



# Patriarchy and the Horror of the Monstrous Feminine

Valerie Wee

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# PATRIARCHY AND THE HORROR OF THE MONSTROUS FEMININE

## A comparative study of *Ringu* and *The Ring*

Valerie Wee

*This paper compares the gender politics expressed in Ringu and The Ring, paying particular attention to specific and noteworthy distinctions and crucial underlying cultural differences that structure and shape the gender politics articulated in the two films. While highlighting the divergences in the films' narratives and examining how their depictions of female characters reveal the fundamental historical, cultural, social and ideological forces that structure Eastern and Western views of femininity, women, and their roles in society, this paper argues that although both films reflect a misogynist patriarchal perspective in their depiction of evil, violent, destructive females, it is the American remake that is ultimately more conservative and reactionary in its simplistic alignment of women, the feminine and maternity with evil and monstrosity. In comparison, the Japanese original offers a more ambiguous treatment of a key female character, the mysterious and deadly Sadako, allowing her to emerge as a potential figure of resistance against conservative patriarchy, an element that is distinctly absent in the American remake.*

KEYWORDS gender; horror; *The Ring*; *Ringu*; Japanese horror films; American horror films

This paper offers a close reading of the Japanese horror film, *Ringu* (1998), and its American adaptation, *The Ring* (2002), focusing on the specific treatments of gender and horror represented in each text. By comparing the distinctly Japanese perspective expressed in *Ringu* to its American counterpart, this paper highlights the key ways in which each film reflects culturally unique constructions and indices of gender, particularly as they intersect with notions of horror and the supernatural. The greater goal of this detailed comparison lies in tracing the larger historical, cultural, social and ideological perspectives that have shaped the gender-oriented views and perspectives expressed in these two films.

Adopting a comparative approach to *Ringu* and *The Ring* is both timely and important considering the increasing number of Asian/Japanese horror films being remade by Hollywood in the new millennium, a trend that began in the late 1990s. Following *The Ring*'s box-office success, Hollywood adapted other Japanese horror films, including *Ju-on* (2000), and *Honogurai mizu no soko kara* (2001). And just as *Ju-On* and *Ringu* generated sequels, so have their American versions. Other Asian horror films also attracted Hollywood attention. American adaptations of Hong Kong horror film *Jian Gwai* (2002) and Thai horror film *Shutter* (2004) were released in 2008. This phenomenon offers a noteworthy

opportunity to engage in comparative examinations that could provide rich insights into how differing cultural and ideological perspectives find expression in a range of narrative and representational revisions undertaken during the remaking process. Thus, this paper is part of the comparative work that is only recently emerging in the wake of the growing number of Hollywood remakes of popular Japanese/Asian horror films.

### Horror Films and Gender Anxieties

According to Douglas Kellner, horror films reveal the “hopes and fears that contest dominant hegemonic and hierarchical relations of power” by “[displaying] both the significant dreams and nightmares of a culture and the ways that the culture is attempting to channel them to maintain its present relations of power and domination” (1995, p. 111). Certainly, questions of power and dominance have always been at the heart of gender issues.

Examinations of Western cinema’s treatment of gender and horror are well established and fairly wide-ranging. Barbara Creed (1993), Julia Kristeva (1982), and Linda Williams (1996), among others, have discussed the (Western) cultural tendency to offer representations of women and the Feminine that are aligned with monstrosity or evil. However, to my knowledge, there has been little work published in English exploring contemporary Japanese cinema’s portrayal of women in horror films. Although broad studies of female representations in Japanese cinema exist (Joan Mellen 1978; Sandra A. Wawrytko 1995), they do not specifically consider the Japanese horror genre. This paper is an attempt to address this gap.

*Ringu* and *The Ring* explore a distinct fear and horror of female monstrosity that resonates across cultures. Despite their different cultural lineages, both films initially appear to reflect similar patriarchal perspectives that limit their central female characters to two familiar opposing extremes: angel/nurturer and demon/destroyer. Both films revolve around a concerned, nurturing mother (Reiko in *Ringu* and Rachel in *The Ring*) trying to protect and save her son from an evil female spirit (Sadako in the original, and Samara in the remake) whose quest for revenge results in multiple deaths.

The figure of the vengeful female is a particularly common trope in patriarchal cultures and frequently appears in both Hollywood and Japanese horror films. As Peter Tombs (2000) notes, Japanese films have a long history of drawing on the popular vengeful female ghost stories found in Kabuki drama, while feminist film scholars (Carol Clover 1992; Creed 1993) have highlighted the significant place the monstrous female avenger holds within Western/American horror films. Although a vengeance-seeking female is central to *Ringu* and *The Ring*, a detailed comparison reveals key underlying cultural differences that structure the gender politics articulated in these two films.

*Ringu*’s gender politics borrows from the tradition of the Japanese female ghost story, adapting its conventions to express a growing masculine anxiety within contemporary Japan, where modernity and social change are steadily undermining previously entrenched gender roles. In contrast, *The Ring* is positioned within a larger engagement with American culture’s views of gender in general, and popular Western (cinematic) representations of gender in particular. Ultimately, although both *Ringu* and *The Ring* offer extremely conservative gendered perspectives, their notions of gender are conservative in culturally unique ways, particularly in the alignment of horror with the female/feminine.

