Perfect Blue* and *Millennium Actress* chosen for this study contain these multi-layered narratives along with the visual trickery to blur the line between reality and illusions. His works are disorienting as it continuously shifts among reality, illusion, performance and this uncertainty is what makes him stand out from the rest of the auteurs of his time and even now. With his unique depiction and montage techniques, Satoshi Kon left a long-lasting legacy on the anime industry.

Satoshi Kon places women at the center of his disorienting works and uses his creative expressions to depict contemporary social issues as well as criticizes Japanese society. His fascination with female characters made him use strong female characters in his movies. In an interview with *Midnight Eye*, he told his thoughts behind working with female characters. “I like women (laughs). . . . It’s because female characters are easier to write. With a male character, I can see only the bad aspects. Because I am a man I know very well what a male character is thinking . . . on the other hand, if you write a female protagonist because it’s the opposite sex and I don’t know them the way I know a male, I can project my obsession onto the characters and expand the aspects I want to describe” (Kon 2001). By offering a world of feminine empowerment he subverted the gender roles of a patriarchal society. In an interview given to ANN, Kon says “Women like the ones in anime don't really exist in reality. I don't appeal to realism as if my life depended on it, but with visuals, characters and the story, there's a reality amongst all that” (Kon 2008). By saying this Kon highlights his auteur vision as he suggests his

awareness of how anime constructs femininity through objectification or fixed ideologies. Hence, he uses his creative expression as a tool to explore authentic female experience that goes beyond the traditional representation of women.

1.2 Hayao Miyazaki: An atypical traditionalist

Hayao Miyazaki is a Japanese manga artist, animator and filmmaker. Since the 1980s he has been redefining anime by taking anime beyond the Japanese anime industry into the global film industry. His works resonate across cultures and generations because of his unique thematic elements. In a post-war Japan, he wanted to create his animated worlds which “contain visions of hope and rebirth” (29) without any apocalyptic tone. He creates an alternative world where he blends realism with fantasy and imagines a world isolated from modernity so that the audience can escape from the pressures of Japanese society. In 1985 Miyazaki established Studio Ghibli with his business partner Isao Takahata. Under this studio they made a lot of films that were financially successful even in Hollywood and won awards at major film festivals. In fact, *Spirited Away* won the first Hollywood Oscar for an animated film in 2002. When it comes to animation Miyazaki is thoroughly a traditionalist which means he uses Japanese hand drawn animation for his films. He does not approve of technology for his creativity. Most of the time Miyazaki starts drawing storyboards and keeps working on it till the film develops. His preferable animation process is “to develop the narrative and characterization through hand drawn story boards with no script” (Tomos 155).

Hayao Miyazaki has always pushed his boundaries to express his creativity and explore his ambitions. One of which is challenging the patriarchal society of Japan where women's roles are only limited to domestic duties. Even though post-war Japan legalized women's equality, it was still not culturally normalized in media representations. Miyazaki believes in the power of imagination and uses that power to make something useful in reality. According to Napier, he is "perhaps best known for two particular elements in his works, his richly realized fantasy worlds and his memorable female characters" (122). Miyazaki always tries to subvert this patriarchal agenda where protagonists are "exclusively male" and includes a more ethical ground through his narrative and characters. One of the important elements of his animated worlds is female characters "in whom he provides a crucial potential for change, growth, and compassionate empowerment" (Napier 124). Through his portrayal of women, he makes the audience visualize and even participate in a world where women are not performing the traditional gender roles. As Lamarre states, "Miyazaki introduces girls and women into his adventures, to disrupt genre conventions and expectations" (80). Since the 1990s he is constantly representing strong female characters and influencing everyone to adapt to the new world where a conventional male protagonist is not the center of attraction anymore.

I have selected four films by each auteur to study for my paper: *Perfect Blue* (1997) and *Millennium Actress* (2001) by Satoshi Kon and *Spirited Away* (2001) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) by Hayao Miyazaki. Even though these films have been studied before, the directors' approach to female characters have not been studied in detail especially for Satoshi Kon's movies. This gap creates an opportunity to explore how Kon and Miyazaki presented their female characters that goes beyond stereotypes. It will provide an insight into how these

directors' ideological and aesthetic views brought a change in the female representations during the 1990s. Given the influence they have both in Japan and globally, it is crucial to understand their approach to gender representation and how it helped anime to evolve as a serious form of art. I expect my findings will lay the groundwork for future researchers to understand the role of these directors in advocating feminist alternatives in Japanese animation.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

The main objective of this study is to examine how Kon and Miyazaki subvert and challenge traditional gender stereotypes with their works. By studying the characters, stylistic elements, narrative structures and visuals in the films of Kon and Miyazaki, it intends to provide insights into their approach to female representation. This study also aims to demonstrate that both the auteurs use female protagonists as an active force against patriarchal, industrial and narrative conventions. To meet these objectives the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is their approach to gender in these films?
2. What narrative, stylistic and visual techniques are used to challenge and counter traditional gender representation?

1.4 Methods

This study employs a qualitative research approach that enables textual analysis of visual, narrative, themes and stylistic elements of a particular cultural text. This research focuses on close textual analysis from both primary sources and secondary sources. All the movies are

selected for their portrayal of strong, independent females. These female characters are represented as the main character, an active agent who drives the plot of the movie forward rather than just being in a supportive role of their male counterparts. Textual analysis is used to interpret the narrative structure, visuals, characters and their dialogues as different films may offer different perspectives in the representation of gender-related themes. At first, I watched every movie to get an idea of the content. All four movies had nationwide theatrical release in Japan when they first came out. I accessed the original version from the internet and it took me several days to finish them since I took notes while watching. Later, I rewatched them from feminist perspective to analyze the portrayal of female characters. I selected specific scenes, interactions, and dialogues from my detailed notes for my analysis. Several themes and patterns emerged from the analysis and after thoroughly observing them multiple times I also connected them with feminist concepts to get a proper insight on each film regarding female representation.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter discusses the evolution of gender roles in Japan to understand the interrelationship between anime and gender as well as the existing literature on Kon and Miyazaki. Additionally, to grasp a better understanding of the female representation of Kon and Miyazaki, it also presents an overview of the feminist concepts I have used in the study.

