

Anime, a Component of Japanese Folk Culture: The Analysis and Appreciation of *Grave of Fireflies*

Mrudula Lakkaraju

Introduction

“Art is powerful, and therefore dangerous. All of the arts move people powerfully. They can strongly influence our behaviour, and even our character. For that reason music, along with poetry and drama and the other arts, should be part of the education of young citizens in his ideal republic, but should be strictly censored to present, at first, only the good.” (Robert E. Kraut, 2004)

Watching animation movies on television and in theatres is assumed to be for children only. Adults accompanying the young audiences prime their mind that the next two hours in the theatre will be a parental duty and nothing else. But in my understanding, animation movies, the first recollection of our experience being Tom & Jerry, caters to all audience, if the grown ups allow themselves to watch them with an open mind. Animated movies are extremely creative and they sometimes might not appeal to those who have a closed mind set on the harsh reality. But those of us who appreciate creativity and innovation in all its forms welcome the entertainment the animated movies have to offer.

Being appreciative of film as a medium of expression like Literature in its entire Genre, I have embarked on a journey to watch all kinds of movie to choose the best and spread their worthiness in academic circuits.

The personal watch list of animated movies are inspired by the famous fairy tales which have inspired generations like Peter Pan, Lion King, Tinker Bell, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, 101 Dalmatians, Beauty and the Beast with the likes of it from Walt Disney's Snow White and the seven Dwarfs of 1937 to Frozen of 2014, there are certain common characteristic features worth observing. These American movies majorly cater to the children of USA and the world; they present a benign version of the world. Everything ends happily. The characters in these movies eat well; have loving parents, endorsing the family values and qualities of personal excellence. The characters who, if, are mischievous are under the influence of something evil and when good pervades the norm is restored. The qualities such as honesty, love, sacrifice, leadership and courage to wade through adversities, to mention a few are celebrated so that the children watching them learn to groom themselves to be better citizens.

Watching 'Studio Ghibli' movies is a change movie goers like me would warmly welcome. The movies produced by them are called anime movies and they are different from animation movies of Hollywood.

'Folk' Culture:

The concept of folk groups has been central to academic folklorists for many years. Originally such groups were assumed to be illiterate, preliterate or not simply as literate as the academic elite who studied them. Alan Dundes boldly challenged this stereotype in 1965, declaring that “folk groups” could be “any group whatsoever,” as

long as they shared some common factor and developed traditions that gave their communities individual identity. (1980, 6-7).

Anime & Manga:

Manga is Japanese comics and Anime is Japanese animation. Earlier Manga and Anime forms are art forms popularised in Japan for Japanese. Once almost completely unknown to the world outside, their popularity is growing every day.

Being a traditional society these traditional Japanese art forms adhered to depicting, promoting and immortalising the Japanese way of life. In a list that includes components of Japanese culture, Manga and Anime are given a place of respect alongside the components of Geisha, Samurai, Cherry Blossoms and Sumo Wrestling. In spite of all the technological advances, the people of Japan hold on very dearly to their traditions dictating their way of life and choices.

Animation in all its glorious variety is Hollywood in origin with visually aesthetic characters, setting and a story line. In spite of all the care of detailing that goes into the story board, the truth is bite sized, muted and blunted keeping in mind the audience's sensibilities and coordinated with the American (read Christian) vision of the world.

Anime on the other hand is Japan born, traditional in outlook, not agenda driven, sharp, closer to reality and sometimes downright ugly. The stories of anime are fictional and mythical on one level similar to animation movies but the representation does not shy away from the bitter and harsh truth. Many full length anime feature films might not represent just pleasant imagery. The closer to life animation represents death and decay too. The characters and audiences are children mostly because it is a medium they easily comprehend, but equally engaging for the adult audiences.

Anime is a diverse art form with distinctive production methods and techniques that have been adapted over time in response to emergent technologies. The production of anime focuses less on the animation of movement and more on the realism of settings as well as the use of camera effects, including panning, zooming and angle shots. Diverse art styles are used and character proportions and features can be quite varied, including characteristically large emotive or realistically sized eyes. ("Anime")

Within this context this paper discusses a movie titled *Grave of Fireflies*, Studio Ghibli production. *Grave of the Fireflies* is a 1988 Japanese animated drama film written and directed by Isao Takahata and animated by Studio Ghibli. It is based on the 1967 semi-autobiographical short story *Grave of the Fireflies* by Akiyuki Nosaka. The film tells the story of two siblings, Seita and Setsuko, and their desperate struggle to survive during the final months of the Second World War. The young child of 14 or 15 years old forced to be mature and the care taker for his baby sister, a girl around four years. Watching Seita dealing with life after his mother's death would have a painful effect but the effect is doubly painful as he also has to now look after his sister.