***Ringu***

Just as there is an archetype of woman as the object of man's eternal love, so there must be an archetype of her as the object of his eternal fear, representing, perhaps, the shadow of his own evil actions. (Enchi Fumiko 1983, p. 57)

In *Ringu*, a reporter, Reiko, finds and watches a mysterious videotape that is linked to several individuals who reportedly died exactly seven days after watching it. After her son, Yoichi, views the tape, she tries to uncover its origins in the hope of saving them both. Reiko and her ex-husband, Ryuji, discover that the videotape is linked to a young woman, Sadako, who was brutally murdered by her father.

Though *Ringu* revolves around Reiko's quest to save herself and her son, it is Sadako, the mysterious and malevolent female force, who pervades and dominates the narrative. Reiko's investigation reveals that Sadako is a teenage girl who apparently possessed supernatural powers. After Sadako's murder, she haunts a videotape and kills anyone who watches it. As information about Sadako is gradually revealed, viewers unfamiliar with Japanese culture are likely to view her as the personification of evil, a deadly, inexorable, female force intent on haunting and destroying innocent individuals out of a desire for revenge. However, a closer examination suggests that this may be too simplistic a view, particularly when we place Sadako within the enduring Japanese tradition of the female ghost story and read her against both a historical and contemporary context of Japanese culture and literature that remain strongly influenced by Confucian thought.

**Sadako, the Japanese Tradition of the Female Ghost, and Confucianism**

*Ringu's* treatment of a murdered young woman returning as a vengeful ghost draws inspiration from the classic Japanese female ghost story. Originating in the Tokugawa/Edo period (1603–1868), these popular narratives articulate the Japanese attitude towards gender roles and behaviors in general, and reverberate through Sadako's depiction in *Ringu*.

In the famous ghost story, *Tokaido Yotsuya kaidan* (*Ghost Story of Yotsuya*), Iemon murders his wife, Oiwa/Iwa. Her ghost returns to haunt her faithless husband, causing him to murder various people, including his new wife and father-in-law. Oiwa's ghost is appeased only after Iemon is killed. In *Bancho Sarayashiki* (*The Story of Okiku*), a maid, Okiku, is murdered and thrown down a well by Tessen Aoyama, her samurai master. Okiku's ghost haunts Aoyama, finally driving him mad. Another Japanese fable, *Kuroneko* (*Black Cat*) features a woman and her daughter-in-law who are robbed, raped and murdered by some samurai. The women then return as vengeful demon cats that kill any samurai they encounter. These narratives remain popular and current in contemporary Japan. Several different cinematic versions of these stories exist,<sup>1</sup> and they are regularly staged in Noh and Kabuki performances. Significantly, *Ringu* overtly references these classical ghost stories in its narrative, characterization and visual imagery.

A common feature in these ghost stories is the female victim who is brutally murdered by a man whose socially prescribed duty is to protect her: Oiwa is poisoned by her husband; Okiku is murdered by her samurai master; the mother and daughter-in-law in *Kuroneko* are raped and murdered by samurai. In *Ringu*, Sadako is murdered by her father. Like her predecessors, Sadako returns as a vengeful ghost.

*Ringu's* visual references to traditional female ghost myths also revolve around Sadako. In the cursed video, Shizuko, Sadako's mother, is seen combing her hair in a mirror. This scene recalls one in *Tokaido Yotsuya kaidan*, in which Oiwa, who has just been poisoned by her husband, brushes her hair before a mirror only to have her hair fall out in bloody clumps (Denis Meikle 2005, p. 114). In kabuki performances, Oiwa's ghost has a disfigured face, swollen eyes, and lank hanging hair. Sadako's ghost, with her long, black, damp hair obscuring a face that seems terrifyingly deformed, is strikingly similar. *Ringu* can thus be viewed as part of the continuing tradition of the female ghost story, a genre that was strongly shaped by highly patriarchal Confucian beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

Confucian teachings stress idealized notions of order, and personal and social responsibility. As Yoko Sugihara notes, "the Confucian ethical system emphasizes a harmonious society in which a hierarchical structure is maintained . . . which assumes . . . men's dominance over women and children" (2002). According to Elizabeth Kanematsu, "there were certain benefits for women under this system. In theory at least, the extreme dependence of women upon their menfolk meant that *the [men] had the obligation to ensure [women's] well-being and protection*" (1993, p. 58; emphasis mine). Within this strict hierarchy, "if a ruler, a subject, a father . . . do [sic] not fulfill their duties, they abuse their titles . . . this is the beginning of the collapse of ritual/propriety . . . and is one of the causes [of] social disorder and political chaos" (Yao Xinzhong 2000, p. 35). In situations when those in positions of power fail to fulfill their responsibilities and duties, Confucians prescribe that it is both acceptable and necessary for the oppressed to rise up against them, as only then can order and balance be reestablished. This perspective is clearly dramatized in these popular historical Japanese narratives of vengeful female ghosts.

