

# Japanese Story: a reading

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*Japanese Story*, the most successful Australian film in 2003, stars Toni Collette as the 'quintessential Australian' geologist (Collins) Sandy, who is forced by her company to show Hiromitsu, a Japanese businessman, around the Pilbara with the ulterior motive of selling the geology software she has developed to his father's company. The unlikely couple fall in lust, but their affair is short lived as he is swallowed up by the unforgiving Australian landscape two thirds through the film. The final act in the film deals with Sandy's grief as she comes to terms with Hiromitsu's death and the arrival of his wife to Australia.

*Japanese Story* may appear, on first viewing, an ideal text through which one can introduce feminist reading practices to students because the film foregrounds the empowerment of the female protagonist. The film has been promoted as a feminist film and the character of Sandy is consciously constructed to break traditional gender stereotypes and validate the female gaze. However, teachers must keep in mind

that the film's subversion of the patriarchal order is in fact conditional and somewhat superficial because it is expressed in such a way that it reinforces the traditional Western (and Australian) discourse of power because the (white) woman's empowerment is dependent on the presence of the Orientalised Japanese man.

*Japanese Story* breaks away from mainstream cinema in its expression of gender because Sandy is the subject rather than the object of the movie. The film's director, Sue Brooks, comments that it is unusual 'to have a woman who drives the film' (qtd. in Cancela). She also points out that her film is different from mainstream film because her female protagonist's presence is not used as a 'marketing ploy' in a 'male way'. What Brooks is referring to is the function of women in mainstream film as fetishised objects of male desires<sup>1</sup>. In 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', an essay which created the paradigm for feminist film theory, Laura Mulvey

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argues that female characters in mainstream cinema suggest a 'to-be-looked-at-ness' whereas male characters are the holder of the gazes and take pleasure in looking at the female (19). *Japanese Story* breaks away from this structure because it is Sandy who actively looks and is never objectified and 'looked at'. For example, in the scene where Sandy watches from the beach as Hiromitsu emerges from the ocean after his swim, the camera objectifies him as it slowly pans up his slender body. Brooks is aware of her subversion of dominant cinematic conventions and points out that this scene was a 'rare opportunity' in that the female 'gets to look at him [the male object] and his body' (<http://popmatters.com/film/reviews/j/japanese-story-dvd.shtml>).

Sandy also differs from traditional screen heroines because she is neither 'looked at' nor required to hide behind what psychoanalyst Joan Riviere terms the pathological 'masquerade of femininity' (qtd. in Doane 37). Mary Ann Doane explains that Riviere coined this term to describe the behaviour of a female patient, a lecturer and influential intellectual, who felt the compulsion to exaggerate 'aspects of femininity' in order to compensate for her masculine role. One example of this was that she would flirt outrageously with her colleagues after each professional presentation. Riviere hypothesises that by performing the feminine the patient conceals her theft of masculinity and placates the 'vengeful father figure' (ibid.). However, Doane argues that Riviere's explanation is insufficient because it hinges upon the Freudian notion that only men have libidos (ibid.). Sandy, unlike Riviere's patient, makes no apologies for her presence in a male dominated field. Rather than donning the veil of femininity, Sandy<sup>2</sup> is constructed as a woman who possesses 'desirable' masculine qualities: she is strong, independent, and assertive.

However, as *Japanese Story* progresses it becomes clear that it is far from subversive but rather, like mainstream films, has been constructed according to the 'unconsciousness of patriarchy' (Kaplan 30). In her essay 'Is the gaze male?' E. Ann Kaplan points out that women are permitted to assume the masculine position as long as the man then steps into her position, thus maintaining the order shaped by patriarchal ideology (ibid.). Kaplan suggests that this simplistic reversal of images creates a 'safety valve for the social tensions that the women's movement has created by demanding a more dominant role for women' (ibid.). From a gender perspective we can now understand that the roles of Hiromitsu and Sandy can both be read as drag performances of traditional gender roles shaped by patriarchal ideology. As Kaplan notes, dominance-submission patterns are part of both male and female sexuality as constructed in western civilisation (27). From their very first meeting Sandy assumes the dominant role and dictates Hiromitsu's every move in the desert.

Her attitude towards him is typified in the scene where she awakes to find him attempting to 'unbog' their car and in a didactic manner tells him to 'put your shirt on'.