Film Theory and Analysis

The film theory distinguishes different kinds of approach to analyse films. The human response to a film, if one can analyse, is a thorough entangling of all these

three primarily, among the others approaches. This paper is an attempt to analyse the chosen movie through them.

A formalist approach looks at the film itself, its structure and form. A formalist approach will focus primarily on internal evidence. A narrative analysis will examine how a film employs various narrative formal elements to convey meaning to the viewer.

A realist approach examines how a film represents “reality.” Some films attempt to make techniques “invisible” to viewers so the characters and situations are always the primary focus. These films may be attempting to convey a type of reality, important to their creators, hoping that viewers will pick up on it.

A contextualist approach to analysis always considers a film as part of some broader context. This can be society at large, the particular culture, time, and place that created it, the director’s personal life and previous body of work, or various psychological and/or ideological contexts. (Jacobs)

Story Line

The film begins at Sannomiya Station on 21 September 1945, shortly after the end of World War II. A boy, Seita, is shown dying of starvation. Later that night, having removed Seita’s body, a janitor digs through his possessions and finds a candy tin which he throws away into a nearby field. The spirit of Seita’s younger sister, Setsuko, springs from the tin and is joined by Seita’s spirit as well as a cloud of fireflies. Seita’s spirit then begins to narrate their story accompanied by an extended flashback of the final months of World War II.

The flashback begins 16–17 March 1945, during a bombing raid on Kobe. Setsuko and Seita are left to secure the house and their belongings, allowing their mother, who suffers from a heart condition, to reach a bomb shelter. The children are caught off-guard as the incendiary bombs start huge fires that quickly destroy their neighbourhood and most of the city. Although they survive unscathed, the fires destroy the shelter and their mother is horribly burned and dies soon after. Having nowhere else to go, Setsuko and Seita move in with a distant aunt, who allows them to stay but convinces Seita to sell his mother’s kimonos for rice. While living with their relatives, Seita goes out to retrieve supplies he had buried before the bombing. He gives them all to his aunt, but hides a small tin of Sakuma fruit drops, which becomes a recurrent icon throughout the film. Their aunt continues to shelter them, but as food rations continue to shrink, she becomes increasingly resentful and openly remarks on how they do nothing to earn the food she cooks.

Seita and Setsuko finally decide to leave and move into an abandoned bomb shelter. They release fireflies into the shelter for light. The next day, Setsuko is horrified to find that the insects have all died. She buries them all in a grave, asking why they had to die, and why her mother had to die. What began as a new lease on life grows grim as they run out of rice, forcing Seita to steal from local farmers and loot homes during air raids. When he is caught, he realizes his desperation and takes an increasingly ill Setsuko to a doctor, who informs him that Setsuko is suffering from malnutrition but offers no help. In a panic, Seita withdraws all the money remaining in their mother’s bank account, but as he leaves the bank, he becomes distraught when he learns from a

nearby crowd that Japan has surrendered unconditionally to the Allied Powers. He also learns that his father, a captain in the Imperial Japanese Navy, is probably dead, since nearly Japan's entire navy is now at the bottom of the ocean. He returns to the shelter with a large quantity of food, only to find a dying Setsuko hallucinating. Seita hurries to cook, but she dies soon after. Seita cremates Setsuko, and puts her ashes in the fruit tin, which he carries along with his father's photograph, until his own death from malnutrition in Sannomiya Station a few weeks later.

In the film's final sequence, the spirits of Seita and Setsuko are seen healthy, well-dressed and happy as they sit together, surrounded by fireflies. The camera then moves overhead, showing the two of them looking down on the modern city of Kobe.

The Medium

If this movie was shot with regular actors it would have been a memorable movie but would not have reached the intensity of emotion reached because of the medium. Anime is not bound by the promise of delivering muted reality, hence, allows it the space for creating a tale of human suffering with the tools capable of distorting the reality with pleasantries but strives really hard to portray without it.

The movie begins on a note of tragedy and is unrelentingly tragic through the movie. In its unwinding there are 'pockets of hope' which drags us to watch it with captivated interest. We as audience predict the outcome because we watch the outcome at the very beginning and retrace our steps back in time. An outcome so gruesome of Seita's death, alone and abandoned can be a result of a gruesome chain of events. As the stage is set with the child's tragic death, our mindset is prepared for the onslaught. But the audiences are taken by surprise with the pockets of child's happy abandonment and deeply pained when juxtaposed with the ravages of war.