In these classic Japanese ghost stories, Confucian ideals of organized, gendered hierarchies are clearly maintained. Oiwa, Okiku, and the women in *Kuroneko* embrace their subordinate and domestic positions in life. It is only *after* they have been betrayed and murdered by men whose social and familial responsibility (according to Confucian teaching) is to protect and guide them that they return as terrifying, destructive beings. From a Confucian perspective, the horrific actions of these vengeful female ghosts are condoned as acceptable responses against those in positions of authority who have failed to act appropriately. Since hers is a vengeance that is provoked and legitimate, the submissive female is empowered to act against the patriarchal male. In such a situation, the women undergo a transformation from victim to villain/victimizer. Tim Screech (n.d.) has noted that the Japanese term for "ghost," "*Obake*," is a noun derived from the verb *bakeru*, meaning to transform, "to undergo change." As Screech explains, "Japanese ghosts . . . are essentially transformations. They are one sort of thing that mutates into another." This notion of mutation and transformation is an important element in the Japanese vengeful female ghost story. In almost every instance, the mutation from benign, subservient female, into something "else"/Other is motivated by a violent act of betrayal and murder. Confucius' endorsement of subordinates overthrowing irresponsible figures of authority appears to further disempower women by implying that any quest for vengeance or change is relegated to acts from beyond the grave. In these historical cultural narratives, Japanese females are never inherently disruptive or dangerous in life.

Certainly, these centuries-old traditional ghost narratives cannot be simplistically mapped onto the contemporary zeitgeist. Modern Japan has undergone significant social and cultural changes, including in the area of gender politics. In contemporary Japan, traditional, idealized gender roles and behaviors are increasingly undermined by the

emergence of a new generation of women who seem reluctant to embrace, and in some cases actively reject, the conventional role of the submissive female within a patriarchal culture.<sup>3</sup> Beginning in the 1970s, changes in the Japanese economy, the increasing numbers of women entering the workforce, and the growing numbers of women delaying or avoiding marriage, all indicate the extent to which Japanese women are increasingly rejecting traditional roles, behaviors and identities (Setsu Shigematsu 2005).<sup>4</sup> These developments have provoked a growing masculine anxiety that is finding increased cultural expression in Japanese popular culture in general. According to Susan Napier, “women seem to have become increasingly other, unreachable, even demonic” in contemporary Japanese cinema and fantasy literature (1996, p. 56). This is particularly true in horror films, a genre predisposed towards the articulation and exploration of existing cultural and social concerns.

*Ringu's* contemporary concerns have resulted in a complex reworking of the Japanese female ghost myth. Like many of the traditional ghost stories mentioned, *Ringu* depicts a world in which order and balance have been disrupted by the male figure's neglect or active betrayal of his duty, responsibility and authority. In *Ringu*, Sadako's father, Ikuma, bludgeons his teenage daughter to death with an axe and then tosses her down an abandoned well.<sup>5</sup> He does this after a shocking, but ultimately ambiguous, incident that takes place during a press conference where her mother, Shizuko, is scheduled to undergo a test to prove her psychic gift. Although Shizuko passes the psychic test, the press in attendance reviles her as a fraud. At that moment, one of the reporters falls down dead. A horrified Shizuko then exclaims, “Sadako, you did that!” Yet, with the exception of Shizuko's accusation, there is little in the sequence to confirm Sadako's guilt. Sadako's face never appears onscreen during the sequence and she does not respond to her mother. The depiction of the reporter's death and Sadako's role in it is vague, at best.

This ambiguity, and Sadako's obscure treatment (Did she kill the journalist? Is she evil?), hints at an underlying ambivalence within the film. In suggesting Sadako's guilt (she is, after all, accused by her psychic mother), she is therefore aligned with a deadly power. That she appears apparently indifferent to what she has done reinforces her monstrosity. This depiction deviates from the traditional ghost story in which the female victims are clearly innocent, submissive and vulnerable—qualities that Sadako may not necessarily share. Interestingly, the filmic Sadako deviates significantly from the novel, which clearly depicts Sadako as an innocent victim in the female ghost tradition. In the novel, Sadako does not murder anyone. Instead, she is a dutiful daughter caring for her ill father at a sanitarium when she is raped and murdered by her father's doctor, and subsequently thrown down a well. Only then does she return in a form similar to the cinematic Sadako, as a wraith with an unquenchable thirst for vengeance. Thus, unlike her predecessors, the filmic Sadako appears to be a terrifyingly deviant female figure while alive. Such a representation could be interpreted as an indictment of an uncontrollable, empowered female who must be punished and contained for her rejection of social norms, proper values and moralities. Yet it is also crucial to remember that Sadako only reacts *after* the (male) reporters turn on her innocent mother. The film's ambiguous and ambivalent treatment of this demonic figure is heightened if we consider Sadako's actions within a context in which patriarchal duties have been betrayed.

In fact, the developments during the press conference reveal some interesting implications if viewed from a Confucian perspective. If Confucianism commands that the male assume authority over the submissive female, ensuring that “the [men] had the

obligation to ensure [women's] well-being and protection" (Kanematsu 1993, p. 58), then the press conference highlights the betrayal of these obligations. The male press corps attack and ridicule Shizuko immediately after she has proven her psychic gift, and her husband, Ikuma, fails or chooses not to protect or defend her. If we believe Shizuko's accusation, then it is Sadako who comes to her mother's defense. If Sadako is responsible for the reporter's death, her actions are neither random nor unprovoked as there is at least the suggestion that she was defending and protecting her mother, a perspective that might offer some mitigation.