2.1 Evolution of gender roles and prominent gender stereotypes in anime

In his book *The Soul of Anime*, cultural anthropologist Ian Condry states, “anime gives us a concrete example to think through the social dynamics of purposeful creativity in a global context. Anime exists not only as media but as labor and energy that connects creators, businesses, and fans” (14). This means the soul of anime lies within the social dynamics of people engaging with it, particularly the creators’ artistic choices are shaped by the audience’s expectations. This also means anime can be used to portray various social issues, break stereotypes and construct a different reality since it does not hesitate to explore into the “territory of adult entertainment and adult preoccupations” (Cavallaro 14). Gender roles have always been a fascinating topic in Japan because of its extreme patriarchy, particularly, the female representation in anime has always been directly influenced by history, culture and politics. To understand the evolution of gender representation it is necessary to lay out the idea of how Japan has always been an extremely patriarchal country and how women were always marginalized throughout its history. During the Edo period (1603-1868) women were seen in familial roles as

the period was based upon Confucianism. They needed to have four virtues to be recognized by the society “feminine virtue (futoku, the various virtues a woman had to display); feminine speech (fugen, the language used by a woman); feminine form (fuyō, appearance, dress, and deportment proper to women); and feminine skill (fukō, the practical skills appropriate to a woman) The cultivation of futoku, the feminine virtues, was considered particularly important” (Balagué 7). These virtues were taught to women for them to be a ‘good wife’ who were obedient towards men and did familial duty and regarded as *Yamato Nadeshiko*, an idealized woman. Balagué quotes Koyama “the ideal woman was one who would serve her husband as one served a feudal lord and obediently perform her duties as a daughter-in-law for her mother- and father-in-law” (8). Mothers were expected to instill these four virtues in their daughters to be the perfect women for her husband. This role got slightly changed during the Meiji period (1868-1912) and became “good wife, wise mother or ryōsai kenbo” (Balagué 10). The main goal of women’s education became to be a submissive, self-sacrificing mother and wife as “The Civil Code of 1898 established the family system (ie), which made emphasis on the authority of the household over the individual and placed women in a subordinate position within the family” (Balagué 9). The government wanted Confucian inspired education for women just like the Edo era while including the virtues of motherhood. Later, during the Taishō Democracy (1905-1932) there seemed to be “a shift from self-sacrifice to self-awareness, which provided the optimum conditions for the “New Woman” debate” (Balagué 11). These “New women” started to challenge and resist the ideologies that were forced upon them by society which means they went against the “good wife, wise mother” propaganda. They founded a group “Seitōsha who were responsible for the publication of *Seitō*” which was used by women to “express themselves as well as deal and challenge old stereotypes and arising gender issues (Balagué 11). Slowly they

became the representatives of the women of modern Japan. After World War II, Japan put effort into improving women's status by reforming laws. The new Constitution and amendments of 1947 created a significant development for women as "women gained their right to vote and were finally recognized as equals to the males" ((Balagué 12). During the 1970s "women developed a clear self-identity through changes in labor practices, introduction of new ideas from the western feminist movement, and the development of the mass media" (Ogi 173). From that time on, Japanese women were finally able to get proper education, participate in politics, and be equal to men.

However, since the patriarchal ideologies are rooted very deeply in Japanese society, they can not get rid of those patriarchal stereotypes from their everyday life and remain the same in many cases even now. This also resulted in the stereotypical representation of women in anime or cinema. In the anime industry in particular, what complicates settling for one dominant gender representation pattern is the presence of different genres. To understand the nature of gender representation in Japanese anime, one must take into account these prominent genres. In Japan, anime is "marketed and sold in four distinct genres: shōnen (boys'), shōjo (少女; girls'), seinen (青年; young adult men's) and josei (女性; young adult women's)" (Flis 77). These genres cater to various ages and genders. This also gives us an understanding of the ways a particular gender is represented within each genre. Seinen and josei are targeted towards young adult men and women. These anime mainly center around dark and matured themes such as violence, philosophy, psychology, social hierarchy, science etc. Shonen is targeted towards teenage or late teen boys thus its "content is commonly intended to appeal to boys at an age where they typically undergo puberty and develop romantic and sexual interests" and "ensures that the male

protagonist exemplifies ‘hegemonic masculinity’” (Flis 77). If the target audience is mostly young adolescent boys or adult males, the female characters would “combine sexuality and child-like cuteness: they are often hypersexualized and are in need of protection” (Unal 21). Female characters are always portrayed in stereotypical gender roles such as passive love interests, damsels in distress, objectified as sexual figures or in other domesticated roles like housewives, elderly, schoolgirls etc.

When the target audience is young girls (shojo) the female characters would be “sweet, cute (kawaii), and attractive, but not purely sexy. They are often passive or dreamy” (Unal 21). The narrative will either be centered around a love interest or magical girl trope which means characters will be fairy, elf, nymph or any other magical being. According to Flis, by doing so “it ensures that shōnen manga appeals to its male readership through narratives rooted in hegemonic masculinity” (78). British film scholar Rayna Denison in her book *Anime : A Critical Introduction* establishes the idea behind sexualization of female characters. According to her, sexualizing female characters is a “kind of character exploitation, a form of “fan service”. During the time period of the 1970s-1980s women were portrayed in those stereotypical gender roles to appeal to the male audience. *Cutey Honey* (1973) and *Bubblegum Crisis* (1987) have strong female leads but are overly sexualized involving fan service and nudity. *Maison Ikkoku* (1986) has a female lead who is a widow and a caretaker. She is shown as a passive and domestic woman. *Urusei Yatsura* (1981) is about “a lecherous boy and an alien princess who only wears a tiger-striped bikini and has magical powers” (Unal 30). The female alien Lum only serves as an eye candy even though she is powerful. *Golden Boy* (1995) revolves around a perverted male

protagonist and most of the episodes of this anime includes overly sexualized women as comedic objects.

2.2 Satoshi Kon, Hayao Miyazaki, and Gender Representation

During the 90s “anime expanded its audience and increased its visibility around the world since it was not overly expensive to produce” (Ünal 32). So, the shift in anime representations were also starting to become more provocative particularly “by the 1990s intellectually sophisticated anime were increasingly appearing” (Napier 18). One of the most important movies from the 90s is Hayao Miyazaki’s film *Princess Mononoke* (1997). This movie “broke all box office records in 1997 and became the highest-grossing film of all time in Japan until the release of *Titanic*” (Ünal 37-38). That same year Satoshi Kon’s psychological thriller movie, *Perfect Blue* (1997) was also released. And this movie, as Ünal quoted Mes, “finally convinced a lot of people that animation might be more than just a children's medium” in the West” (38). Both of these films have female protagonists. Unlike before, this time the female characters were more complex both emotionally and psychologically. Their powerful representations went beyond stereotypes and overly sexualized fan service. Both Satoshi Kon and Hayao Miyazaki utilized their creative freedom to resist the traditional patriarchal representation of women in anime.

This section looks into some of the existing scholarly works on the auteurs and their selected films. The existing studies on the novel provide essential ideas to this research in understanding how Kon and Miyazaki brought a change in gender representation. Satoshi Kon’s “film within film” technique is a widely discussed aspect in the scholarly works on his movies.

Saint-Oyant (2017) explores this technique and blending of realism and illusion in Kon's work by highlighting it as "queer aesthetic" "Kon's films become queer not in the sense that they are representing gay characters, but more so in the way they are deconstructing and challenging a multitude of historical conventions around social and artistic traditions" (7). His paper explores Kon's unique montage techniques such as frame within frame, film within film, cue less scene transition by examining all his movies. With these techniques, he creates a kind of illusion that creates confusion within the audience's head. Kon uses this disorientation as the aesthetics of his works. Mishra's (2014) analysis of the magical realism portrayed in *Millennium Actress* relies on the broader magical realist theory. The paper studies "merging realms" which means "where the film world and the real world are so seamlessly woven together that it becomes difficult to tell them apart" (301). They explore the concepts of "non-linearity of time and space", "entangled identities", "non-sequiturs", "observers as actors" and "integration of alternative realities" to apply in Kon's films (300-301). This thesis, too, relies on "film within film" or "merging realm" to examine Kon's critique towards the art of filmmaking. Similarly, the article *A Girl Divided: the Fragmented Shōjo in Perfect Blue* by Dylan Levy (2016) studies the movie's portrayal of Mima's psychological collapse and connects it to the broader concept of female identity within the entertainment industry. It explores how the narrative employs Mima and her alter ego to challenge the traditional shojo image. In the context of creating a critique that challenges social conventions, the article "*Excuse me, who are you?": Performance, the gaze, and the female in the works of Kon Satoshi*" by Napier (2006) also examines how Kon's female characters are represented under the themes of performance and identity to reflect into our role as audience. She applies Mulvey's male gaze to analyze the audience's gaze and how it is built upon around female characters. Both Levy and Napier's observations align with this study's claim regarding

Kon's subversion of traditional gender representation through his criticism of the entertainment industry.

