

(DE)CONSTRUCTING NOSTALGIC MYTHS OF THE MOTHER IN JAPANESE DRAMA WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

In a time of uncertainty and crisis, many Japanese have sought comfort in images of an idyllic native home, centred on a devoted, nurturing mother. Paradoxically, while this romanticised conception of the “mother” is mourned as a casualty of modernisation, it is a relatively recent invention produced in response to anxieties over the rapid social

changes Japan experienced during the post-war period. The construction of this maternal fantasy has primarily been the work of men seeking solace in the warm embrace of the “mother” as compensation for their diminishing social status. However, nostalgic representations are not invariably sweet reminiscences. The television drama *Woman* is one example of a media product that exploited the nostalgic image of motherhood without ignoring its contradictions. I argue that in its depiction of two contrasting returns to one’s native home, the drama constructs an indulgent, child-centred idealisation of motherhood only to deconstruct it through the revelation of its artifice. In the process, it reveals the contrasting dissatisfactions of men and women in contemporary Japan.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Japan, as elsewhere, the nostalgic reimagining of the countryside has been a recurrent theme of modernity. A “re-awakened agrarian vision” is experienced by each generation feeling anew the conflict between city and country, present and past (Gluck 1985: 178). The concept of *furusato* – a term denoting one’s ancestral or native home, which invariably conjures images of communal living in a rural landscape – has been invoked in order to bring comfort at times of personal anxiety or national crisis. To reference an example from the recent past, following the triple disasters of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown that afflicted the Tōhoku region in 2011, volunteers at evacuation sites expressed their solidarity by singing *Furusato* (My Old Country Home) (Suzuki 2015: 114), a song learned by Japanese children in elementary school that describes reminiscences of a pastoral childhood spent chasing rabbits and fishing in rivers. *Furusato* was invoked as a symbol of the destruction of nature, the lost homes and lost families that resulted from such cataclysmic devastation (Suzuki 2015: 115).

Furusato as a nostalgic representation of childhood has become synonymous with an idealised image of motherhood (Robertson 1988: 500, Creighton 1997: 242). Both *furusato* and the “mother” are associated with love, warmth, nurturance and a sense of belonging (Creighton 1997: 243). They are sanctuaries of retreat from the rigours of urban life. Much like *furusato*, the “mother” is also mourned as a casualty of the forces of industrialisation. Herein lies the paradox: these nostalgic conceptions of *furusato* and the “mother” are recent inventions created in response to anxieties over the rapid social changes Japan has experienced during the process of modernisation. Such inconsistencies point to the re-interpretive power of nostalgia, which reveals more about present conditions than past realities. It is provoked by a “dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of a remembered, or imaged, past plenitude” (Robertson 1988: 504).

The nostalgic idealisations of a native place centred on a devoted, benevolent mother have been, for the most part, the conceptions of male scholars, intellectuals and producers of culture. They reflect the dissatisfaction of men who, in Japan’s post-capitalist age of economic decline and job insecurity, can no longer rely on the stereotype of the corporate warrior as financial provider for the family to define their masculine identity. Anxiety over their diminishing social status has caused some to resurrect outdated notions of the “traditional” family based on a male breadwinner and female

homemaker. However, women have also expressed their dissatisfaction with the post-war “maternal fantasy” (Asai 1990), which has presumed and impressed upon their supposed instinct to care and nurture, regardless of their actual desires. Faced with the prospect of bearing the double burden of child-rearing and work, with little support from men or the (patriarchal) state, many continue to reject the roles of wife and mother, as persistently low marriage and birth rates attest.¹

The fictional drama series *Woman* (2013) reflects this contrast between male and female dissatisfaction, encapsulating many of the competing discourses surrounding motherhood, family and communal bonds that have emerged in recent years. On the one hand, by referencing the aesthetics and the mood of the 1960s and 1970s, the drama invites the viewer to indulge in a nostalgic fantasy of mother-child bonding. The central narrative concerning the protagonist’s return to her native place and the maternal realm reproduces the romanticised imagery of the home centred on an affectionate, devoted mother. This male-produced maternal construction is emblematic of a reactionary discourse that has railed against feminism and urged women to return to the domestic sphere. On the other hand, a subplot featuring a mother who refuses to submit to the maternal fantasy provides an outlet for female dissatisfaction. The depiction of a homecoming that is far from heart-warming punctures the fictions of idyllic *furusato* and the presumption of maternal love. I argue that the motif of motherhood as performance first constructs, and then deconstructs, the post-war concept of the “mother”.