It is worth noting that Shizuko and Sadako's respective reactions to the press event showcases the disparity between the traditional, patriarchy-respecting female and an "upstart," "disrespectful," contemporary female. While Shizuko suffers the reporters' derision and criticism in silence and offers little resistance, Sadako (apparently) retaliates against the unfair male bullying by killing one of the aggressors. Shizuko's and Sadako's depictions represent two conflicting constructions of femininity that have emerged in contemporary Japan: the *musume* and the *shōjo*, two feminine terms that carry distinct associations. Although both terms describe women, *musume* connotes a virtuous, powerless female who embraces her "daughterly duties and obligations within the [patriarchal system]" (Tomoko Aoyama 2005, pp. 52–53). In contrast, *shōjo* refers to a young female who is "socially unanchored, free of responsibility and self-absorbed—the opposite of the ideal Japanese adult" (Sharalyn Orbaugh 2002, pp. 258–259). *Shōjo* are "free and arrogant" while *musume* are "meek and dutiful" (Aoyama 2005, p. 53). Though the popular notion of the *shōjo* is associated with young girls engaging in innocent, if unrestrained, consumption and self-involved enjoyment, the term does carry with it connotations of selfish personal indulgence, an apparent thoughtless disregard for others, and a rejection of traditional social mores. *Ringu's* portrayal of Sadako exaggerates the selfish, irresponsible connotations of the *shōjo* to monstrous extremes. Sadako's seeming arrogance, and her refusal to respect patriarchal representatives and structures, hint at contemporary Japanese society's growing anxieties and concerns regarding the rise of the *shōjo*.<sup>6</sup> Shizuko, in comparison, reflects the traditional ideal qualities of the *musume* who is resigned to her reduced social position and quietly accepts her lot.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of Sadako's guilt or innocence, however, the event culminates in Sadako's brutal murder by her father, Ikuma. Consequently, it is at least possible to view both Shizuko and Sadako as victims of the various men present at the press conference. In killing Sadako, her father emerges as a tyrannical force that is both judge and executioner. He is a murderer who has relinquished his social, familial and patriarchal responsibilities by exposing his wife to public humiliation and then killing his daughter. In the tradition of the Japanese female ghost story, Ikuma's actions result in the return of Sadako's vengeance-driven spirit. Thus, Sadako's ghost is not simply or unambiguously the embodiment of evil. Rather, *Ringu* consciously problematizes its depiction of Sadako, presenting her as both victim and villain. As Laura Miller and Jan Bardsley argue, cultural depictions and discourses that depict empowered, aggressive females often "[point] beyond established ideas of normativity and propriety. She resists easy definition and defies containment" (2005, p. 2).

In refusing to reduce Sadako to an oversimplified incarnation of supernatural vengeance, *Ringu* reaches beyond the established tradition of the ghost story. Where the classic narratives clearly reflect Confucian values, specifically the emphasis on social responsibilities, and the patriarchal male's duties to lead by serving and protecting, *Ringu* updates the convention by introducing a more contemporary ambiguity and anxiety to the

figure of the vengeful ghost. Most notably, Sadako, unlike her more traditional predecessors, cannot be easily neutralized. Where Oiwa, Okiku and the vengeful spirits of *Kuroneko* were either finally appeased or defeated, Sadako's anger endures and escapes containment.

### Shizuko and Reiko: Submissive, Docile and Domestic?

The film's depiction of the other female characters reveals a continuing patriarchal bias. As noted earlier, Shizuko, Sadako's mother, essentially conforms to the idealized notion of the submissive and docile *musume*. Her brief appearances onscreen reflect a traditional Japanese woman. Shizuko does not respond when taunted by the press. Furthermore, she uses her psychic abilities to predict a natural disaster in an attempt to save lives. Interestingly, however, the film undermines this portrayal of Shizuko as *musume* when Ryuji tells Reiko that perhaps Sadako's father "wasn't human." This one comment raises the implication that Shizuko may be complicit in challenging and subverting the rights of the father, and by extension the entire patriarchal system, by conceiving a child with a sea demon. Although none of this is explored or confirmed in the film, the information comes by way of inference based on an old man's memories of Sadako and Shizuko, the suggestion that Shizuko would flout the accepted patriarchal and familial structures in such a manner, coupled with the idea that Shizuko brought forth a "monster" like Sadako, clearly aligns both women with terrifying acts of deviance, and associates them with a destructive supernatural power. This narrative maneuver further hints at the heightened masculine anxieties structuring the film's narrative.

It might be tempting to view Reiko, the film's heroine, as a sign of the film's attempt to break with patriarchal tradition and redeem the modern Japanese female. Significantly, the novel on which *Ringu* is based features a male protagonist, Kazuyuki Asakawa. In Nakata's film, Kazuyuki has been transformed into Reiko Asakawa, a divorced single mother. Reiko, the film's heroine, initially comes across as Shizuko's opposite. Reiko is a modern, independent Japanese woman; she has a job (as a journalist) and is divorced. These two qualities distinguish Reiko from the traditionally idealized, domestic, Japanese woman and align her with the "problematic" new generation of Japanese women whose rejection of traditional, patriarchal ideals is responsible for provoking contemporary Japanese masculine anxieties. As the film's main protagonist, Reiko has the opportunity to "redeem" the modern woman by defeating Sadako, yet this fails to materialize. Instead, the film's narrative trajectory ultimately undermines and disempowers Reiko, while reinstating masculine authority. Though Reiko's investigation is largely motivated by her quest to save her son, she is not particularly effective. Reiko's plan to appease Sadako's destructive spirit by recovering her body and burying it with the properly administered rituals is pointless and ineffectual, and her attempts to neutralize Sadako's evil powers fail. Reiko finally escapes death purely by chance and the timely intervention of patriarchal male figures. Significantly, it is Ryuji, Reiko's ex-husband, who inadvertently takes on Reiko's curse and dies in her place.<sup>8</sup>

