Dangerous Victims: Ideology, Victimhood and Exclusion in Fires on the Plain

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Abstract
In the aftermath of World War II, a deep sense of malaise swept Japan as the shock of defeat began to sink in. One of the major figures of blame for the defeat was the Japanese soldier, who upon return to their homeland faced significant scrutiny and exclusion. Prior to the defeat, the figure of the soldier had been a paragon of proud imperial ideologies and militaristic values, yet with the advent of Japan's defeat, this culture of celebration came to an abrupt close. Essentially, these once valorised individuals of the pre and inter-war became wretched symbols of a shameful war that Japan was desperate to forget. This paper will consider the figure of the soldier as an epicentre of ideological transformation, reading Kon Ichikawa's 1959 film *Fires on the Plain* as allegorical of this shift in national attitude.

Keywords: Victimhood, Ideology, post-war Japan

Introduction

The first two decades after Japan's defeat in 1945 were a period of intense rebuilding, not only of ruined cities, but of social values. This process of re-coding social values in reaction to the traumas of the war that proved so disastrous is visible in the films that emerged during this period. Because films operate as "systems of representation and as narrative structures" they present, as Graeme Turner argues, as "rich sites for ideological analysis" (Turner 1988, p. 132). Through the analysis of post-war Japanese film, one is able to attain an insight into post-war Japanese society, considering elements of films that support the dominant ideology and points of resistance against it. Kon Ichikawa's *Fires on the Plain* (1959) is an exemplary post-war Japanese film for the way it represents the powerful ambivalences of the very recent war-time past, centering on the marginal figure of the soldier. Ichikawa's *Fires on the Plain* with sentiments of victimhood but in an anti-war film genre, presenting a highly nauseating depiction of the Japanese World War II campaign in the Philippines. The film chronicles the tuberculosis-ridden Private Tamura's plight through the wretched war zone, encountering scenes of horror in his attempt to escape back to civilised society. The film's representation of cannibalism and visceral war conditions place it as a document of the fringes of post-war Japan, centering on the soldier as a figure of exclusion and liminality. The central focus of this paper is to investigate the relation between exclusion and victimhood, furthermore considering how the position of victimhood might conceal a certain lethality, as it has the potential to justify and perpetuate further systems of violence.

In conceiving an applicable understanding of exclusion, a synthesis of elements of the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler and Slavoj Zizek allow for a far-reaching and unique way of engaging with the topic. Firstly, the adoption of Kristeva's term for the repressed object of exclusion, the abject, allows for us to conceive of a relationship that exceeds the simple linear structure of excluding-excluded, or subject-object. From Kristeva's Lacanian framework, the excluding subject is necessarily implicated by its own object of exclusion, as the abject substance was once a part of them. While usually a strong critic of psychoanalysis and Kristeva in particular, Judith Butler's of the 'corporeal abject' allows us to understand the volatile implications of being abject. So for Butler, to be abject is to exist in the 'unlivable' zones of subjectivity, unable to enjoy the status of the subject yet still required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. Finally, Zizek's conceptualization of community (or nation in our case) adds that the act of exclusion by a nation-community is not a mere contingent act but can work to structure the outline of the nation itself. Such a process constructs a kind of falsely unified identity based on a shared disavowal of certain repressed elements of society. From this theoretical position, the figure of the soldier in post-war Japan can be approached.

The Pre, Inter, and Post-war Soldier

Prior to Japan's defeat in World War II, the Japanese soldier was a much celebrated and lionised figure in Japanese society, standing as a founding example of many of 4 Japan's dominant imperial ideologies. As Pennington claims, in the pre- and interwar period, "mass culture (magazines, films, popular fiction, advertising, and everyday visual arts) suppressed the physical suffering of war-wounded servicemen in favour of dwelling on the triumphant overcoming of adversity," valorising the soldiers as ideal

imperial subjects (Pennington 2015, p. 165). Furthermore, the soldier's "cheerful, almost inviting endurance of their injuries" constructed them as "icons of personal fortitude during an era of ever-escalating national crisis" (Pennington 2015, p. 165). However, with the advent of the Japanese defeat, the social standing of the soldier figure underwent significant inversions, not only stripped of their elevated status, but also now seen as wretched and shameful reminders of a lost war. These changes were firstly driven by SCAP (Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers) reforms put in place by the Allied Occupation, which brought an end to military support services and preferential assistance for military casualties. Indeed, men who had grown accustomed to "receiving imperial gifts such as artificial arms and legs," as well as "enjoying the succor of society, and recounting their war stories with pride" found their lives profoundly different after the war (Pennington 2015, p. 196). As Moore proposes, during the imperial and post-war period, returning Japanese soldiers "did not fit into a postwar world that wanted to move on," with veterans feeling "deeply frustrated by postwar society's inability to understand them" (Moore 2013, p. 244). These accounts refer to the fact that on a broader level, Japan's collectively constructed memory of the war and the newly forming national narrative didn't feature the figure of the soldier.

