

The Ghostly Double: The Crisis of (Gendered) Subjectivity and the Self in Asato Mari's Bairokêshon

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Abstract

From Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* to Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan*, the double or doppelgänger motif remains prevalent in psychological horror films. The idea of a divided/ duplicated self involves the disassociation of one's identity that often results in the creation of an uncontrollable evil 'other'. Moreover, the double is deeply connected to the Freudian concept of 'the return of the repressed' in which a (deadly) manifestation of suppressed desires arises to disrupt both symbolic and imaginary orders. The premise of Asato Mari's *Bairokêshon* (2013) revolves around a female artist who is threatened by her dead ringer— an entity that is referred to in the narrative as a 'bilocation'. Deliberately portrayed as a newly married woman, the protagonist negotiates her gendered role as a self-sacrificing wife while attempting to remain committed to her art. Such negotiation articulates a struggle for gender equality that persists among the female characters as the constraints of marriage and/or motherhood further propel the monstrosity of their bilocations. This paper focuses on the study of the protagonist's double as an embodiment of a profound cultural anxiety that is related to the socio-political crisis in contemporary Japan due to the changing roles and status of women. The film situates the double as a form of dread as it becomes symptomatic of the female desire for autonomy in a society confined by patriarchal order. This calls for a discussion on the issue of feminine subjectivity that renders itself as problematic in the narrative.

Keywords: Japanese cinema, horror, doppelgänger, double, gender identity, uncanny.

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Introduction

Near the end of Asato Mari's *Bairokêshon* (2013), the protagonist Shinobu Kirimura (Azami Mizukawa) finally confronts her double for the first time. She learns that the double— a woman named Shinobu Takamura— has won top prize at the art competition in which they both entered. In an effort to reconcile their split subjectivities, the double presents Shinobu a wedding ring and urges her to 'claim' her identity as an artist and most importantly, a wife. Repulsed, Shinobu refuses the ring and claims that the only life she knew has only been art. Undeterred, the double begs her to consider a life with a husband and hands the ring once again to Shinobu. After a brief silence, Shinobu takes the ring and leaves her double alone in the room.

The scene is a classic representation of how the double or the doppelgänger motif functions in a fictional narrative. In early Romantic and Gothic literature, the doppelgänger is largely portrayed as a supernatural manifestation that signals a foreboding event such as a disaster or the death of the protagonist (Gamache, 2013). Newer approaches to the doppelgänger, however, often reposition the concept as representative of the internal conflict within the protagonist's psyche, thus causing the central self to split and the double to materialize. Classic Gothic works such as *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) articulate this crisis of self-division that frequently occurs whenever the central self has alienated himself from moral conscience (Fonseca, 2007). In turn, contemporary Hollywood psychological narratives like *Fight Club* and *Shutter Island* have also incorporated the concept to highlight the notion of fragmented identities by subjecting the protagonists to come face-to-face with their mirror image.

Discussions of the double in film and literary narratives so far have primarily identified the doppelgänger as a projection of internal conflict that results from a discontentment with one's identity (Gamache, 2013). Sigmund Freud's (2003) notion of the double, for example, describes the doppelgänger as an uncanny manifestation of one's own repressed psyche and also possesses the ability to "co-own" the central self's "knowledge, feeling and experience" (p. 141-142). The uncanniness of the doppelgänger lies in the fact that in seeing one's self in the image of the double yields an unsettling feeling of familiarity yet foreign. Based on the Freudian view, the horror of the double derives from the central self's inability to identify with and/or control his or her duplicated persona. The central self must then acknowledge what the double represents, and at the same time struggle against it.