As *Ringu's* narrative plays out, the film's conservative political inclinations become evident. It is the men, figures of patriarchal authority, who emerge as defenders and protectors in *Ringu*, thus redeeming the Japanese patriarchal system undermined by Sadako's father, Ikuma. It is Ryuji who returns from the dead with a message to help Reiko understand how their son can be saved. The representation of Ryuji, the innocent male victim who returns to the living, not for revenge but to protect and save his son,



is a noteworthy contrast to the vengeful female ghost. Male ghosts, or *yurei*, also appear in Japanese folk tales. In these stories, they are typically warriors killed in battle and are characterized as sad and melancholic due to their premature deaths. Unlike their female counterparts, Japanese male ghosts are seldom motivated by revenge (Screech n.d.). Thus, where Sadako conforms to the trope of the Japanese female ghost, Ryuji follows in the tradition of male *yurei*.

*Ringu's* conservative perspective is not limited to Ryuji's commitment to his patriarchal responsibilities. At the end of the film, Reiko is seen appealing to her own father to save her son's life by taking over Yoichi's curse and dying in his place.<sup>9</sup> The film, therefore, continues to privilege men and fathers as the principal figures of action. It would appear that while *Ringu* begins by dramatizing the chaos and destruction that ensues when one father fails to protect his wife and murders his daughter, it ends by reinstating a measure of order and a return to the status quo with its depiction of two other fathers who accept their socially-determined roles and duties. *Ringu* ends with a world that is still dependent upon the patriarchal fathers to "save" the woman and child.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, *Ringu* seems to suggest that fathers must pay for the mistake of other fathers. The only female figure that attempts to throw off the bonds of socially approved female behavior is marked as a deviant monstrosity who is subsequently murdered by her father. It is only in death that she can wreak her revenge with impunity.

### ***The Ring***

Gore Verbinski's Hollywood remake, *The Ring*, retains the core narrative of the original Japanese film. Rachel, a reporter, investigates the existence of a mysterious, deadly videotape. After Rachel and her son, Aiden, both watch the video, she asks Aiden's father, Noah, to help her uncover the video's origins. They discover the videotape's link to a young girl, Samara, who was killed and thrown down a well. The videotape is Samara's revenge for her untimely death. While retaining these narrative similarities, a series of changes reveal distinct differences in the Western/American philosophical and cultural systems that offer a different, if ultimately still patriarchally-inflected perspective on gender politics. Where the original Japanese version explores contemporary male anxieties while acknowledging traditional gender ideologies via references to classic Japanese ghost narratives, Verbinski's *The Ring* expresses rather different patriarchal fears about women and the feminine. The American remake codes the female as a malign force that is closely associated with the unnatural, the mysterious and the irrational, while equating the male with the benign, the rational and the logical.

### **Western/American Patriarchal Society and the Monstrous Feminine**

As many feminist film scholars have argued, Western horror cinema has long grappled with gender trouble. Many scholars interested in issues of gender and horror tend to adopt a psychoanalytic approach, founded on the Freudian notion that horror films articulate hidden repressed fears that cannot be overtly mentioned and discussed. The idea that horror films offer viewers a return of the repressed can perhaps be linked to the contemporary American view on gender.

Gender struggles within the American context are arguably distinct from that of the Japanese one. While dominant mainstream Japanese culture continues to embrace

patriarchal ideals and feminist views are still regularly and overtly criticized and even rejected, the American debate on gender politics has largely been driven “underground” by the shift towards political correctness and the apparent attainment of greater gender equality. As such, a psychoanalytic approach may offer useful tools with which to mine and explore the repressed gender troubles and horrors that persist beneath the surface of gender equality and political correctness and that continue to “erupt” in contemporary cultural artifacts. Where a popular and enduring convention in Japanese culture portrays submissive women who become monstrous after men betray them, Western culture has a long tradition of aligning femininity/the female with motherhood, monstrosity and/or death. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva (1982) argues that horror is linked directly with the feminine and motherhood itself. Grendel’s mother in *Beowulf*, Snow White’s evil step mother, and Mother Bates in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock 1960) are just some of the familiar Western/American cultural representations of monstrous female (m)Others and/or dead (or dying) women who appear in Western culture. This tradition of conjoining monstrosity, death, motherhood and the feminine endures in *The Ring*, where the three primary female characters, Anna, Samara, and Rachel, are aligned with supernatural forces that are clearly marked as evil, terrifying and closely associated with maternal failures and death.