2. MALE NOSTALGIA FOR THE LOST IDEAL OF THE MOTHER

Three years prior to making *Woman*, the all-male creative team consisting of producer Tsugiya Hisashi, director Mizuta Nobuo and scriptwriter Sakamoto Yūji first collaborated on the critically-acclaimed television drama *Mother* (2010). It centred on a 35-year-old childless academic, Nao, whose maternal feelings are awakened when she encounters an abused girl. The 11-part series charted the protagonist’s transformation from a lonely, emotionally-repressed, socially-awkward woman to one who, through embracing her

1 The crude marriage rate has fallen from a post-war high of 12 per cent in 1947 to 5.1 per cent in 2015. During the same period, the total fertility rate (TFR) fell from 4.54 to 1.45 births per woman (NIPSSR 2017a).

maternal aspect, becomes more expressive, is able to rebuild kinship ties and eventually find emotional fulfilment. Nao's own mother represents another paragon of maternal virtue, making numerous sacrifices, which include suffering 13 years of imprisonment for a crime committed by her daughter. The discourse surrounding the drama reinforced its maternalist message. The tagline, "Motherhood drives a woman crazy", suggested that maternal instinct was an overwhelming drive that no woman could ignore. In an interview, Tsugiya, revealed that he and his co-creators had aimed to tell a story depicting a woman undergoing a process of psychological and emotional maturity (Asō 2010). His comments imply that only through motherhood could a woman achieve full self-realisation.

The construction of selfless, compassionate motherhood in *Mother* follows a pattern of sentimentalised representations, often the creations of men, which have come to epitomise the post-war image of the mother. In particular, the use of melodramatic tropes such as the liberal use of affect and the tragic-mother narrative in *Mother* echoes the post-war *hahamono*, or "mother films", characterised by their emotive glorification of maternal love and devotion. *Mother* borrows the familiar *hahamono* plot of a mother of low social standing sacrificing her personal happiness for the sake of her children's security. It plays on the "nostalgic sweet resonance" (Minaguchi 2002: 104) imbued in the cry of "*okāsan*" (mother), uttered by a child yearning for their mother, which has become sentimentalised to such an extent that just the sound of this word is enough to pull on the heartstrings (Yamamura 1983: 55).

Such imagery is best understood within the context of the maternalist discourse that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s. Tsugiya, Mizuta and Sakamoto belong to the generation raised during this period; their glorified vision of motherhood was no doubt influenced by the culturally-constructed stereotype that abounded at the time. Doi Takeo's (1973) theory of indulgent co-dependence, or *amae*, is of particular relevance. Doi posited *amae* – indicating a desire for one's needs to be indulged by another – as an instinctive emotion that fosters a sense of oneness between mother and child, necessary for healthy psychological development (1973: 75). Supported by theories of maternal deprivation promoted by experts both in Japan and the west (Kyūtoku 1991, Bowlby 1979), *amae* psychology justified what have become the conventional norms of day-to-day childrearing. Mothers are encouraged to satisfy the child's desire for love and security through close physical contact, which involves prolonged

breastfeeding, co-sleeping and co-bathing (Johnson 1993: 131). This child-centred perspective of motherhood constructed a fantasy of the mother as an undesiring, selfless being whose sole reason for existence was to care for and nurture others (Asai 1990: 100).