Hayao Miyazaki's auteur ship is also extensively discussed in the scholarly works on anime films. He might be one of the few auteurs in the anime industry who still uses hand drawn cel animation technique. The paper *Hayao Miyazaki as Auteur: Techniques, Technology and Aesthetics in Animation* by Ang (2013) studies the auteur's earlier works (1980s-2000) and recent works (2000-2025) through the lens of animation technique. It explores how Miyazaki combines traditional and digital techniques by looking into animation effects, motions and depth. Anime scholar Susan Napier has always criticized the negative stereotypes of female characters in anime. Yet in her book (2001), she argues that "Miyazaki's female characters are indeed "real" and richly believable within the confines of the narrative" (124). The chapter titled *The Shōjo in the World of Miyazaki Hayao*, examines how Miyazaki uses female characters "in whom he provides a crucial potential for change, growth, and compassionate empowerment" (Napier 124). Unlike traditional shōjo who are portrayed as "ultrafeminine", his girl characters "might well be described as stereotypically masculine" (124). Napier studies Miyazaki's films to highlight the narrative surrounding his female characters. Even Thomas Lamarre argues in his book (2009) that Miyazaki avoids "marriage or even romantic alliance between the heroine and hero...In this way he avoids scenarios in which girls' figure as objects of exchange between men (83). In the chapter *Only a girl can save us now*, Lamarre examines how boys and girls are animated differently in Miyazaki's works. Especially he researches the technological and industrial relations between a boy centred film and a girl centered film. By doing so he tries to show "girl is the site of futurity in Miyazaki's animations.... Without the figure of the girl, however, this

future would simply appear as a return to the past, a return to old technologies and old forms of social organization, and thus as a repetition of older understandings of the world” (85). These scholarly works inspire this research to explore the films of Miyazaki through a feminist lens. Overall, this thesis aims to portray both Kon and Miyazaki’s approach to gender by looking into the narrative, stylistic and visual techniques of their films.

2.2 Analytical lens

To undertake a feminist reading, the study mainly uses Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze” theory and Judith Butler’s “gender performativity” theory. These theories provide an analytical lens to examine how gender and identity operates in Kon and Miyazaki’s films. Firstly, the concept of “male gaze” was first coined by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 seminal essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. This essay shaped the path for feminist media critiques to study films in a new way. In a patriarchal society women are treated as objects to signify men’s fantasies and obsessions, a perspective that Mulvey finds embedded in the cinematic framework, the camera. The present study aims to employ this critical lens to examine the selected films to understand how women could be positioned to counter the “male gaze”. Satoshi Kon’s film stands as a critique towards this male gaze whereas Hayao Miyazaki directly counters it. Men derive erotic visual pleasure by subjecting women, both directly and indirectly, to the male gaze. The gaze theory can be looked at in three levels. The first one is the female character’s stance and the camera’s positioning towards her. Since women are only considered important for “visual and erotic impact” (11), the director will place the camera in an angle that will emphasize their bodies or enhance their physical appearance. Even though women are used as visual objects their

importance is still irrelevant for the film. She is positioned as an outsider whose only purpose is to serve as an object of pleasure “The presence of a woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (11). As a result, the man's role in films is more active than that of a woman. He is given authority to control the story as well as objectify the woman's character for his pleasure. This is also the second level of gaze theory where male characters within the film are positioned to derive visual pleasure by objectifying the female characters. Lastly, the audience's gaze where the audience is influenced to embrace the male point of view. Since he is the representative of power, a controlling figure, the audience feels he is also a part of the journey and are forced to take part in his voyeurism. The later chapters will show how Hayao Miyazaki breaks this pattern of female representation in his film while Satoshi Kon criticizes the concept of male gaze through his film.

In a different way, Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), revolutionized gender theory. She argues that gender is not a fixed thing rather a repetitive act conditioned by society. One becomes a “man” or “woman” not because they are born like that, but rather they are produced by repeated actions and social expectations. She reinforces the idea that gender is not something we are rather it is what we perform. Gender performativity theory highlights how gender is constructed in visual media. As Butler says, “There is, in my view, nothing about femaleness that is waiting to be expressed; there is, on the other hand, a good deal about the diverse experiences of women that is being expressed and still needs to be expressed” (*Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* 530-531). In *Perfect Blue*, Kon shows how “performative female” characters are reinforced by the media whereas in *Millennium Actress*, he

shows us how this “performative female” archetype can be countered through conventional femininity. Miyazaki, on the other hand, blurs the line between gender roles by portraying his female characters with both masculine and feminine traits. Satoshi Kon constructs gender performativity in a way that forces the audience to think about it and Hayao Miyazaki deconstructs the very notion of it.

The very notion of anime is based upon challenging reality and offering a medium that goes beyond traditional conventions. Hence, the male gaze and gender performativity theory are crucial lenses to examine how gender and identity are constructed in anime and visual culture in general. Through these theories it is possible to reimagine femininity in anime that transcends traditional gender stereotypes.

Chapter 3: Reimagining femininity in Kon's world

3.1 Feminine Psyche in *Perfect Blue* (1997)

Perfect Blue (1997) is Satoshi Kon's first movie and arguably one of the best psychological thrillers ever made in the history of cinema. Keeping the audience on edge from the very beginning, it tells the story of Mima, a J-pop idol and her journey in becoming an actress as well as the emotional turmoil she goes through. The constant pressure she faces while transitioning from idol to actress, the invasive nature of fans and media drives her into madness. Through Mima's breakdown Kon reflects upon the inhumane expectations the entertainment industry places on women. Napier says in her article, "Kon possesses a strong social/sociocultural consciousness—several of his works are not only grounded in contemporary social issues but also serve as clear critiques of Japanese society" (24). Kon uses this film to demonstrate the reality of female performers and criticizes their objectification within the Japanese entertainment industry.