The more tangible aspects of this shift in early post-war period Japan were seen in the sight of veterans begging for money on the streets, as well as many ex-soldiers returning "to discover that they had been declared dead long before, their funerals conducted and grave markers erected" (Dower *Embracing Defeat*, 2000 p. 60). Furthermore, stories circulated of veterans who made their way home after years of hardship "only to find that their wives had remarried, frequently to a brother or close friend" (Dower *Embracing Defeat*, 2000 p. 60). In the sardonic phrase of the times, such men became known as the 'living war dead' [ikite iru eirei]. As Japan began to construct its new post-war identity, it seemed that the soldier epitomised the antiquated, nationalistic, and ultimately flawed pre-war ideology that the public was so desperate to forget. As Dower posits, the "wartime fixation on purity and purification proved adaptable to this commitment to a new path of development" that occurred after Japan's defeat (Dower *Ways of* Forgetting, 2000 p. 63). More 5 specifically, "individuals who had been exhorted to purge self and society of decadent Western influences before the surrender now found themselves exhorted to purge the society of militarism and feudalistic legacies" (Dower *Ways of* Forgetting, 2000 p. 63). Such a sense of "'cleansing' Japan of foul and reactionary influences" was "truly phenomenal in the early post-war years," leading to a period of selective national amnesia, which functioned to effectively remove the figure of the soldier from the prevailing Japanese narrative of war and defeat (Dower *Ways of* Forgetting, 2000 p. 63).

In the third decade of the Showa period (1955–65), only three years after the end of the US occupation, the narrative of war guilt and shame began to be replaced by an attitude of victim consciousness (*higaisha ishiki*). In lieu of responsibility for horrendous crimes committed by the military during the war, this attitude of victimhood sought to depict the Japanese as misunderstood victims of an unjust war. Specifically, Japan's embrace of victim consciousness relied upon the distancing of pre-war remnants from the 'new national identity', remnants that included the returning soldiers. As Wickham notes, in light of pre-war memories, the events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were universalised, helping to justify the separation of the

"common person from the military" that was "necessary to absolve the common Japanese citizenry of responsibility" (Wickham 2010, p. 15). Orr also points out "war victim consciousness was promoted by Allied psychological warfare agents and Occupation authorities to encourage alienation from the wartime state and its military" (Orr 2001, p. 7). Such a severance of the link between the Japanese nation and the military can be understood as representative of the military's repressed status in Japan's post-war subjectivity. Considering Kon Ichikawa's *Fires on the Plain* within this context, the film presents the following proposition to the ideological structure of post-war Japan: What if the very element of repression in post-war Japanese society, the figure of the soldier, was elevated to the purified position of victim? Essentially, the film makes clear the contradiction at the heart of post-war Japanese ideology through the character of Private Tamura, specifically, the disavowal of war crimes in tandem with embodying the position of victim in regard to the war around him.

Able, Incapacitated and In-Between Bodies

In *Fires on the Plain*, the abject nature of the solider is primarily presented in the crippled and broken bodies of the Japanese soldier, a motif repeatedly revisited throughout the film. Butler's discussion of the corporeal abject in *Bodies That Matter* considers the exclusionary matrix that exists between subjects and "abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects," but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject" (Butler 1993, p. 3). For Butler, the abject stands for the "'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life," populated "by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject" (Butler 1993, p. 3). As Arya summarises, "in order for control to be maintained, the excluded need to remain on the outside of the signifying boundary" (Arya 2014, p. 8). Considering the abject in the context of disability, Michalska makes the link that the disabled body, "being neither present nor absent, defies the symbolic categories such as 'broken' and 'whole' … therefore the fear of disability resembles that of abjection, as of everything that is 'out of order'" (Michalska 2016, p. 5). Within *Fires on the Plain*, the soldier's body is defined either by its utility to the army, or the care it receives from the medics. Within this framework, the crippled but not incapacitated soldiers in the film can be read as marginal, incongruent and crucially, abject bodies outside the margins of Japanese society. Such a status recalls Moore's suggestion that returning veterans "did not fit into a post-war world that wanted to move on" (Moore 2013, p. 244).