The rapid social changes Japan experienced during the post-war period of high economic growth and intense urbanisation were, however, seen as a threat to the mother-child bond. The social advancement of women was blamed for an apparent loss of maternal instinct (Ochiai 1997: 126). Implicit in such arguments was the conflation of the maternal principle with traditional, rural Japan, the notion that motherhood as a concept predated civilisation, and was thus inherent to Japanese culture. Yoda (2000: 871) notes the paradox in the consistent framing of maternal love as a "supplement of modernity". Research has established that motherhood and maternal love did not exist as ideological concepts in pre-modern Japan (Niwa 1993, Koyama 2013). It was not until the prosperity of the post-war era, when male white-collar workers were able to support the family on a single wage, that the full-time "professional housewife" became the norm. The 1960s and 1970s were a golden era for the family: the number of marriages increased to an all-time high of over one million per year and the country experienced its second post-war baby boom (Kumagai 2015). The female labour participation rate, which had been over 60 per cent in 1910, had fallen to 45.7 per cent by 1975, and the image of the devoted mother lovingly nurturing her children came to define the ideal family (Ochiai 1997: 18, 15, 50). Far from being a vestige of a bygone era, the maternal ideal was a product of the very process – modernisation – that is blamed for its destruction (Yoda 2000: 871).

The mythology of the "mother" has, of course, long been dismantled by feminist scholars, both in Japan and further afield (Ueno 1996, Ohinata 1995, Badinter 1981). The notion that all women possess an instinct to nurture and find fulfilment in the experience of motherhood is contradicted by the disillusionment expressed by many. This is particularly so in Japan, where women are still expected to shoulder the lion's share of childrearing, regardless of whether they work outside the home or not. As a result, women have continued to limit the number of children they have or reject motherhood altogether. Half of never-married women in their thirties believe raising children is a "great psychological strain" (Tachibanaki 2010: 150). Meanwhile, in response to a survey asking why married women had not had as many children as they had hoped,

more than a fifth of respondents in their thirties felt they could no longer mentally or physically bear the burden of childrearing (NIPSSR 2017b: 21).

Economic uncertainty has meant the aspiration of becoming a fulltime housewife supported by a corporate warrior husband is no longer viable. Instead, contemporary women seek a partner who will cooperate in the home (Ogura 2003: 36). Men, however, continue to hold on to outdated notions of masculinity and traditional gender roles. Surveys of unmarried men show a continued preference for female marriage partners with conventional feminine traits, such as domesticity and docility, suggesting a persistent desire to depend on a supportive wife in the home (Nemoto et al. 2013). Thus, such men continue to see the heterosexual marriage in terms of *amae* ideology, with women assuming the maternal, nurturing role.

This yearning for a “lost” ideal is reflective of a backlash against female emancipation, partly fuelled by a crisis in masculinity. Japan’s economic decline following the collapse of the bubble economy led to two “lost decades” during which increasing numbers of men became trapped in non-regular employment and saw their prospects of marriage and family dwindle as a result (Kano 2015: 88). Persistently low marriage and birth rates have triggered fears over the collapse of the “traditional family”, based on the gendered dichotomy of the male breadwinner and female homemaker, considered the cornerstone of Japanese society (Kano 2011: 53). Women are once again being urged to return to the domestic realm to pursue their “natural” vocation of childrearing.² Perhaps not coincidentally, this period has also witnessed a boom in nostalgic media focused on the more optimistic era of 1960s and 1970s, commonly referred to as Shōwa nostalgia, as this period corresponds to the late Shōwa era (1926-1989) (Hidaka 2017: 2). Amidst worries that contemporary Japan is becoming a “relationless society” (Allison 2015: 45), it is perhaps unsurprising that people might yearn for the “good old days” of family centred on a compassionate, indulgent mother. In this sense, Japan is not an isolated case; economic uncertainty and the breakdown of traditional family structures have fuelled a global shift towards conservatism. As such, Shōwa nostalgia may be regarded as a local iteration of a wider cultural trend that references a recent, pre-feminist

2 As recently as May 2018, Hagiuda Kōichi, executive acting secretary-general of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, made remarks suggesting that encouraging men to participate in childrearing was detrimental to children and more needed to be done to create an environment in which children could be with their mothers (Nakamura 2018).

past, with shows such as *Mad Men*, set in 1960s-70s America, finding international success.³

Woman capitalises on this trend for nostalgic media in its evocation of Shōwa-era imagery. It shared many commonalities with its stablemate drama *Mother*, including the preoccupation with a sentimentalised image of motherhood reminiscent of the post-war ideal rooted in *amae* theory. The glorification of the mother-centred home as a place of retreat from the rigours of the social world reinstated nostalgic conceptions of *urusato* and motherhood. The reproduction of melodramatic tropes, such as maternal suffering and emotional excess was also resonant of *hahamono* films. In keeping with other media referencing the Shōwa era, the nostalgic imagery in *Woman* “are not simply pleasant reminiscences of that period but rather are a form of criticism of post-war society” (Hidaka 2017: 25). However, the framing of maternal love and social bonds as victims of the process of modernisation also reveals the inconsistencies in the post-war idealisation of the maternal realm as a vestige of the “good old days”.