Mima: A socially constructed female identity

Through the protagonist, Mima, Kon shows that the identity of a female figure is socially constructed to benefit the entertainment industry. The film begins with her as an idol in the J-pop band Cham. In the scene where Mima performs with her group members on stage (2:50-3:10) we see they are wearing mini frocks with knee-high socks. The dress almost looks like a costume

that accentuates their perfect body figure whereas their performance is based upon their innocence and cuteness while singing and dancing. Kon uses camera movement that simultaneously lingers around their body and the audience enjoying the concert. Here, he also places all grown male characters as the audience of that concert. Through this Kon cleverly highlights how Japanese female idol's image always has to be perfect and crafted specially for the youth to consume where the 'youth' only centers around male fans. This works as a visual metaphor which reveals that the crafting of female idols as well behaved, perfectly clothed and seemingly innocent comes from the internal patriarchy of the industry since men are the one consuming these performances. Judith Butler's concept of gender as performative helps understand the social construction of femininity in this context. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed thing rather a repetitive act conditioned by the society (519) which aligns with the idol culture in Japan where fans expect their idols to act in a certain way. After the concert Mima very politely discloses to her audience about her retirement and pursuing acting. But few aggressive fans start to create commotion to display their dissatisfaction regarding this change where one man even tries to throw a can towards Mima (6:25). This scene indicates how fans act as if they own the female performers, ultimately suggesting that those performers are merely subjected to the norms and wishes of the very society they perform for and are not free to "act" the way they like. This also makes us question how we tend to see "performance" as having an active role. In the case of these idols, performance is without any active agency in the true sense. There is another important scene that showcases this objectification perfectly. When Mima was performing in her concert a fan shapes his hand like a camera and frames her in his palms (05:05). This is also a visual sign by Kon to show us how a female performer is an object of

consumption. Mima's placement into the hand reveals her as an object owned by the fan rather than being her own self.

Even after, when Mima starts acting in a film as she wished for, she is not free from this direct subjection to the system and its patriarchal norms. The director of Mima adds a rape scene in her film without taking her opinion. Either as an idol or a film actress, she is constructed as a persona to be consumed by her fans. The fact that Mima's director suddenly includes a rape scene in the movie just for shock value shows how filmmakers use women as a tool to appeal to a more male audience. Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory reveals how women are only considered important for "visual and erotic impact" (11). Her director wanted to create Mima as an object for male pleasure even though it was based upon her suffering. Kon makes the scene explicitly graphic by setting the scene where Mima in her film dances very seductively wearing little to no clothes in front of men (31:35). Later one man jumps on her and starts forcing himself on her while other men are enjoying watching it happening (34:00). This scene not only shows eroticization but also shows how desire is built through Mima's vulnerability. Kon masterfully includes this scene as a powerful representation to criticize the visual culture surrounding women in the entertainment industry since he reveals how the erotic is coded into the camera eye to pacify male desire.

Later in the film, a famous photographer does a nude photoshoot of Mima which is "supposed" to help grow her acting career but afterwards we see only her male fans are buying the magazines containing her nudes. This only reinforces the truth about patriarchal society that constructs the identity of a female performer, particularly to appeal to the male audience. In

addition to that, Kon shows how society pressurizes young women into acting according to their expectations. He does this by showing Mima as a public figure who needs to be “managed.” In a scene where the discussion of her career change is going on, her agent emphasizes focusing on acting career whereas her manager wants her to keep being an idol. Kon keeps the focus on her during this shot to reflect her helplessness. She is seen sitting quietly keeping her head lowered, face filled with uneasy expressions and shifting anxiously (4:37-4:53). Her discomfort reveals how uncertain a female performer’s life is where their choices not only depend on ambition but also depend on the pressures of societal expectations. A close look at the rape scene and how it traumatizes Mima starting her mental decline will prove this point. During a mental breakdown which happens after she becomes mentally disturbed from doing the rape scene, she cries, “I didn’t want to do it. But I couldn’t trouble everyone who brought me this far” (37:10 - 37:12). This scene reveals the dilemma and her inner hesitation between her own desires and the obligation she feels for the people around her. Through this scene Kon criticizes the entertainment industry where women are expected to align their ambitions with societal conventions. This further adds into my argument, that Kon created Mima as the perfect idol only to criticize and expose the objectification of women by the Japanese entertainment industry.

Psychological turmoil and Identity crisis

Kon’s signature style is blending reality, dream and illusion by applying sudden shifts in scene, jump cuts, multiple layers of frames etc. He uses this technique to capture the exact condition of Mima’s inner psyche since in the film Mima’s public persona, idol persona, actress persona and her true self gets conflicted from time to time. As Mima navigates through her

career she develops paranoia and experiences visual hallucinations. In a scene Mima is seen standing by the glass door inside a moving metro rail and her reflection in the glass is the “idol” Mima who abruptly says “I absolutely refuse to do it!” to the “real” Mima (30:35). The scene then cuts to real Mima’s visibly confused reflection. In this scene Kon uses animation to create two versions of Mima who exist simultaneously in the same screen but in different realities which ultimately shows us how she was not ready for the rape scene and was mentally disturbed during that time. Furthermore, the famous bathtub scene (47:33) reveals the true essence of Mima’s psychological despair. In this scene Mima submerges herself into the tub and we see a long shot of her bare back. The shot cuts to her agonizing face under the water screaming “Bastards” (47:44) perfectly illustrating how vulnerable she is and how she feels about the industry and its people. This scene is another visual metaphor by Kon that reveals the impact of systematic oppression by the entertainment industry on a female performer by visualizing the trauma inflicted upon Mima as she begins her spiraling into madness. Another interesting detail added by the auteur is the recurring question “Who are you?” precisely centered around Mima throughout the movie. Particularly during a scene Mima is seen chasing her “idol” persona who is actually her hallucination and asks her “Who are you” and the persona replies “I told you! I’m the real Mima” (51:25-52:08). This scene implies how Mima slowly loses herself against the “idol” identity that society created for her while also proving Butler’s idea that how a woman acts or appears is directly influenced by the history and culture of the society. When Mima was an idol, she was supposed to maintain an innocent and pure personality but when she shifted to acting, she had to deal with mature contents to maintain her image. This creates a fragmented identity where her reality blurs with her hallucinations which we see in this scene. This identity crisis can also be interpreted as female performers losing themselves to societal pressure and

expectations. The contradiction between their own ideologies and the ideologies society imposes upon them leads them to a psychological despair.

Reclaiming Agency

Kon does not keep Mima as a passive victim of the patriarchal conventions. Instead, by the end of the movie she finds out her manager Rumi is behind all the murders and wants to steal Mima's identity. Through the dramatic confrontation between Mima and Rumi, Kon tries to emphasize the importance of reclaiming one's agency. During the fight between them Mima says "Like I care. I'm who I'm" (1:14:29). This is the first time in the movie where Mima confidently claims her identity. Unlike the earlier scenes where Kon used jump cuts and distorted scene shifts to navigate between real Mima and illusion Mima, this time he uses a still close up only focusing on real Mima's face to visually confirm that she regained her stability. In fact, the last dialogue of this movie is Mima saying "I'm real" (1:17:45) while looking into her car mirror. Earlier in the film whenever we saw Mima's reflection, Kon used distorted scene shifts to make the reflection move independently which made it clear that those were Mima's hallucinations. But this time the reflection in the mirror is calm and stable, exactly replicating what Mima is doing. This proves that Mima has finally gained control of both her mind and life. By reclaiming the control of her life she gets her sanity back and by doing so she breaks free from the patriarchal constraints of the entertainment industry. This representation of Mima is powerful since it demonstrates that women can reclaim their autonomy and fight against societal expectations by staying faithful to their own ideologies. Even Kon says about Mima "I simply wanted to show the process of a young girl maturing, becoming confused because her old set of values gets

shattered, but who is reborn as a mature being as a result of that” (2001). One subtle but interesting aspect of the ending is that Kon does not end the movie with Mima performing on a stage or movie surrounded by male gaze. The movie ends with Mima visiting Rumi in the hospital (1:16:20). There is no one beside Mima, no camera, no audience- only her dressed simply with minimum make up contrary to her “idol” or “actress” look. This is also visually important as Kon shows Mima reclaimed the control of her life and embraced her authentic self. This visual and thematic choice by Kon destabilizes Butler’s theory of gender as a performative act as Mima is no longer someone who performs for others rather she chooses her course of action herself. Thus, through the exploration of feminine psyche Kon shows us the systemic oppression of women in the Japanese entertainment industry and also deconstructs those patriarchal conventions by giving the main protagonist Mima her own agency.