Sandy is only the masculinised subject and holder of the gaze in the presence of the feminised Asian Other. Hiromitsu is consciously constructed as 'skinny, pallid' and 'introverted' against a 'strong, elegant' and 'extroverted' Sandy (Cancela). While film critic Lorena Cancela describes the expression of gender as 'unconventional' and 'non-mainstream', therefore suggesting that progressive gender politics are at work, the construction of both Sandy and Hiromitsu affirms Edward Said's assertions that progressive and first world West is defined against an 'irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike' East (Said 40). While Said writes specifically in context of French and British occupation of the Middle East and North Africa, the discourse of Orientalism underlies the treatment of the Other by any Western culture. Since the publication of *Orientalism*, theorists have pointed out that the discourse of the Orient shares an ontological norm with constructions of race, gender and sexuality in all Western cultures (Berstein and Studler 3). While Japan was never colonized during European expansion, in Australia the Japanese are incorporated into the discursive category of Asians with larger ethnic groups such as the Chinese and Vietnamese who have been subject to colonial rule. As the feminine and malleable East, Hiromitsu adheres to the hegemonic discourses of the Orientalised Asian Other in Australia. As the Orientalised representation of the Japanese man, Hiromitsu is the polar opposite to Sandy's masculine White Australian. In other words, the fragile, delicate and effeminate Asian (East) is set up against the strong, durable and masculine white Australian (West).

Sandy's 'paternalistic and condescending' (Said 204) attitude is typical of Western attitudes towards the backward and ignorant East. As the object of her scopophilic desires, Hiromitsu legitimizes Sandy's performance of the superior and masculine white Australian. This is nowhere more evident than in the motel sex scene where Hiromitsu lies passively on his back as Sandy removes her clothes. Moreover, she inexplicably slips into his black pants yet decides to undo the fly before approaching him. As she straddles him, they both laugh as Sandy reaches between her open fly for her imaginary (or castrated) penis. The scene is set up in such a way that there are ambiguities as to who penetrates whom, despite the obvious gender differences. The camera becomes Sandy's eye as it cuts to a high angle close-up shot of Hiromitsu's face. His eye lashes flutter and he waits in anticipation as the camera then cuts to a low angle close-up of Sandy gazing intently and steadfastly into his eyes at the moment of penetration. In this scene Sandy fulfills the confident masculine role and Hiromitsu the nervous feminine.

Racial politics aside, this scene can be read as the reinforcement of Sandy as the empowered woman. The open zip through which they have sex functions as the *vagina dentata*<sup>3</sup> (toothed vagina) and Sandy becomes the woman castrator, rather than the castrated woman. Barbara Creed suggests that the acceptance of 'woman as castrator' destabilises Freud's theory of penis envy, the castration anxiety<sup>4</sup> and the role of the father as the transmitter of culture (Creed 121). In other words, the *vagina dentata* threatens to destabilise the patriarchal order. Yet Hiromitsu's racial difference sees to it that Sandy does not subvert the patriarchy, as her empowerment is dependent on Hiromitsu's feminisation as the racial Other. His race complicates what appears to be a rather progressive feminist statement, as what is implied is that the (white) woman has license to castrate, and make the man her equal, so long as the phallus belongs to the Japanese Other.

Sandy's sexual liberation is further undermined by Hiromitsu's death when he breaks his neck diving head first into a billabong only moments after they have sex. His death, an almost comical affair, can be read as the complete castration of the Asian male whose fetishisation and feminisation has been complicated by the threat of miscegenation. In the scenes before his death he is stripped of his black business suit and is no longer a rigid and fixed stereotype of an awkward Japanese businessman. He is 'masculinised' not only through his response to Sandy's gaze, but also through more flattering wardrobe, lighting and make-up. His emerging masculinity is cut short and his potential phallic power castrated, as he dives into the billabong which, like the open zip, can be read as another *vagina dentata*.

Hiromitsu's death also reveals an existing racial prejudice in Australia towards the Japanese. Brooks suggests that this prejudice and 'anxiety' is addressed in the boat scene where Hiromitsu is told, 'In the war, we thought you blokes were coming after us... now you own the place' (qtd. in Cancela), but in fact it is in Hiromitsu's death that the threat of the Asian male is literally removed. One is reminded of the post-war parliamentary debate in which then immigration minister Arthur Calwell denied the entry of all Japanese to Australia:

They (the Japanese) cannot come as wives of Australian servicemen for permanent or temporary residence, nor as businessmen to buy from or sell to us; they cannot come as pearl-ers nor as labourers of pearl-ers. I have no intention of granting interviews to anybody in matters concerning the entry of Japanese into Australia or into Australian waters<sup>5</sup> (qtd. in Palfreeman 44).

In other words, 'good Japs' are still 'dead Japs' as they were during the war (Everson 125-126).