Ichikawa's film presents the presence of an exclusionary matrix as early as the opening scene, where the tuberculosis-ridden Private Tamura is labelled as a liability to his squadron. In this dialogue with his superior, the attitudes towards crippled soldiers are presented:

> Officer: You're nothing but a burden. You should be ashamed! All I can do as a squad leader is send you back to the hospital before everyone starts hating you. If they don't admit you, sit there until you do. If they still refuse, then you must die! You weren't given a hand grenade for nothing. If they send you away, blow yourself up. That will be your final duty. Tamura: I, Private First Class Tamura, will return to the hospital. If they do not admit me, I will kill myself.

This dialogue, and the proceeding scene where Tamura enters the medical village present the complex nature of disability in Fires on the Plain, in which three distinct categories of soldier are presented. For Tamura's superior, Tamura is too crippled with tuberculosis to be allowed to fight alongside his fellow able-bodied soldiers, being "nothing but a burden" to him. However, according to the practising doctor in the village, Tamura is not sick enough to be admitted to the hospital: "This hospital's overflowing with seriously wounded men … I don't care if you're coughing blood. If you can walk, you're not a patient." In this sense, Tamura's mobility and capacity to walk prevent him from being able to identify with the completely incapacitated soldiers residing in the medical village. Such a state recalls Michalska's definition of the disabled body defying the "symbolic category of 'broken' and 'whole'" (Michalska 2016, p. 5), giving rise to Tamura's abject, in-between nature. This concept is further emphasised by several montages of Tamura nomadically wandering the plains of the war zone, as well as the final scene in which he wanders into the firing line (and presumably, his death) in search of someone "who is leading a normal life."

Through Private Tamura's inability to integrate into the incapacitated or able-bodied, the abject nature of the soldier's body is revealed through its existence within the liminal space between subject and object. These strict boundaries are also enforced through the distribution of food to only those deemed able-bodied and able to fight, and those who are too sick to walk. Fundamentally, the in-between or, partially injured soldiers are left to fend for themselves on the plains, unable to completely incorporate into with either group. This trope of starvation and food rationing serves as a microcosm for the conditions in Japan post-defeat, where "despair took root and flourished" (Dower *Embracing Defeat* 2000, p. 44), with "the streets of every major city quickly peopled with demoralized ex-soldiers, war widows, orphans, the homeless and unemployed" (Dower *Embracing Defeat* 2000, p. 48). As Dower explains, many of the injured returning soldiers were forced to beg for food, essentially "treated like pariahs in their native land" (Dower *Embracing Defeat* 2000, p. 60).

Another instance in which the indeterminable nature of the soldier's body is revealed in the scene where Tamura joins a severely wounded, dejected and starving group of soldiers also in his predicament. These soldiers are on the way to Palompon, the place of evacuation from the war zone. Tamura and the soldiers come upon a road frequently traversed by US soldiers, deciding to wait until nightfall before they attempt to cross the bridge. As the soldiers gingerly creep towards the road – which acts as a border between their camp and the road – they are ambushed by American tanks, which open fire on the hapless soldiers, leaving a trail of corpses. In a particularly visceral shot, the tank shells hit a zone of scrambling soldiers, who are now thrown to the floor, most likely fatally wounded. The attempt of the in-between soldiers to cross the road can be read as allegorical of Japan's returning soldiers attempting to take their place in Japan's new post-war identity, but failing to do so. 31 These soldiers instead present a key aspect of abjection, the threatening of boundaries between self and other. As Kristeva posits, the abject is that "disturbs identity, system, order," to which, as Tamura and the surviving soldiers realise, they stand outside (Kristeva 1982, p. 4).

Cannibalism and Victim Consciousness

As a whole, Fires on the Plain appears to align with post-war Japanese's society less than inviting reaction to the figure of the soldier, marking them as abject individuals unable to integrate into Japan's new national identity. However, to a large degree, Ichikawa's film also interacts with post-war Japan's narrative of victimhood. In Wickham's dissertation on how victimhood was represented in post-war Japanese literature, she posits that by "separating the common man or soldier from the 'military' … literature acted as a national Bildungsroman, and the victim's consciousness became an integral part of the post-war imaginary" (Wickham 2010, p. v). Furthermore, this victim consciousness prevented Japan from "an authentic confrontation with history and memory," and by proxy prevented "an authentic Japanese identity" (Wickham 2010, p. vi). Relating this ideology with the social aspect of abjection, it can be posited that victim consciousness arose out of Japanese society's desire to repress choice parts of their involvement with World War II, in particular, the guilt surrounding war crimes performed by Japanese soldiers while abroad. Specifically, this topic might be best considered in the context of a primary theme in Fires on the Plain dénouement: the depiction of cannibalism.