The premise of *Bairokêshon* is based on the idea of those who undergo the psychological split and are then haunted by images of their own. These doubles, also known as 'bilocations' in the film, are able to retain the memories of their central selves while making new ones. Freud (2003) views the double as the "uncanny harbinger of death" whereby the central self is diminished while the alter ego becomes indispensable (p. 142). Similarly, Shinobu's central self does not share her double's experience and thus becomes unaware of how her life is being poached and subsequently altered. From a Jungian perspective, the double is referred to as the shadow— an entity that is once part of unconscious made conscious. For a central self to be able to see his or her own shadow marks his or her vulnerability and inadequacy. In Jungian terms, one must confront the shadow, make an attempt to identify with it and reintegrate it as part of a unified psyche. Carl Jung views the double as a

manifestation of a forbidden desire that results from a certain “lack, absence or loss” due to “cultural constraints” (as cited in Zivkovic, 2000, p. 126). In *Bairokêshon*, the double’s desire for matrimony is diametrically opposed to the independence that the central self stands for. Despite their differences, Shinobu’s double may externalize the complexity of her dilemma— one that coerces her to acknowledge the more traditional and feminine aspects of her personality.

Instead of a narrative that focuses on the doppelgänger aiming to annihilate the original identity, *Bairokêshon* is presented based on the perspective of the double. The film, which is set in the outskirts of Tokyo, follows Shinobu (the double) who has recently married her neighbor— a visually impaired man named Masaru Takamura (Asari Yôsuke). While transitioning into married life, she finds herself being pursued by a dead ringer made up of who appears and vanishes within close proximity. Unknown to her, the dead ringer (whom she ironically believes to be her evil bilocation) is her central self whom she has split from in a moment of emotional turmoil. Shinobu is convinced that her bilocation is threatening to harm her husband. Only later in the film does she realize that she is, in fact, the doppelgänger version of herself.

The splitting that creates the film’s bilocations resembles the disintegration of sanity, and partly becomes a source of gender and cultural anxiety. By incorporating the notion of the double, *Bairokêshon* exemplifies the fragility of (modern) female subjectivity and identity within contemporary Japan where patriarchal social norms still reign. The narrative interweaves between the unmarried Shinobu Kirimura and her espoused alter ego; both characters’ identities as a single female and a wife are destabilized as they navigate their lives in an urban setting. This paper will argue how the film articulates, to a degree, a struggle among the female characters in their negotiation of gender roles within Japanese cultural paradigm that still privileges tradition over modern female autonomy. In this respect, this paper focuses on the study of the protagonist’s double as an embodiment of a profound cultural anxiety that is related to the socio-political crisis in contemporary Japan due to the changing roles and status of women.

Doppelgänger, Gender and Japanese Identity

While the motif of the double has long prevailed as a common trope in contemporary Western horror, the idea however remains relatively scarce in the context of Japanese horror cinema. The movement itself accounts for successful films such as Hideo Nakata’s box office hits *Ringu* (1998) and *Honogurai mizu no soko kara* (‘Dark Water,’ 2001) as well as Takeshi Shimizu’s *Ju-on* installment in which the narratives are often centered on avenging spirits such as the female *yurei*. The concept of doppelgänger is considerably a foreign import in Japanese popular culture. In fact, the word doppelgänger is of European-Germanic origin and first appears as a literary concept in Jean Paul Richter’s novel *Siebenkäs* (1796). While the term literally means ‘double-goer’ or ‘double-walker’ in German, Richter (1796) instead specifically describes the word in a one-sentence footnote as “people who see themselves” (as cited in Zivkovic, 2000, p. 122). This Gothic term is later transliterated as *dopperugengâ* in Japanese which highlights its adapted foreignness even more (Posadas, 2010).

The Gothic tradition, however, does exist in older Japanese literature and can be traced back to *Genji Monogatari* ('The Tale of Genji,' 1008) and the collection of *Japanese Gothic Tales* by Iizumi Kyoka published during the pre-war period (Ng, 2007). Similar to the Western construction of the Gothic, these works of supernatural literature deal prominently with the concepts of loss and the (uncanny) return of the repressed while inflecting the Confucian principle of "self-emptying" or nothingness (Ng, 2007, p. 69). The late 1980s also sees internationally known authors like Yoshimoto Banana and Murakami Haruki positioning the doppelgänger motif or "second selves" as a means to thematize personality and identity disorders that have become more common in the midst of modernization and especially during the economic crisis of the Lost Decade (Treat, 1993, p.90).