The use of colour is interesting in the movie. As the narration of events begin, we watch the spirits in red as seen in the glow of fire and the other surroundings are in dark brown instead of black which is a standard colour to denote death and destruction. The characters in their exposition are animated yet so close to the truth. The suspended sense of reality is what makes this movie such a painful cathartic experience.

Defining Moments :

- Seita adjusting the little girl's cape and dusting her coat.
- Setsuko swinging her feet after she pops in her favourite fruit drop.
- Seita tying his little sister to himself so that he can carry her.
- The children running away from their burning neighbourhood.
- The dread on Setsuko's face as they reach a temporary shelter.
- The small purse of knick knacks Setsuko offers her brother.
- Seita comes to see his mother, completely and unrecognisably bandaged.
- When Setsuko is forced to take a decision she rocks her body, knowing not what to do.

- Seita himself a young kid, tired, alone with the additional responsibility sits down resignedly and Setsuko breaks into tears.
- The simple pleasure of Seita washing himself near a broken pipeline.
- The children's painful childhood allows them to have moments of happiness which are marked by Fireflies all around
- Setsuko tries to stop the aunt from selling off her mother's kimonos for rice.
- Each time Setsuko breaks into tears, Seita has the tin of fruit drops to pacify her.
- Setsuko has nightmares in the middle of the night and Seita carries her out on his young shoulders to pacify her.
- Seita and Setsuko decide to live in the abandoned shelter. As they leave their aunt's house with their belongings they burst into a fit of giggles and laughter which shocks the aunt.
- Seita and Setsuko try to make a home out of the abandoned bomb shelter, painfully optimistic.
- Captured fireflies lighten up the darkness of the shelter.
- Amidst nature, they live like the birds on the trees and the ducks on the lake.
- Setsuko collects all the dead fireflies in the morning and buries them telling Seita that even her mother is in a Grave. Seita was keeping this secret from her but she in her innocence grasps that her mother is no more.
- Seita is now relieved that he does not have to hide the truth from her and allows his tears to flow.
- The children go out to people to trade food for work, but the war has limited the resources. Then they start stealing food from the local farmers.
- Seita steals a stalk of sugar cane from a farm to feed his sister suffering from diarrhoea. He is beaten up by the owner and is handed over in a police station.
- The station inspector releases the boy and warns the owner about beating him up, a glimmer of humanity in the times of war.
- Setsuko is waiting for her brother outside the station. He comes out stands guiltily and weeps tears of insult, helplessness and shame.
- Seita starts the dangerous act of raiding homes as the inmates run to shelter during the bombing to find food and things, which he can trade for food in an effort to save his sickly delirious sister.
- The bombing siren now becomes an opportunity for Seita to raid unattended homes hastily abandoned by the fleeing residents.
- Seita tries to feed his sister some ice shavings.

- As Seita learns about his father's death, the anguish is immediately followed by pangs of hunger.
- Setsuko dies from hunger, chewing on a glass marble as a fruit drop and a stone as a rice ball.
- The thundering storm raging outside, Seita lies down beside his dead sister. The nature and the society at its worst.
- The shelter where the children resided is filled with memories of Setsuko.
- Setsuko cremates his sister filling a basket case with her little belongings in it and retrieving the empty box of fruit drops.
- The war is over, the town folk are returning to their homes, peace and happiness spread around.

Some more defining and pivotal moments are identified with Seita's and Setsuko's spirits retracing their steps back identifying them.

- Seita carrying back her mother's ashes in a box on the train
- Setsuko crying when her aunt tries to sell her mother's kimonos
- Setsuko and Seita seeking shelter from an air raid in an abandoned shelter
- The reconstructed city of Kobe has many spirits of people who died in war watching over.

The city is built on the grave of fireflies.

Symbols :

Symbolism is an underlying and often distinct theme that pervades a work of writing. It is usually buried very subtly under the main narrative of a story or conversation in order to reinforce the main themes and add a certain layer of depth that would be missing otherwise. It is something that has always been regarded more as a term for an aspect featured in literature rather than in film. This may be true but it doesn't stop many filmmakers from employing the use of symbolism in their movies in very subtle ways. (Reynolds)

War :

Wars are illogical and beyond any sense of reason. Wars are extremely huge budget affairs, irreparable loss of human life and property with the innocent civilians suffering from the actions of the military. In this massive destruction, uprooting people from their shelters, the survival of the grownups becomes impossible and *Grave of Fireflies* is a survival story of two helpless children. The backdrop of the war accentuates the tragedy of these two children. If it were a survival of the children in any other circumstance the tragic component wouldn't have been this accentuated. The war stops people from even remotely turning into good Samaritans as the rations are meagre everywhere.