Moreover Hiromitsu's death signifies the end to Sandy's empowerment and independence, because from this point forth she slips into a more submissive role and hides behind 'the masquerade of femininity.' After she retrieves Hiromitsu's body, she drives to a nearby town and seeks help in the local pub. Despite previously proving herself to be a woman of initiative and independence, Sandy is unable to raise so much as a whisper when she attempts to address the bartender, a white Australian man. In this scene the camera positions Sandy in such a way that she appears distanced from the men in the main bar. She is literally barred from the masculine sphere and a medium camera shot confines her to a restricted space, under a small arch in what appears to be the saloon section of the pub. This is of significance because historically the saloon was where women waited for their husbands who would have been drinking in the exclusively male public bar. Ignored by the bartender, Sandy is eventually told to 'hold your horses' as she attempts to draw his attention. With downcast eyes, Sandy then leaves the pub and decides to drive overnight to the next town with Hiromitsu's corpse still in the back of the car.

While Sandy ceases to perform the role of the masculine, she remains the subject of the film and continues to be set up in opposition to the Asian Other. For the remainder of the film, Sandy is dependent on Baird, her white Australian male colleague, and follows his every instruction. Even though their positions in the corporate hierarchy are never clearly established, he assumes a dominant role and is in charge of all business dealings. Sandy is still constructed against the Oriental Other because her hysterical reaction to Hiromitsu's death is constructed against his widow's stoic silence. This sets up the binary opposition of the real and more complete 'I' (eye) against the distant and mechanical objectified Other. The character of Yukiko conforms to stereotypes of the Oriental Other and, like the character of Hiromitsu, is the 'standard idea of what Japanese means for Western culture' (Cancela). While Sandy refuses to be a Geisha, a traditional Japanese courtesan, Yukiko accepts her husband's concubine in a controlled and dignified manner. Yukiko's passive acceptance of her husband's mistress is directly influenced by Orientalist attitudes towards the East.

Actress Yumiko Tanaka won the part of Yukiko as she fulfilled Brook's desire for the authentic Oriental. Brooks explains that unlike the 'American or Australian' style actresses, who felt that in Yukiko shoes they would probably slap Sandy, Tanaka understood the traditional concepts of 'dignity, honour and saving face'. This desire for the Other is what Rey Chow explains as 'sentimental fetishising' because it is only desired in its 'uncontaminated' state which cannot be explained within existing

Western paradigms (30). The stylized treatment of Yukiko can be compared to the construction of Asian women in Australian popular fiction from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Robin Gerster remarks that in these stories, the Asian women were almost always 'exquisite' and 'accommodating' (106). Yukiko is praised for being an 'honourable wife' and it is this honourable acceptance of Sandy's affair with her dead husband that confirms Said's theory that the Orient is exalted and not patronized when it exists in a fixed space in antiquity (204). Sandy is only progressive and independent, in relation to Yukiko's traditional dependence.

*Japanese Story's* critical acclaim in Australia, the USA and Western Europe can be attributed to its apparently radical gender depiction, and its surprising box office success to its conservative adherence to Orientalist conventions within a Eurocentric patriarchal order. Sandy possesses the gaze but only

in the absence of the white male. In holding the gaze, Sandy assumes the role of the ego idea, the White man, while Hiromitsu fits comfortably into the white patriarchal order as the castrated Other. The film reinforces popular Western stereotypes that have persisted, and enabled the creation of even more derogatory caricatures of the Asian man. The popularity, or mere existence, of personalities such as William Hung or Flynn from the *Pop Idol* phenomenon, is neither surprising nor a co-incidence. Each representation of the Asian male is so significant because there are so few images of them in our media. In teaching this text, teachers must also consider the implications of racial stereotypes, not only within the context of the English curriculum, but also the limitations these stereotypes impose upon the identity of their ethnically diverse students. Sadly, *Japanese Story* confirms Ian Ang's assertion, in her essay 'The Curse of the Smile', that Asianness must be feminised in order to welcome it into Australian culture.

1 Fetishism was originally a term used by Portuguese sailors to describe objects that possessed supernatural powers. Sexual fetishism is a term which in Freud's thought describes the condition where men try to find an object that stands in for the missing penis in women. Freud argued that fetishism is a way of compensating for male castration anxiety where the object stands in for the phallus, and functions as a talisman against its loss. According to Freud, this anxiety stems from the young boy's Oedipal complex in which he desires his mother and fears castration by his father. Mulvey attributes the 'glamorisation' of the female image to the camera, and the male spectator's, fetishisation of the female form (21).

2 It is interesting to note that Brooks praises actor Toni Collette in her role as Sandy as it was Collette's "lack of vanity that takes the veil [of femininity] off" (qtd. in Cancela).

3 The myth of the toothed vagina "pervades the myths and legends of many cultures" (Creed 105).

4 According to Freud's five stages of psychosexual development a boy, during his phallic stage, desires his mother and fears castration by his father.

5 While all Japanese domiciled in Australia were repatriated after the war, approximately 600 Japanese women entered Australia as wives of Australian servicemen under the government's "War Bride" legislation. This is an early example of how Asianness has been accepted in Australia in its non-threatening feminine form.

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