Baryon Posadas (2010, p. 129) likens the doppelgänger concept in Japanese literature as an embodiment of "return of the repressed" in the sense that Japan has always remained ambivalent in its negotiation between modernity and tradition. The double connotes a modern neurosis that plagues contemporary Japanese society as the logic of being current and civilized yet traditional and primitive bestrides into a sense of displacement (Posadas, 2010, p. 74). Until today, Japan is seen straddling between maintaining isolationist pre-modern values and adopting individualistic values from the West. This feature is clearly captured in Karl Lowith's (1943) description of the Japanese people, who are:

governed by the traditions of Oriental antiquity and by Occidental modernity.... They wish to retain what is best of the Japanese culture and add the achievements of the Western civilization to it, taking home what is good and expedient and leaving behind what is detrimental and bad in order to surpass us in such a manner (as quoted in Takada, 2010, p. 285).

This observation, according to Takada (2010), remains valid in present-day Japan and highlights the "cultural identity crisis" the Japanese experienced due to the country's "hasty" course of adapting to Westernization (p. 285). In *Discourses of the Vanishing*, Marilyn Ivy (1995) explains how the Japanese persistence in preserving their tradition is borne of an anxiety over losing their cultural roots due to the process of Westernization. Yet, at the same time, Japan continues to sustain its "non-modern" patterns of socio-cultural organization, which are often at odds with its pursuit of the hyper-modern (Ivy, 1995, p. 2). As such, contemporary Japan reflects a country that is culturally exclusive and contrastive to other highly developed countries: while it has succeeded in retaining the homogeneity of its cultural heritage and traditions, it has also succeeded in achieving economic and technological supremacy equal to that of the West.

Susan Napier (1996) suggests that the bipolarities of "tradition versus modernity", or more specifically the "West versus Japan," have become convoluted in the postwar period as the dilemma extends to gender politics (p. 55). While traditional culture is still able to co-exist in modern Japan, it is more likely identified with the masculine in its patriarchal parameters (Napier, 1996). Since the 1980s, modern Japan has seen drastic changes in women's roles alongside the shift in Japanese economy. Setsu Shigematsu (2005) points out that there is an increasing number of women enter the

workforce, which results in a growing number of them delaying or avoiding marriage and hence, a significant decrease in birth rates (as cited in Wee, 2010, p. 155).

Despite Japan's heavily patriarchal culture, this situation invariably yields an emergence of a new generation of women who reject the idealized role of the submissive female (Wee, 2010, p. 155). The dynamic between the sexes are rendered as problematic in a society that emphasizes on "technological advancement and material wealth" due to "increased expectations and disappointments" (Napier, 1996, p. 55). The complexity of such changes in gender roles has relegated the modern female as the demonic other in Japanese cinema (Napier, 1996). This can indeed be seen in the common portrayal of the evil *yurei*, such as *Ringu's* Sadako and Kayako in the *Ju-on* series, in recent horror films. Regardless of such demonic presence, the (victimized) monstrous female exists as an important cinematic representation in Japanese.

Traditionally, doppelgänger fiction is dominated by male protagonists, hence making the double "invariably masculine" and gender representation becomes considerably asymmetrical (Sencindiver, 2011, p. 33). According to Sencindiver (2011), the lack or absence of females in the doppelgänger universe is possibly because:

...the doppelgänger puts subjectivity at stake, this subjectivity is also mandatory in order to figure as a host for a doppelgänger. If only man has been privileged with the status of self, and woman has been designated as man's other, her subjectivity is not at risk; hence, she cannot logically figure as a female hostess to a doppelgänger (p. 32).

According to Posadas (2010, p. 65), feminine subjectivity is denied in the doppelgänger narrative because the female is deemed as "the primitive, the savage" and also marked as the "Other" compared to the "modern, masculine and civilized self." Modern doppelgänger narratives, however, may focus on the subjectivity of female but her identity is often problematized as the double becomes an embodiment of "hyper femininity" in relations to the ideal ego (Ruddell, 2013, p. 79). The dichotomy between good and evil can be seen through negotiation of (gender) identity that the double makes.