Anna Morgan, whom we see only in flashbacks and unexplained supernatural “visions,” is a woman whose desire for motherhood ends disastrously. Unable to conceive, Anna and her husband, Richard, adopt a young girl, Samara. After bringing the child home, Anna begins to accuse Samara of invading her thoughts, giving her visions and destroying her sanity. Finally succumbing to her daughter’s evil powers, Anna wraps a black garbage bag around her adopted daughter’s head and throws her down an abandoned well. This murder is distinctly different from the incident in *Ringu*, where Sadako is murdered by her father. There are several interesting implications behind this narrative revision. Where *Ringu* uses the events culminating in Sadako’s murder to explore the consequences when patriarchal males betray their prescribed social responsibilities and duties, *The Ring* constructs both Anna and Samara as irrational, unnatural and destructive (female) forces. The depictions of Anna and Samara disturbingly blur the line between victim and tormentor. Though Anna is a victim of Samara’s unnatural (supernatural?) visions, she is also Samara’s tormentor, banishing and imprisoning the child in the stable before murdering her. Similarly, though Samara terrorizes Anna with visions and madness, she is also Anna’s victim. Clearly, both females commit incomprehensibly destructive and terrible acts. In contrast, Richard, Anna’s husband, is the male trapped between two terrifying females. Seemingly well intentioned in his attempts to help his wife and adopted daughter, Richard sends Anna and Samara to a psychiatric facility. Though greatly affected by the events that destroy his family, Richard Morgan seems inexplicably “immune” to Samara’s powers: he does not appear to suffer from visions, nor does he initially succumb to insanity. Although bitter, angry and both guilt- and grief-stricken when Rachel and Noah track him down, Richard is the family’s sole living survivor, as Anna, the direct victim of evil, and Samara, the source of evil itself, are both dead.<sup>11</sup>

Samara is the female child who possesses decidedly unnatural and destructive abilities in both life and death. *The Ring* depicts Samara as simply and unambiguously the embodiment of destructive, supernatural evil. Unlike Sadako, who is a mysterious cipher while alive, and whose guilt is at least ambiguous and possibly mitigated by her attempt to protect and defend her mother, Samara’s evil tendencies are explicit from the start. Her mere presence initiates a wave of destruction. After Samara arrives at the family farm,

the horses go mad and need to be put down, and Anna's mental well-being deteriorates, culminating in Samara's murder and Anna's subsequent suicide. In a psychiatric session, Samara's guilt is confirmed when she acknowledges her supernatural power and takes responsibility for Anna's visions. When Anna kills Samara, the event is portrayed as the act of an insane woman. The ambiguity, and the critique of gender and power relations that lead to Sadako's death in the original film, are thus significantly missing in the remake.

Despite being a young girl, Samara conforms to a misogynist representation of femininity aligned with the supernatural, the mysterious and the irrational. She is another instance of Creed's "monstrous feminine" (1993) that threatens the order and safety established by patriarchal law. Richard, her adoptive father, fails to restrain or neutralize her power. While Samara lived with the Morgans, Richard's solution to Anna's complaints about Samara is to exile and isolate the child in a barn, a decision that fails to protect Anna and merely further provokes Samara's anger. Richard also tries sending Samara to a psychiatric hospital, a patriarchal institution founded on reason, logic and science.

The alignment of reason, logic and science with the male is common practice in Western patriarchal cultures. Britta Schinzel traces how notions of gender were redefined in the wake of Western developments in modern science and technology:

The male was equipped with the capability of rationality and logic while in contrast woman received a new female nature in which emotional and moral values dominated . . . In the words of the founders of the Royal Society: "The rational mind is male." (cited in John Lewis 2005).

*The Ring* overtly and actively equates the female with irrationality, insanity and evil, pitting her against the male who is aligned with logic and reason. In *The Ring*, these patriarchal values of reason, logic and scientific explanations are advocated, even as they are ultimately undermined.<sup>12</sup> The male characters in the film are marked as rational individuals who place their faith in science. Richard sends Samara to a psychiatric facility and trusts in their ability to cure her. Noah, Aiden's father, also examines and relies on the psychiatric records to explain Samara's abilities. Significantly, Samara's unnatural powers cannot be contained, neutralized, or even adequately understood by rational, scientific approaches.

Despite this apparent acknowledgement that logic, reason and science have their limitations in the face of the supernatural, the film's narrative itself privileges an internally "rational," at times scientifically linked, perspective to explain various plot points. *The Ring's* commitment to unity and clarity is expressed in its tendency to explain a range of narrative issues left ambiguous and mysterious in the original Japanese version.<sup>13</sup> The seven-day lapse between watching the video and dying is clarified when Noah wonders how long Samara could have survived in the well. Rachel declares: "Seven days, you can survive for seven days." Samara's use of the television and videotape as a conduit for her vengeance is explained when Noah and Rachel discover that Samara had a television set that served as her access to the outside world after she was imprisoned in the barn by her fearful adopted parents. When they investigate Samara's stay at a psychiatric facility, they uncover medical records that show that Samara has the ability to transfer her thoughts and visions onto film/videotape, thus explaining the odd images available on the cursed video. These concerted efforts to explain the narrative mysteries highlight the narrative's adoption of, and adherence to, the rational, patriarchal mind.