3.2 Celebration of Womanhood in *Millennium Actress* (2001)

Millennium Actress (2001) is an adventure drama and Satoshi Kon’s second feature film. This movie is also centered around a female actress, Chiyoko, and her journey. Unlike *Perfect Blue*, this movie demonstrates the positive side of an ideal idol-fan relationship in the Japanese context. It revolves around the events of Chiyoko’s life as she tells her story to documentary filmmaker, Tachibana. Her journey begins with the attempt to find the mysterious man she once helped during wartime, the man she fell in love with. According to Dani Cavallaro, “*Millennium Actress* penetrates the innermost workings of the entertainment industry, this time focusing on the art of filmmaking itself” (50). A woman telling her past story while recollecting history can transform into a stage where she can be both a narrator and actor. Kon uses his unique story

telling technique of ‘film within a film’ to depict Chiyoko Fujiwara’s life story through her performing in her own movies.

Feminine journey: Subverting the traditional Hero’s quest

Through the protagonist Chiyoko’s journey Kon destabilizes the traditional hero’s quest trope of anime. A traditional hero’s quest revolves around him gaining power, defeating the villain and finally claiming the victory. Kon subverts the conventional quest by giving us a feminine perspective that revolves around themes of memory, love, loss and legacy. Especially during the 90s, most of the time a hero’s quest revolved around him doing everything alone or with little to no help from a supporting character. For example, popular anime series *Dragon Ball Z* (1989-1996), *Rurouni Kenshin* (1996-1998) and *The End of Evangelion* (1997) revolve around lone protagonists who isolate themselves or train in solitude to defeat the villain alone. But Chiyoko’s journey is finding the mysterious man whom she loves, a journey in which her mother, colleagues, the filmmaker Tachibana are involved one way or another. In addition to that, a traditional hero’s quest requires the hero to save something or someone by defeating a powerful opponent, a villain but Chiyoko’s quest is about pursuing her feelings. With this thematic approach Kon wanted to subvert how the patriarchal society constructed heroism does not necessarily involve larger than life events and struggle. Instead, he proposes that it can be about connection, care and having meaningful relationships with everyone. Chiyoko even overcomes the restraints of society through her determination to find the man she loves. There is a scene where she gets an acting offer in her childhood as she recalls “my mother thought that being an actress was unseemly” (10:36) and refused the offer saying “A woman can serve her country by

staying at home and raising a family” (11:08). This indicates that women had to perform according to societal expectations presumably in the early 1930s Japanese society. To quote Butler “to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project” (*Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* 522). Society constructs the existence of a woman in a way where she has to conform to societal conditions imposed upon her to become an ideal woman. But later in the movie we see that Chiyoko starts her acting career to travel across Japan in a hope that she finds the mysterious man. This is a powerful representation of a female character as Kon subverts the traditional cinematic and cultural stereotype of women being controlled by societal expectation. Her persistence in finding the man acts as a catalyst for her to continue having a purpose in a society that constantly tries to restrain her. A close look at the narrative surrounding the key that the mysterious man gives Chiyoko before escaping from the officers will prove this point. The first time we see the key is when Tachibana brings it to elderly Chiyoko which she lost many years ago and asks “Was it the key to something important” where Chiyoko replies “Yes. The key to the most important thing there is” (7:58-08:05). In her recollection we see that she always kept the key close to her, it was the only thing she had of the person she loved. Kon uses this key as a visual symbol of Chiyoko’s inner self, her desire to overcome everything for her quest. In another scene she is seen travelling in a train and gets stuck in the cabin while a band of bandits attacks that train (25:35). She tries to open the door of the cabin but it is locked after a while she uses that very key to open that door and escape from there. This reveals how the key symbolizes her strong will which in terms reveals that her romantic longing does not restrain her rather it helps her to continuously

overcome every challenge she faces. The fact that she never gets to meet the mysterious man but still loved to pursue him throughout her life further proves my point. As the film ends with Chiyoko saying “After all, what I really love is the pursuit of him” (1:21:59), indicating that her life is not depended on anything or restrained by any shackles; rather she chooses what to do herself and enjoys every bit of it. In fact, Kon says to Osmond that “this last line is the reason why I even made the film as it isn't Chiyoko's ego that's on display, it's her attitude, her style of life that's shown here” (Kon 2007) which just proves that Kon made this movie to show us a feminine journey which goes beyond the patriarchal hero's quest.

Reimagining femininity through the art of filmmaking

Millennium Actress stands as a powerful film that redefines the visual culture surrounding women in the entertainment industry by deconstructing the very notion of ‘male gaze’. Throughout the movie Chiyoko is seen embracing her natural beauty, wearing traditional Japanese clothing even in her own movies. She is not sexualized for both her own audience and Kon's audience. There is a one-minute scene where Chiyoko rides a horse to escape some miscreants which transitions to her riding a chariot in a cherry blossom filled road to riding a jinkrisha (two wheeled rickshaw) along a modern city to riding a cycle in a village road, all while wearing traditional Japanese attires (42:25-43:34). This is a very powerful female representation in the animated world as it captures the beauty of femininity. Even the films done by Chiyoko did not portray her as a sexual object or stereotypical gender roles. In her career she is portrayed as an astronaut, warrior, teacher, princess and geisha which only empowered her to live through her life. Just like *Perfect Blue* this film also includes scenes intertwining both real Chiyoko and

actress Chiyoko but Kon does not use distorted scene shifts or jump cuts to differentiate two different versions of Chiyoko to emphasize that her performance as an actress and her real life is her own emotional and personal experience. For example, in one scene Chiyoko is seen acting in a film as a teacher, teaching in a classroom and the students ask her how her lover looks. While replying she starts sobbing and saying “I can’t remember. Not even his face” the scene then slowly transitions into an elderly Chiyoko of present time, telling her life story to filmmaker Tachibana. She is sobbing and saying “I loved him so much. And I can’t even remember his face” (57:27-57:52). This is one of the visual signs which indicates that both Chiyoko’s acting life and real life are her personal experiences. This is also Kon’s famous ‘film within film’ technique where he includes double narrative to create a multilayered film. This double narrative is added through smooth overlaying shifts, match cuts, gradual blend and camera focus to make seamless transitions in scenes while blurring the line between onscreen reality and performance (Saint-Oyant). To visualize the shift between Chiyoko’s real life version and her actress version Kon uses ‘film within film’ technique that blurs the line between her reality and onscreen performance. By blurring the fragile line between her real identity and actress identity Kon proves that as a female performer Chiyoko holds her cinematic roles so dearly that she accepts them as her own experience. Additionally, through her fan and admirer Tachibana, the film director we see a positive idol-fan relationship that counters the male gaze through a unique narrative. Here the fan does not consume the idol rather he admires and adores her with respect. When Tachibana first meets Chiyoko to take her interview he says “It’s a great honor to meet you. This is a great and memorable day for us” (6:53-7:00). With this Kon proposes a dynamic where even a male fan can keep a female performer’s legacy alive without objectifying her. In fact, it can be argued that the fact that the interview Tachibana takes of Chiyoko is a way to pay

homage to her and not just a documentary to make money shows how society can respect and celebrate women if they have the correct mind. Hence, Kon tries to demonstrate that if women are properly represented in visual media, even society is forced to change their views regarding them.