Bairokêshon thus constructs the female identity and subjectivity as imbalanced in this discourse and the appearance of the double only further reinforces the notion. Both Shinobu and, to a degree, her double appear to be independent women. Yet the fundamental split of Shinobu's psyche suggests her desire to conform to the patriarchal basis of Japanese society. The double, on the other hand, struggles to negotiate her identities as both a wife and a woman of her own. Both, in fact, harbor repressive resentment at their own ever-shifting state of identity that causes the duality to occur in the first place. The pattern of repression here concerns the expression of legitimate female desires, in favor of an idealized yet superficial view of "what a woman should be" according to the standards of Japanese social order (Iles, 2008, p. 77).

The (Isolated) Single Woman and Patriarchy's Ideal Female

Former Japanese Prime Minister Mori Yoshirō once addressed the issue of declining birthrate by stating that women without children are undeserving of any welfare benefits because they live their “lives selfishly and singing praises of freedom” (Hemmann, 2013, p. 27). The single lifestyle among female in Japan, although common, has long been considered as self-interested and discouraging as the phenomenon contributes to the falling rates in both marriage and childbirth. The unpleasant stereotype surrounding unmarried female still remains prevalent even in contemporary Japanese settings (Hemmann, 2013).

Shinobu's central self fits the profile of the self-centered single woman and thus, symbolizes the modern Japanese female populace who no longer accept the traditional role and images of the mother and wife. Her unmarried status and autonomy clearly defies and challenges the Japanese norm; Shinobu chooses to live alone and self-sufficiently relies on the savings she has acquired from her previous administrative job to sustain herself as she works on her painting for the prestigious art competition. While struggling to finish her painting, she accedes to a reclusive lifestyle that limits her from any form of social interactions. In maintaining such a modern, independent lifestyle, the film even suggests that such choice has cost her a lack of familial and platonic connection. These qualities alone align her character with the “new generation” of Japanese women who reject patriarchal ideals as a means of “provoking contemporary Japanese masculine anxieties” (Wee, 2010, p. 157).



Figure 1. Shinobu Kirimura in her apartment.

It might even be tempting to view Shinobu and her ensuing death (by suicide) as a sign of the film's attempt to redeem the modern Japanese female by denying any form of regression toward patriarchal tradition. However, on closer scrutiny, the character seems to display certain uneasiness with her current existence. Shinobu's studio-cum-apartment, which is a focal spot of *Bairokeshon*, is mostly shrouded in dimness and cluttered with art supplies and cigarette stubs. The entire mise-en-scene of her living/workspace accentuates the feelings of claustrophobia and her position (mostly shot with her back to the camera) denies emotional contact with the audience, which also suggests acute social alienation. Her art that she cherishes is symbolic of her disconnection from the world. The painting is of the sliding door of her apartment—a palpable reference to the doubling or bilocation phenomenon—is daubed in dark

charcoal that directly mirrors her internal dissonance. The image of the door does not connect her to the possible outside world; it shuts her in instead.

The film, hereby, points to a deep psychological war that Shinobu undergoes with her identity and subjectivity. In the beginning of the film, she is shown contemplating her choice of resorting to art as her career. Her struggle stems from the fact that she has to manage her breakthrough in the professional art world by producing the best work of art or risks going back to her previous office job. Both circumstances, by and large, will eventually lead her to solitariness. Shinobu is, in fact, unsure of the modern identity that she has adopted thus far. Modernity has afforded her to make decisions of her own yet affected the 'self' to disintegrate in extreme loneliness and emptiness. She drops to the floor and says, "I can't do this anymore"— an indication that she is exhausted from the increased alienation and the societal pressures of conforming have brought upon her. In the face of finishing her painting, she undergoes a nervous breakdown. The scene is darkly ironic as the breakdown happens the moment Masaru is trying to greet her by ringing the doorbell, the only possible connection that may break the cycle of loneliness that she is facing. The split occurs at this moment where the double materializes in cloud of black smoke and consequently greets Masaru at the door.

The double, in this context, is the embodiment of her impalpable (albeit covert) resentment of her own loneliness and inherent need to end the feelings of isolation. Napier (1996) comments on how Japanese women in cinema are now "aligned with the dark side of modernity" and these changes correspond to the "alienation that modernity has brought and the multiplicity of identities now offered" to the female community (p. 244). The haunting of Shinobu's double is literal of her attempt to escape from the modern expectation of being a woman in control of her own autonomy within a patriarchal society. The disassociation of her central self and the double may also be her manner of searching for an identity that is "felt to be lacking" instead (Gamache, 2013, p. 6). This doubling is whereby the split character is divided by the gender role binary— single/ married— where each character leads a slightly different path yet they are intrinsically linked with the uncertainty of their gender role and identity.