Interestingly, this privileging of reason, logic and science reinforces and intensifies the horror of Samara's Otherness, particularly after her death. Samara's evil spirit exists in

opposition to patriarchy and the values and qualities it endorses. She is the embodiment of a threatening, disruptive power that, if left to endure, leads to chaos and devastation. Samara thus represents an evil that challenges the stability and order established by the patriarchal system. In *The Ring*, all that is evil, perverse and destructive is externalized and projected onto the female. Yet despite giving these negative qualities a tangible female body, that body cannot be hunted down, punished or destroyed, since she endures beyond death itself. Elisabeth Bronfen notes that death is the conventional means used to subdue the monstrous feminine that threatens or undermines (patriarchal) order: “[It is] over her dead body [that] cultural norms are reconfirmed or secured . . . because a sacrifice of the dangerous woman re-establishes an order that was momentarily suspended due to her presence” (1992, p. 181). However, *The Ring’s* central horror revolves around the realization that this evil female force cannot be neutralized or contained even “over her dead body,” for Samara’s ghost returns and defies all attempts to defeat her. Samara’s horror is founded on her abjection, which she displays in life, and then is confirmed in death.

Julia Kristeva defines the abject as that which does not “respect borders, positions, rules”; it “disturbs identity, system, order,” and threatens life (1982, p. 4). Kristeva’s notion of the abject recalls Mary Douglas’ work (1969); in particular, Douglas’ interpretation of “The Abominations of Leviticus” which prohibits Man (sic) from consuming various categories of food deemed impure. As Douglas notes, impurity, in these instances, is identified with that which violates culturally established categorical schemas, schemas defined by “borders, positions, rules.” Samara’s abjection is first hinted at in the video, which features numerous images of worms, maggots and millipedes, images that are inherently repellant and disgusting. Alongside these creatures’ impurity, these images evoke a familiar response to the abject in the viewer, the need to repudiate, to turn from, and relegate to

the space where I am not. [For t]he abject threatens life, it must be radically excluded from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self. (Creed 1993, p. 65)

As long as Samara can be confined to the other side of the television screen, her victims remain alive. But the problem with Samara’s abjection is that she cannot be “excluded,” she ignores the “borders, positions, rules” that “[separate] the self from that which threatens the self”: while alive, her ability to trespass on her mother’s mind and “share” her sight/visions with her mother is one indication of her refusal to respect borders and rules. In doing so, Samara effectively shatters Anna’s mind and dismantles Anna’s maternal identity. Even death cannot contain Samara’s abjection. The fact that the dead Samara appears as a television image that can leave its technological confines, “enter” the “real” world and kill, is yet another indication of her transgressive abjection.<sup>14</sup> In Samara, *The Ring* depicts a female who is not and cannot be controlled, even in death. Instead, death accords her even greater destructive powers. The film, thus, offers a familiar depiction of a female who is overtly linked to the “inexpressible, inscrutable, unmanageable, horrible” (Bronfen 1992, p. 255).

### **Rachel: Patriarchy’s Ideal Mother?**

At first glance, the film’s heroine, Rachel, seems the opposite of both Anna and Samara. Rachel is an independent, working, single mother, ably raising her young son.

Unlike Anna Morgan, who kills her child, Rachel is the protective mother who strives to save her child. However, the film does not confine itself to this depiction.

As the film progresses, Rachel emerges as yet another ambiguous and potentially dangerous female figure. Far from being benign, Rachel is quickly aligned with Otherness when she sets out to investigate the unnatural events linked to the videotape. Not only does Rachel acquire the videotape, she introduces its evil into her home, exposing Aiden and Noah to Samara's malign powers (Lewis 2005). Finally, even though Rachel, unlike Anna, is dedicated to protecting her child, she acquires monstrous connotations at the end of the film when she is seen making a copy of the video tape, apparently having decided to save her son by passing Samara's deadly curse to someone else. Unlike the Japanese original, in which Reiko acknowledges and reinstates the power of the patriarch by approaching her father to help her save her son's life, the American remake ends ambiguously—we never discover what Rachel does with the tape, and thus we have no idea who is to be sacrificed in Aiden's place. The horrific implications of this ending are distinct from the seemingly more uplifting conclusion of the Japanese original, in which children's voices are heard chanting the "solution" to surviving Sadako's curse: passing it on.<sup>15</sup> The American remake ultimately implies that motherhood, whether in destroying or protecting a child, can be potentially amoral, destructive, and deadly. *The Ring* is thus predicated on the Western tendency to align femininity and the female with evil and represent them as active threats to patriarchal order, stability, morality and reason.

### Conclusion

Both *Ringu* and *The Ring* reflect a patriarchal perspective in their depictions of evil, violent, destructive females whose existence transgress natural and social laws and boundaries. This basic narrative similarity suggests that both films are the products of essentially patriarchal cultures, a point that is not particularly revealing in itself. If we look beyond these similarities, however, we discern a range of noteworthy distinctions in the patriarchal attitudes expressed in the two films. The divergences in the films' narratives and their depictions of these female characters reveal the fundamental cultural and philosophical differences that structure Japanese/Eastern and Hollywood/Western views of femininity, women, and their roles in society.

As shown above, Japanese culture is greatly influenced by Confucian values that advocate a highly hierarchical and rigid patriarchal system founded on clearly defined gender roles and behaviors. That these values have been increasingly undermined in Modern Japan underpins many of the anxieties and ambivalences expressed in *Ringu*. The film explores the consequences of ignoring or betraying the traditional gender system and its attendant responsibilities and values. In *Ringu*, villainy is not equated with a specific gender. Instead, the villains are those who neglect or reject their socially prescribed gender roles. Consequently, the male reporters and Ikuma are monstrous in their betrayal of patriarchal responsibilities when they destroy where they should protect, while Sadako is monstrous because she reacts and kills when, as a female, she should accept and submit. *Ringu* thus borrows from the traditional ghost narrative, while revising it to reflect contemporary concerns. Sadako represents the uncontrollable, defiant, "modern" woman who refuses to submit to the idealized notions of femininity. Reiko, though lacking the monstrous connotations associated with Sadako, serves as the modern woman who is

“put in her place” by a narrative that continues to envision heroes and saviors in entirely male/patriarchal terms.