To conclude this chapter, Satoshi Kon's *Perfect Blue* and *Millennium Actress* both stand as critique towards female representation by showing us how narrative and visual strategies are used to create female subjectivity. Through his unique storytelling, in *Perfect Blue* he demonstrates how eroticism is coded to pacify the patriarchal conventions of the entertainment industry while *Millennium Actress* counters these patriarchal conventions by blurring the line between real life and performance. By representing complex female characters in his films Kon challenges the traditional female representation in anime.

Chapter 4: Reimagining femininity in Miyazaki's world

4.1 Breaking stereotypes with *Princess Mononoke* (1997)

The Japanese title of *Princess Mononoke* (1997) is *Mononoke Hime* which is an action fantasy film. The film is set during “the fourteenth-century Muromachi period” (Napier 177). It shows a time when humans and kami (God) used to live together. Ashitaka, the young warrior from the Emishi clan got cursed while fighting a demon god. To protect his people and find a cure for his curse, he sets off to a journey where he meets the female protagonist, San, the titular ‘Princess Mononoke’ who fights for the forest that is being destroyed by Lady Eboshi’s industrialization. In this film Miyazaki both demonstrates and challenges the traditional Japanese myth as it defamiliarizes one of the important icons in Japanese culture, “the myth of the feminine as long-suffering and supportive” (Napier 177). *Princess Mononoke* tries to destabilize the stereotypical portrayal of gender roles through the unique characters by rejecting fixed gender norms and blurring the line between masculinity and femininity. The most influential characters of this film are San and Lady Eboshi. Apart from Ashitaka, the young male protagonist, there are literally no male character’s worth mentioning in the film.

Lady Eboshi: Breaking gender norms with female authority

The first display of female leadership is shown through Lady Eboshi who is the leader of the fortress of Tatara which is also known as the Iron Town. In the first appearance of Lady

Eboshi, we see her fully covered in a kimono while carrying a rifle and actively participating in a fight (19:20). Her appearance itself counters Mulvey's "male gaze" theory which says women are only considered important for "visual and erotic impact" (11), as her looks serve no purpose to appeal to the male audience, rather her beauty lies within her confidence and boldness. Moreover, the moment when Lady Eboshi and San finally engage in a fierce duel is a pivotal point in the film (49:23). From a cultural point of view women were always seen in familial affairs during the 90s whereas Eboshi wielding a sword with ferocity to fight with San made it clear that women can be warriors as well. One of the core ideas of male gaze is it projects men's own fantasies and ideologies into the female representations. But with this scene Miyazaki provides a different representation which goes beyond the patriarchal conventions of the society. Traditionally an ideal Japanese woman is always referred to as *yamato nadeshiko* which is associated with purity, obedience, gentleness and sacrificing nature (Balagué). This aligns with Butler's idea of performative gender act which tells us that society constructs a belief for a subject, in this case women, and through repetition of acts everyone comes to believe it eventually (519). But Miyazaki challenges this gender norm through Eboshi who is authoritative, aggressive and bold in nature. He deconstructs the "women should be submissive toward men" norm with Eboshi's character. In this film we see Lady Eboshi actively ruling both the political and military sectors by being the leader of her town Tatara. Every man in that town respects and fears her, they say about her "She's not afraid of ancient laws, curses or even wolves. You should've seen her fighting Nago (boar god)!" (34:41-34:50). She also frees women who were sold for slavery or prostitution and gives them work as one man says to Ashitaka "When she finds girls sold as slaves, Eboshi buys their freedom" (34:35). She even cares for the people suffering from leprosy by giving them the job to make weapons, a leper says about her "She is

the only person who ever treated us as human. She did not fear our disease. She washed and bandaged our flesh” (41:00-41:15). Basically, her town is like a refuge for all kinds of outcasts. Through her leadership and compassion for her subjects Lady Eboshi gains the respect of her people. She wanted to create a place where everyone, especially the women, could live with dignity, prosperity and security. Lady Eboshi, who can come off as ruthless, is actually fighting for the sake of her people. Not only that, she herself challenges the traditional gender norms present in Japanese society as she breaks the oppressive system where men lead and women follow. She made her town Tatara a matriarchal society which is the exact opposite of Japan’s extremely patriarchal society. The women of the town actively work the bellows for ironworks, protect the town when men go for other works given by Eboshi and men have to be obedient towards them. In the scene where Eboshi visits the lepers and while checking the firearms she says “It’s not just for me. The women will be using them” (39:24-39:27). Her statement proves that she helps the women of her town to be strong and independent just like her. In another scene when Ashitaka asks the town women if they are happy living there and they admit saying “We eat our fill and the men know their place” (44:09) which implies that they are the authoritative figure in that society. Through this representation of Eboshi and her townspeople Miyazaki destabilizes the stereotype that only men can have power, authority and ambition and implies that if women are given the opportunity they can achieve anything men can do and even more. Hence, through Lady Eboshi, Miyazaki masterfully destabilizes Butler’s idea of performative gender act where one becomes “men” or “women” through the repeated actions forced upon them by societal expectations (519), by blurring the line between traditional masculine and feminine roles.

San: Breaking the stereotype of traditional shōjo (young girl)