On the surface, the double of Shinobu is an embodiment of what the central self could secretly desire for— a return to traditions, to her patriarchal roots and to what modernity has generally repressed— as opposed to her acquired autonomy. The film clearly defines her as someone who essentially conforms to the ideal notion of the submissive female by embracing her wifely duties through caring for her nearly blind husband and obliging to the patriarchal system. As noted earlier, Shinobu's double marries Masaru a couple of months after their first meeting and moves in to his apartment exactly one floor beneath her old residence. The family name on Masaru's unit clearly states 'Takamura', a new identity of which she assumes and adopts.

To some degree, and especially in the first few scenes concerning Shinobu's double, the film demonstrates a rather conservative perspective on gender roles. The double is seen attending to her wifely commitments while Masaru remains the breadwinner despite his worsening eyesight. Dominique Buisson (2003) notes that in Japanese society, a respectable woman's life is governed by "three submissions" – to her father, to her husband and to her eldest son (as cited in Balmain, 2008, p. 73). Her

appearances onscreen reflect a traditional Japanese woman, thus aligning herself with the discourse of filial duty as a *ryōsaikenbo* (‘good wife, wise mother’) that has been around since “pre-feudal times” onwards (Balmain, 2008, p. 73). The system, however, was predicated on the repression and oppression of women, for whom the rules of appropriate behavior were dictated by her obedience to her parents, husband and children (Balmain, 2008).



Figure 2. The winning piece entitled “Window” by Shinobu Takamura.

A character who helps both the ‘originals’ and ‘bilocations’ named Kagami (Takada Sho) later informs Shinobu’s central self that having a husband has changed the double’s overall perspective on life and her art. The double later leaves the competition triumphantly with her winning piece, which is a similar painting of the door that the central self has been working on. Her painting, however, yet exudes optimism and life with yellowish bright colors instead of the charcoal motif that the central self has utilized in hers. The painting, aptly titled ‘Window’, mimics the bright, tidy and pastel-colored apartment of her marital home while the central self’s darker motif is equivalent to her cluttered and cramped dwelling upstairs.



Figure 3. Masaru and Shinobu in their marital home.

Regardless of her devotion to Masaru, the double seems uncertain of her new role/identity and her own internal dissonance becomes evident in the scene where she

mistakenly writes her maiden name (Kirimura) instead of her surname (Takamura) at the laundry. Interestingly, the film undermines the portrayal of Shinobu's fidelity to the marriage institution when she admits to Masaru that she is not used to her new identity as a Takamura. Her finger does not bear a wedding ring, of which she says that having one will make it dirty since she deals heavily with charcoal in her artwork. When asked if she desires her art or her husband more in order to find a conclusion to her fragmented identity, the double answers "Masaru" with hesitance. She is also hesitant to meet Masaru's parents for the first time and remains adamant about keeping her apartment above as a working studio. These instances raise the implication that Shinobu may be, to a certain degree, complicit in subverting the importance of traditional matrimony, and by extension the entire Japanese patriarchal system.

Akin to her central self, the double remains steadfast about winning the art competition in order to have a career. Yet many a times, she is seen 'concealing' or keeping her painting away from the view of her husband. Masaru, however, claims to love her painting and encourages her to continue her creative endeavour but with an important proposition. Over the phone, almost mechanically disconnected from face-to-face encounter, he tells her, "Let's live together. Give up your apartment. Meet my parents this time." As a husband, Masaru clearly represents Japanese patriarchy though he is physically dependent on Shinobu because of his visual impairment. Like what is expected of a Japanese husband, he upholds family tradition by trying to make his parents accept her. Masaru frequently apologizes to his wife for their "shabby newlywed life" which, in his perspective, is unconventional of a Japanese home life seeing that he depends on his wife for his disability and that Shinobu still insists on keeping her apartment above 'to paint.'