In contrast, the American version unambiguously associates femininity with evil. Unlike Sadako, Samara is an unequivocally monstrous, mysterious, undefeatable, malign force linked to insanity and destruction. The film’s other female characters are also portrayed as threats to patriarchy, and to the patriarchally-aligned values of order and reason: Anna is the insane mother who murders her adopted daughter, while Rachel is the protective mother who is willing to sacrifice other innocent lives to save her son. In *The Ring*, the only destructive, diabolical and terrifying forces are female, while the male figures, Aiden, Noah and Richard Morgan, are innocent individuals haunted and/or killed by a malevolent female force. The film thus represents a reality in which evil exists and takes a female form that must be feared and repudiated.

*Ringu* and *The Ring* are both products of patriarchal societies and cultures. However, as I have shown, there are noteworthy distinctions that characterize each culture’s patriarchal perspective, as well as the ways in which these patriarchal beliefs are indexed, endorsed and practiced. Despite the surface similarities that exist between the two texts, revisions were made, some of which subtly reflected culturally distinct and diverse views of gender and horror. Certainly, the cultural distinctions extend beyond these considerations, pointing to the need for more comparative studies that would further illuminate the phenomenon. The surge in Hollywood remakes of Japanese/Asian horror films since the late 1990s offers an opportunity to compare the original Asian films and their Hollywood remakes. Such an approach would provide significant insight into both the similarities and differences that characterize each culture’s contemporary values, beliefs and ideologies.

## NOTES

1. According to Peter Tombs (2000), there are over twenty-five film versions of *Tokaido Yotsuya kaidan*.
2. While Confucianism originated in China, there is ample evidence of its spread to Japan. See Yao Xinzong (2000).
3. I thank my first reviewer for highlighting the link between *Ringu*’s negative depiction of Sadako and the deepening (masculine) anxieties in Japanese society motivated by the emergence of a new generation of women who reject traditional constructions of femininity.
4. These developments notwithstanding, traditional patriarchal structures and values remain strongly entrenched in contemporary Japan and ongoing gender inequalities in Japan persist. See Martin Fackler (2007).
5. This narrative element is yet another link/reference to *Bancho Sarayashiki*.
6. I thank my first reviewer for bringing this to my attention.
7. Shizuko’s name is significant: “Shizu” can translate as “silent,” “calm,” “inactive” or “be suppressed,” while “ko” means “child.” The name acknowledges Japanese patriarchy’s preferred view of women as passive, quiet and child-like.
8. Reiko’s curse is passed on to Ryuji when the latter makes and watches a copy of the original videotape.
9. In *Ringu 2* (Hideo Nakata, 1999), we discover that Reiko’s father sacrificed himself for Yoichi. Interestingly, he failed to save himself by passing the curse on to another person.

Though the reasons and events leading to this oversight are unclear, the sequel hints at the potential difficulties of eluding and neutralizing Sadako's vengeance.

10. In *Ringu 2*, Reiko again fails to save Yoichi when he begins to develop powers similar to Sadako's. Furthermore, her untimely death in a traffic accident leaves her son alone and unprotected.
11. Richard finally commits suicide, but this occurs long after Anna and Samara's deaths, after Rachel approaches Richard during her investigation. It is thus possible to assume that it is Rachel's investigation, and Richard's sense of guilt at failing his wife, that prompts Richard to end his life.
12. Koji Suzuki's novel, from which *Ringu* is adapted, offers a "scientific" explanation for Sadako's curse, aligning it to a smallpox-like virus that is passed on from "infected" person to person. Interestingly, Hideo Nakata, *Ringu's* director, removed this explanation, preferring to foreground the supernatural elements instead. I thank my second reviewer for pointing this out.
13. This not to suggest that Japanese culture is therefore less patriarchal in its acceptance of the unknown and ambiguous. Rather, Japanese culture simply does not embrace the Western tradition that privileges reason and human consciousness in the way that Western culture does.
14. Kristeva's (1982) notion of the abject is certainly relevant to Sadako as well. Like Samara, Sadako is abject in her refusal to respect borders. Sadako's emergence out of the television set is terrifying because she cannot be contained by the boundaries of the screen. This disruptive sequence is particularly disturbing in its self-reflexivity, since we, the viewers, are also only separated from Sadako by a television (or movie) screen.
15. I thank my second reviewer for highlighting the "contrasting tones" of the two films' endings. It is worth noting, however, that *Ringu's* "optimistic" conclusion is undermined in *Ringu 2*. After Reiko's father saves Yoichi by watching the videotape, he fails to pass on the curse and is killed by Sadako.

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**Valerie Wee** lectures on film and media studies in the Department of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore, Singapore. In addition to her work on American and Asian horror films, her research interests include teen culture and the American culture industries, science fiction films, and issues of gender and representation in the media. E-mail: [Valerie\\_Wee@nus.edu.sg](mailto:Valerie_Wee@nus.edu.sg)