The female protagonist of this film is San, who is also the titular ‘Princess Mononoke’. She is a human raised by the wolf gods, which makes her half human, half wolf. From the very beginning she is seen to fight the humans, particularly intending to kill Lady Eboshi. She embodies an aggressive, wild femininity that goes beyond the patriarchal conventions of society. In Japan a traditional shojo character is always portrayed as cute, attractive or sexualised in a manner that will attract the male audience. According to Napier, “cuteness is such an important part of contemporary Japanese culture” (182). However, San lacks this attribute, she is anything but cute. A close look when San makes her first proper appearance is significant (22:00) to prove this point. In this scene she is seen sucking blood from her wolf mother, to take the poison out. She is wearing a cloth made of bones and fur. Her face is smeared in blood from sucking out blood from the wound. This scene establishes San as an aggressive girl and connects her to wildness making it one of the most powerful scenes in the history of female representation in anime. In addition to that, through this Miyazaki subverts one of the most recurring cinematic norms of gender representation which is sexualizing the female characters. The scene is based on Ashitaka seeing San from a distance and through his eye we get to see San’s first appearance and according to Mulvey, audiences are influenced to embrace the male point of view where they can position themselves to get the pleasure of objectifying women just by identifying with the male character (12). But in this scene both the male character and the audience get an explicit image of San where she is not erotic rather seen as a merciless figure. Specifically, this line when San first confronts Ashitaka “I’ll cut your throat! That’ll shut you up” (55:14) captures her merciless and dominant side even perfectly. It is also worth mentioning how San is not portrayed as a

stereotypical romantic shojo heroine who lives for the love of her life or gets married to them by the end of the story. Instead, she is a strong, fearless girl who always abides by her own rules and makes her own decisions. From the beginning of the movie her priorities are clear. She tries to save the forest which is being destroyed by humans. Even in the scene where Ashitaka gets injured she does not develop any soft corner for him like other stereotypical portrayals of young girl characters; rather she boldly tells him “I am not afraid to die. I would do anything to get you humans out of my forest” (55:00 - 55:02). However, at the end of the movie Ashitaka’s sincerity makes San fall in love with him nonetheless she says, “I love you, Asitaka. But I’ll never forgive the human race” (2:07:28), after this they part their ways and live on their own. It shows the audience an alternative reality where women do not cave in to their love interest for the sake of the plot and stand strong to their moral ground. In a patriarchal society like Japan, Miyazaki uses San’s character to reimagine new gender roles for the young girls. Miyazaki gives us a young heroine who is capable of fighting for herself and for what she represents without requiring any help from men or depending on her love interest.

Ashitaka: Subverting the traditional male hero archetype

The only important male character of this film is Ashitaka and the only reason he is relevant for this study is his role in the film. Firstly, in a patriarchal anime industry where male characters dominate the plot, he is just a supporting character who saves the forest alongside San and not by himself. Furthermore, Miyazaki reimagines the traditional hero’s quest through Ashitaka’s journey. As mentioned earlier, conventional anime heroes of the 90s quest revolve around them gaining power and defeating the villain to claim the victory. On the contrary,

Ashitaka's journey is not about defeating anyone or any side, rather he wants to heal the bond between human and nature. He wonders, "Can't humans and the forest live in peace? Can't this fight be stopped?" (1:20:33). Even during the fierce duel between Lady Eboshi and San, he acts as the mediator to stop their fight while telling Eboshi "There is a demon inside you. And in her" (50:40). Throughout the movie we see when standing between the crossroads of human and nature, Ashitaka continuously tries to save both of the worlds and restore the balance between them. In addition to that, traditionally in both cinema and culture women work as the mediator, the peacemaker who bridges the gap between good and evil through their empathy and compassion to save men and the world. But Miyazaki basically reverses the gender roles with Ashitaka who says, "I will see with eyes unclouded and decide" (37:32) and works as a mediator by understanding both sides' perspectives. Unlike conventional masculine hero traits like assertiveness or aggression, Ashitaka embodies empathy, perseverance and compassion. When the wolf god asks Ashitaka to fight the humans alongside San he replies, "No. That will only breed more hatred" (1:21:34). Through his portrayal, Miyazaki masterfully deconstructs the very narrative surrounding traditional gender roles.

4.2 Empowering Girlhood in *Spirited Away* (2001)

The Japanese title of *Spirited Away* (2001) is *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* which is a coming-of-age fantasy film. The film revolves around the protagonist Chihiro, a 10-year-old girl who accidentally transfers into a spirit world controlled by witch Yubaba. To save herself and her parents, she starts navigating her life in the spirit world while working under Yubaba. In an interview published in the *Midnight Eye*, Miyazaki says, "What made me decide to make this

film was the realization that there are no films made for that age group of ten-year old girls.....Certainly, girls like her see films that contain characters their age, but they can't identify with them, because they are imaginary characters that don't resemble them at all” (2001). It was extremely rare during the 90s to see a female protagonist of this age who gets to be the hero of the story. So, Miyazaki wanted to make a movie where young girls can see themselves as heroines by providing a realistic representation of them.

Beyond the hero's quest

Miyazaki destabilizes the traditional hero's quest trope of shonen genre where a teenage or late teen boy goes on an adventurous journey. As mentioned before, a traditional hero's quest revolves around him gaining power, defeating the villain and finally claiming victory. Especially, when a story centers around a teenage boy their quest includes bravery, victory, exploring ways to upgrade their powers and so on. Some of the classic anime of the 90s *Pokemon* (1997), *One Piece* (1999), *Naruto* (2002) revolve around a teenage protagonist who has to prove himself through tests of strength or courage and save others in that process. In *Spirited Away*, Miyazaki subverts this by giving us an inward and emotional journey of a 10-year-old girl who is vulnerable and dependent on everyone around her. Chihiro is not a perfect heroine, rather she is a flawed heroine. During their exploration of the deserted fair, she is seen extremely clingy with her mother the entire time (5:50-8:00). In this sequence Miyazaki deliberately uses animation to emphasize her fragility and small figure in comparison to her parents and the architectural sites. He uses long and wide shots to frame Chihiro from a distance to accentuate her small figure which helps us visualize her as a helpless little girl. In another scene when Haku helps her and

gives her some rice cakes in the spirit world Chihiro starts crying very loudly (50:00). Here, Miyazaki gives her huge drops of tears to emphasize her vulnerability. This exaggeration of tear drops is a visual sign by him that captures the true essence of Chihiro's emotional state while balancing her life in the spirit world. Miyazaki also subverts one of the famous tropes of the shojo genre where a young girl is always perfect and cute through these portrayals of Chihiro. However, he does not keep her like this, instead he uses her flaws as a base to demonstrate her growth. Initially portrayed as flawed, Chihiro starts her epic inner journey in the spirit world. In a scene where Haku takes her to meet her parents, Chihiro realizes that witch Yubaba has turned her parents into pigs. Even though she cries while watching their state, she says, "Daddy, Mommy, I promise I'll save you" (48:10). This shows her growth as she chooses to be brave to face her reality. In addition to that, when Chihiro takes a train all by herself by the end of the movie (1:39:31) is also visually important as it captures her growth perfectly- calm, composed and confident. It can be considered symbolic to the very first scene of the movie where Chihiro is portrayed as a vulnerable little girl. In fact, when asked about the pivotal scene of the movie Miyazaki says, "what for me constitutes the end of the film, is the scene in which Chihiro takes the train all by herself" (Miyazaki 2001). Thus, through Chihiro's journey Miyazaki offers us an empowering representation of girlhood by redefining the traditional anime stereotype of a teenage hero's journey. By doing so he wanted to offer the pre-teen girls of the 90s an alternative reality where they can overcome their challenges on their own and for that he said "it was necessary to have a heroine who was an ordinary girl, not someone who could fly or do something impossible. Just a girl you can encounter anywhere in Japan" (Miyazaki 2001).