In a scene reminiscent to Masaru's given ultimatum, Kagami notices the wedding ring missing on the double's finger and convinces her to wear one because it "means more than" she knows. At this point in the film, the storyline maneuvers to further hints at the heightened masculine anxieties structuring the film's narrative. Shinobu reluctantly agrees to both of the men's request, thus once again submitting or accepting her 'true' place in the patriarchal and familial structure of Japan. Her life is now manifested as a metaphorical version of the window she has painted; one that neither incarcerates wholly nor does it allow actual freedom. *Bairokêshon*'s depiction of the privileged men and husbands as the principal decision-makers clearly reveals a continuing patriarchal bias despite how the double is exemplary of the ideal 'modern' Japanese woman who is able to juggle both her marriage and career. The overall fragmentation of Shinobu's psyche can be argued as articulation of masculine fears around female subjectivity and empowerment.

Shinobu's double highlights the choice given to modern Japanese women and how these choices further binds them in a confusing state of subjectivity. Eventually, she chooses to leave her apartment that is symbolic of her single life and concentrates on her marriage to Masaru. When she learns of her 'true' existence as a double, she acknowledges the need to reconcile with the central self and gives a choice to the 'original' Shinobu to claim what she has attained for her. Nearing the end of the film, the double persuades Shinobu to take over her position partly because of her love for and filialness to Masaru. Her central self is the physical embodiment of independence and isolation, figure that has been 'contaminated' by capitalism and modernity. She is

the opposite of the double who is self-sacrificing, thus aligning herself with tradition and whose subsequent 'death' is dictated by the (central) self's selfish desire. Jung (1934) notes that the hardest part of the process of assimilating with one's double is actually confronting it (as cited in Gamache, 2013). The central self needs to take responsibility for the double's manifestation before the darker parts of the psyche can be assimilated into a coherent state of mind.

Shinobu, however, refuses to reconcile her two selves, therefore denying any responsibility for the double's choices in life. By doing so, Shinobu is avoiding what Jung describes as an inevitable confrontation with oneself. Instead of accepting the double's plea to take her "life" (i.e. having a husband and a career), Shinobu refuses by claiming that art is the only life she knows. As the film's main protagonist, Shinobu has the opportunity to wholly "redeem" the modern woman yet this fails to materialize. This climax takes us to a denouement with her tragic suicide (that occurs just as the double is browsing through a catalog of gowns as a preparation for her wedding ceremony), killing both herself and her double. Death is the only permanent way to dissociate her two selves.

Conclusion

Shinobu's refusal to consider a compromised, married life can be read as a form of denial that seems to be both personal and social. Her denial is partly galvanized by intense anxiety surrounding identity politics in modern Japan. Suicide is a choice and having choice(s) is what liberates females from being compellingly bound in the patriarchal society. Otto Rank (1971) even suggests that the double is symptomatic of a regression to a state of childlike narcissism (as cited in Posadas, 2010, p. 73). Shinobu's suicide by way of the murder of one's double – points to an enactment of displacement in that suicidal tendencies are externalized as a consequence of excessive self-love.

The film situates Shinobu's alter ego (double) and central self as those who are caught in a social double bind. They are unable to find solace in both their traditional and modernized roles or what their desires may be. The two characters face their dilemmas— either subscribing to Western feminist ideas or reclaiming the tradition— in liminal Tokyo. The plight of both characters highlights the choice given to modern Japanese women and how these choices may be detrimental to their subjectivity. This is align to the film's inherent focus on confusion, dread and insecurity that are reflective of the Japanese society's concern regarding modern influences in undermining previously established cultural mores.

Western psychoanalytical frameworks like Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject or Creed's monstrous feminine, on the other hand, may suggest that her death is then symbolic of a punishment for her alignment with the 'problematic' modern cohort of Japanese women whose rejection of (patriarchal) tradition further provokes masculine anxieties in Japan. On that note, Balmain (2008) also suggests that the female body is always in "transition," never fixed nor static, thus suggesting an inherent instability in subjectivity (p. 74). Instead of seeing Shinobu's death as an articulation of male anxieties around female sexuality, it is instead more telling of the female anxiety surrounding the displacement of their liminal subjectivity and identity in modern times.

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