Fruit drops:

A tin of fruit drop candies is another symbol frequenting through the story. The tin is saved by Seita, in an underground pit along with the other valuable during the air raid. As he unearths this stash after his home is destroyed, he saves this tin for his sister and hands everything else to their aunt with whom they stay after their mother passes away. These fruit drop candies offer succour in times of tumult and turbulence in their young lives. Whenever Setsuko is hungry, tired or misses her mom Seita offers her a fruit drop candy and she is pacified. She has this unique way of rattling the fruit drop candy tin before popping one in her mouth, it is like saying cheers before having a glass of wine. On one occasion when Seita finds the tin empty, he pours some water into the tin rinsing it of all the flavour, pours the water into a cup and offers her. She drinks it with glee. It almost till the end supplements for the missing parental love for the little girl. Even before her death she places some glass marbles in the tin and suckles on them in her delirium mistaking them for the candy. The most poignant of the symbols is when Seita cremates Setsuko's frail body the ashes are stored in this very tin, symbolically uniting her to her mother and the protected cocoon of the tin she became so attached to.

Bomb Shelter :

The abandoned bomb shelter becomes the children's alternate home offering them a utopian surrealistic solution to their present problem the viewer response also experiences a solace as the children try to create a home out of it. It is almost like a doll house play but the euphoria does not last long as they start to go hungry for long spells of time. What they are actually seeking shelter from is not the bomb but the suffering the war brings. They try to recreate a home but it ends as a tomb filled with death like the box of ashes of his mother Seita carried with him into the shelter. After Setsuko succumbs to hunger and is cremated, the bomb shelter rings with Setsuko's laughter filled childhood antics and suddenly goes eerily silent like life and death juxtaposed causing a cathartic effect on the viewer.

Fireflies :

This species of bugs, belong to the species of *Lampyridae*. They emit a bioluminescence light in the night either to attract a mate or a prey. Fireflies are a treat to watch, lightening up the night ("Fireflies"). In utter darkness they create their own light like Seita and Setsuko, who create their little moments of joy. Seita takes Setsuko to the beach, he carries her out on nights she remembers her mother, cooks her a nice dinner, tries to create a home for her in the bomb shelter and many other things mentioned earlier in the paper under 'defining moments'. Even the dropped bombs in air resemble the fireflies, but are fireflies of destruction.

Conclusion :

Anime become a cultural mode of transmission, instruction and elucidation of the traditional Japanese values. A traditional society which has successfully propagated its core values in an increasingly technologically innovative society ensures the chosen way of life for the future generations. What's more apt than the very popular Manga

and Anime as vehicles of Japanese culture turning them into motifs for popularising as folk culture?

Setsuko's tearful question "Why do fireflies have to die so soon?" almost sums up the movie *Grave of Fireflies* in which fireflies live a bright and brief existence, creating their own light in the process. Wars exactly do opposite to that. They snuff the lights out of people's beautiful lives.

On one level *Grave of Fireflies* can be called an anti-war film because of the dominating backdrop of World War II and the suffering of the two young kids trying to survive in the war torn country. On another level this film is existential in its essence. Whichever way you look at it *Grave of Fireflies* leaves indelible impressions of Seita and Setsuko along with a huge lump in the throat which refuses to go away for at least a few days.

Works Cited

Dundes, Alan. *Interpreting Folklore*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980. Print.

"Manga & Anime." www.insidejapantours.com. N.p., n.d. Web.

Wikipedia contributors. "Anime." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 7 Jun. 2015. Web. 8 Jun. 2015.

Reynolds, Dolan. *11 Classic Movies with Amazing Symbolism That You Never Noticed*. whatculture.com, n. d. Web. 07 June. 2015.

< <http://whatculture.com/film/11-classic-movies-with-amazing-symbolism-that-you-never-noticed.php> >

Jacobs, Christopher P. *Film Theory and Approaches to Criticism, or, what did that movie mean?* University of North Dakota, n.d. Web. 07 June 2015.

< <http://www.und.edu/instruct/cjacobs/FilmTheory&Analysis.htm>

"Firefly." National Geographic. n.d. Web. 07 June. 2015.

<<http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/bugs/firefly/>>