Feminine traits as strength: Empathy, Kindness and Compassion

Chihiro's quest includes vulnerability, kindness, integrity, creating meaningful bonds with everyone in the spirit world and finally evolving as a person. In the spirit world Chihiro understands what it means to live alone, do one's own work and face the consequences of each action so she chooses to be brave, selfless and diligent to her work at the witch's bathhouse. In the bathhouse there are two incidents which show Chihiro's compassion and kindness. At first, when the stinky spirit visits the bathhouse (59:30-1:06:11), nobody wants to go near him because of his stinky appearance so witch Yubaba gives the task to Chihiro only to teach her a lesson. But Chihiro puts the needs of the customer before her own and cleans the spirit with utmost care. She uses herbal tokens and prepares the largest bath for the spirit. Turns out it is the river god who says her "Well done" (1:05:00) and gives her a magical herbal cake which can bring her parents back to normal, as a token of appreciation. This sub plot of the stinky customer not only shows Chihiro's integrity and diligence towards her work but also captures her kindness. The second incident is when she shows compassion to No-Face, a lonely spirit who becomes a monster (1:10:25). No-Face attacks everyone and even offers gold to Chihiro to lure her in. But Chihiro has no greed for anything materialistic and she realizes No-Face is not inherently evil rather becomes overwhelmed out of loneliness which made him a monster. She makes him eat some of the magical herbal cake she got from the river spirit, to bring him back to normal "I was saving it for my parents, but you can have it" (1:34:11). This shows us how selfless Chihiro is. In a conventional anime a brave hero would have solved these two instances by defeating them as monsters, but in this movie, Miyazaki shows how a 10-year-old girl's empathy and kindness resolves everything. In addition to that when Haku gets seriously injured and cursed she makes Haku eat the remaining of the magical herbal cake "Haku, the river guardian gave me this. Eat it,

maybe it'll help" (1:26:23). The fact that she sacrifices the only thing that can turn her parents back to normal for helping Haku reveals her selfless and kind nature. In Japan having feminine virtue (futoku) is considered important for a woman to become a 'good wife' (Balagué). But Chihiro's feminine virtues are her strength and Miyazaki demonstrates that even these feminine virtues can be heroic through Chihiro's character. Thus, through Chihiro's quest Miyazaki wanted to send his young girl audiences the message that the qualities which society considers feminine and regards them as mere familial duties can actually be utilized to grow as a person which in terms will make them successful.

Reclaiming Identity

One interesting aspect of *Spirited Away* is Chihiro reclaiming her identity. In the scene where Yubaba gives Chihiro the job in the bathhouse she makes her sign a contract. After seeing Chihiro's name in that contract Yubaba steals her name saying "Quite a fancy name. From now on your name is Sen (40:15-40:28). In the contract we see Chihiro signs her name in Japanese kanji 荻野 千尋 (40:15) which is read as Chihiro Ogino, then Yubaba uses magic where 荻野 尋 literally flies out of the paper and disintegrates into thin air leaving only 千 in the paper which is read as 'Sen'. Miyazaki deliberately uses this as a visual metaphor to emphasize the loss of identity. This becomes more significant if we consider the socio-cultural norm of Japan. Japan is the only country in the world where married couples have to adopt a single surname as a legal requirement since 1947 and because it is a patriarchal society 95% women end up taking their husband's name. In a patriarchal society, taking the husband's surname after marriage is a very common tradition even outside Japan. To quote Butler, "The "subject" who emerges as a

consequence of this repression becomes a bearer or proponent of this repressive law” (101). Which means when someone is constantly taught or forced to act in a certain way, they end up supporting the idea themselves. Since Miyazaki made this movie for young girls like Chihiro he emphasizes this loss of identity to enlighten them about the importance of having their own identity. In the movie Chihiro starts to forget about her real name with time after Yubaba steals it. She tells Haku how Yubaba almost changed her real identity “I was turning into Sen” (49:10). This line also aligns with the idea that often young women lose themselves in their marriage and are defined by their husband's name or status. But Haku helps her remember that she is not Sen and her real name is Chihiro. In addition to that, Haku says “Without your real name, you’ll never find your way home” (49:15) which further proves my point that Miyazaki included this aspect in the movie to inform his young girl audience about the impact of identity loss and inspire them to never forget their real identity. This is his way to inspire them to fight for their own identity since Chihiro does not accept her fate as it is; rather, she claims back her identity with Haku’s help. Hence, with this subtle narrative Miyazaki is urging the young girls to create a strong, independent identity of their own even if the society is against them.

In light of these findings, it is evident that through his films Miyazaki redefines femininity by resisting traditional portrayals of female characters. His characters constantly challenge or destabilize stereotypical gender roles by blurring the line between feminine roles and masculine roles. His strong stance against sexualizing female characters redefines the visual culture around women in anime and Japanese media. Including feminine qualities as strength into his films stands as a subtle yet powerful critique towards the extremely patriarchal Japanese society which considers femininity as weakness.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Satoshi Kon and Hayao Miyazaki might be the most artistically blessed auteurs in the anime industry. They kept perfect balance among reality, art and entertainment which makes them stand out from the rest of the directors of their time. They both used anime not only as a medium to showcase their works rather they used it as a powerful tool of resistance against the patriarchal Japanese society. Their use of narrative, visuals, character designs collectively challenges how femininity has been portrayed traditionally within cinema. This is why their movies are still relevant to today's viewers. Both of them pushed the cinematic boundaries of anime and subverted traditional gender representations in their own way. Their films literally act as a tool to fight patriarchal conventions in anime and expand gender roles by redefining the traditional roles with new possibilities. Their contrasting creative choices together works as a way to study anime's potential as a feminist discourse.

This thesis examined how Kon and Miyazaki represented female figures in their animated world by critically examining the underlying themes of their movies. Their female representations also align with feminist theories of Laura Mulvey and Judith Butler. Kon's film *Perfect Blue* and *Millennium Actress* forces the audience to think how society reinforces their expectations on women. His female characters embody the traditional sense of femininity, yet becomes an active agent against the patriarchal society. *Perfect Blue* critically criticizes the objectification of female figures within the entertainment industry and the psychological turmoil a female performer goes through because of the patriarchal conventions of the entertainment industry. Whereas *Millennium Actress* stands as an example how female figures should be

represented through the unique journey of Chiyoko and by penetrating into the art of filmmaking itself.

Hayao Miyazaki revolutionizes the notion of “gender as a performative act” through his films *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke*. His female characters embody traditional masculine traits along with their feminine attributes. His strong stance against sexualizing his female characters challenges one of the core traditional female representations in anime. I will say the female characters of both of the auteurs: Mima, Chiyoko, San, and Chihiro can not be confined within a fixed archetype; rather they embodied the complexity of womanhood while navigating through the patriarchal conventions of society.

To conclude, this study argues that Kon and Miyazaki reimagined femininity in anime by subverting or breaking traditional patterns in female representation through their films. By articulating complex themes surrounding traditional gender stereotypes of anime, they reimagine the very narrative around womanhood. During the 1990s their films contributed to a rethinking of anime’s artistic potential by resisting the patriarchal conventions of gender portrayals. In an extremely patriarchal country like Japan their perspectives towards gender and identity contributed in creating these empowering female figures. This thesis tries to provide a deeper understanding of how both these auteurs in their own ways tried to redefine what constitutes ‘feminine’ in a patriarchal anime industry. By analyzing their films, it is revealed that both the auteurs’ used anime not just aesthetically but ideologically as a contribution to anime and cinema.

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