Cannibalism and Ideology

According to Levi-Strauss, cannibalism can be understood as alimentary incest, with societies placing emphasis on the taboo nature of the act. Certainly, the taboo nature of cannibalism permeates Fires on the Plain, perhaps best shown by the euphemism given to human flesh by soldiers ("monkey meat"), echoing Kristeva description of the abject of that which exists in the archaic stage before language, eluding signification: "the non-distinctiveness of inside and outside would thus be unnameable" (Kristeva 1982, p. 61). In Fires on the Plain, cannibalism is performed by the soldiers Nagamatsu and Yasuda, the former of which attempts to make Tamura eat human flesh by thrusting it into his mouth. After failing to chew the "monkey meat", Tamura spits it out, rejecting the material. Tamura's rejection of human flesh is important as it works to ethically separate him from the other soldiers, who are presented as morally compromised by the wartime environment.

For Kristeva, abjection is strongly linked to the societal deterrence of cannibalism, positing that one must "give up cannibalism because abjection (of the mother) leads me toward respect for the body of the other, my fellow man, my brother" (Kristeva 1982, p. 79). In the context of Ichikawa's film, Kristeva's universalising claim can be applied to Tamura in the sense that he becomes a "synecdoche for a nation that has, itself, already taken on the mantle of a victim of a wartime atrocity rather than the guilty perpetrators of one in the form of an imperialistic war of aggression" (Lofgren "Ideological Transformation" 2004, p. 414) In this sense, Tamura's rejection of the act of cannibalism is symbolic of the moralising perspective associated with victim consciousness, where previous indiscretions (in this case Tamura's war crime against the Filipina woman) are seemingly absolved. Tamura presents this sense of moral leverage over his fellow soldiers in the scene following the refusal, when Tamura confronts Nagamatsu while he is hunting for "monkey meat":

> Tamura: You saw?
> Nagamatsu: I saw. The monkey got away.

Tamura: Here's one in front of you.

For Lofgren, this scene presents Tamura adopting the role of the victim in relation to Nagamatsu's morally unjust actions, suggesting an absence of guilt that is representative of Japan's ideological transformation from guilt to victimhood. By removing "the ethical and moral stain" of cannibalism from Tamura's character (Lofgren "Christianity Excised" 2003, p. 265), Tamura becomes a "commentator on and evaluator of the depravity of his compatriots by virtue of his resolute refusal to eat human flesh" (Lofgren "Christianity Excised" 2003, p. 268). In this sense, Fires on the Plain's moralising stance is predicated on a paradox, where one is made to disavow Tamura's previous behaviour in favour of his symbolic act of purity. In the final scene of the film, Tamura ventures towards almost certain death in the firing line of local Filipino militia, choosing almost certain death in favour of violating the "ethical imperatives of civilised humanity" (Lofgren "Christianity Excised" 2003, p. 274). This final scene, when considered in the context of Tamura's own personally committed war crime – the murder of the Filipina woman in the village- can be read as allegorical of Japan's national rejection of the abject Japanese veterans, in favour of adopting the victimhood narrative. In this crucial scene, Tamura, as a synecdoche for post-war Japanese ideology, purges his link with the military by killing his monstrous fellow soldier and throwing down his weapon, thus symbolically removing himself from his previous identity as a soldier. Tamura then turns to the wasteland around him, making a beeline for the Phillipine farmer's area, but he is shot at by the Phillipine militia. Herein lies in the recognition of contradiction, as the militia still view Tamura through the symbolic identity of military soldier. What Fires reveals is the impossibility for Japan to shed their military identity and adopt a position of pure victimhood. What is communicated through Tamura is precisely the unspeakable, repressed dimension of post-war Japan. The foundational lesson here is not simply a reification of Japanese war crimes, but rather, an insight into the nature of any kind of adopted national victimhood.

Conclusion

What Fires on the Plain communicates through its final scene is the illegitimacy of national projects that articulate themselves through the logic of victimhood. As certain groups may adopt the position of victim in relation to events, we should of course grant them allowance, yet also understand that such a position is by no means zero sum. To clarify, it is not incorrect to adopt the position of victim; it is incorrect to assume this position doesn't have the potential to function ideologically to perpetuate further systems of violence. Instead, the fundamental lesson from Fires on the Plain is that an individual or group can exist as both a victim and a perpetrator in a system.

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