3. NOSTALGIA FOR AN IDEALISED PAST IN *WOMAN*

Woman is an 11-part fictional drama series that aired on national television channel NTV during the summer of 2013. It was broadcast on Wednesday nights at 10pm, a slot associated with dramas exploring contemporary social issues, predominantly targeted at a female audience. *Woman* referenced many of the issues that have become topical in recent years, particularly following the triple disaster, including grief, poverty, single-motherhood and social connection. The heroine, Koharu, is a young, working-class widow struggling with the financial and practical burdens of raising two children single-handedly after the death of her beloved husband, Shin. Her difficulties mount when she is diagnosed with a life-threatening condition and she is forced to seek support from her mother, Sachi, who abandoned her as a child. In its depiction of these two mothers, the drama employs a style that is distinctly and deliberately retrospective.

The themes of nostalgia, *urusato* and familial harmony are presaged early in the drama. The opening scene is a flashback to the first meeting between Koharu and Shin, during which Koharu sings a verse from “Sunset Behind Distant Mountains” (*Tōki yama ni hi wa ochite*), a song set to Dvořák’s Largo from

3 For more on the global trend for nostalgic media, see Niemeyer (2014).



FIGURE 1. SHOT REVERSE SHOT SEQUENCE OF INTIMATE MOTHER-CHILD BONDING IN *WOMAN* (EPISODE 1.01).

the Symphony No. 9 that became popularised during the 1960s. The Largo has long been associated with nostalgic images of *furusato* in Japan; an earlier version of the song was known as *Goin' Home* (Nishimura 2014: 6). The rendition Koharu sings describes an evening family gathering around a fire in a rural setting at the end of a working day. This sentiment is encapsulated in the phrase *madoisen*, an old-fashioned word meaning “happy circle”, evoking images of familial harmony, which becomes a dominant theme of the drama.

This scene becomes the first chapter in the story of the couple’s courtship, marriage and family life, related in the form of a montage of clips. Koharu’s narration of this opening sequence – she is telling the story to her daughter Nozomi – establishes her role as a mediator between the present and past. The construction of Koharu as a representation of the “good old days” extends to her wardrobe, which favours light, practical clothing meant to evoke the warmth of the 1960s and 1970s, according to the stylist who worked on the drama (“Natsu dorama ‘ura’ awādo!” 2013). Even Koharu’s frugality – her lack of adornment, buying clothes second-hand and keeping a household account book – recalls the thriftiness of the housewives of the wartime and post-war era who were encouraged to save for the sake of the nation (Garon 2000: 77).

The technical aspects of the production also drew from the past. Director Mizuta eschewed advances in television production in favour of a cinematic style. Instead of using multiple cameras and lighting from all angles, the drama aimed to reproduce the soft, “natural” lighting of real life. As many of the scenes were filmed at dusk, this technique imbues the images with a sepia tone evocative of a bygone era. This visual style has been observed in other cultural products referencing the post-war Shōwa era, which have featured

sunsets and orange hues (Hidaka 2017: 66). Zoom lenses were rejected in favour of fixed focal length lenses; the shallow depth of field and extensive use of close-ups created a sense of introspection, allowing viewers to focus on the characters’ thoughts and feelings. The objective was to “give the viewers the sense that they are in the drama,” thus drawing them into the nostalgic fantasy (Tanaka 2013).

A scene from Episode 1 illustrates how these techniques were used to reproduce heart-warming images of *amae* nurturing. Koharu and her four-year-old daughter, Nozomi, lie under the covers of their shared futon, their faces softly illuminated by the lowlight coming in through the blanket covering their heads. Koharu plays with her daughter’s hair as she fondly reminisces about her first encounter with the young girl’s deceased father. A shot reverse shot sequence invites the viewer into this intimate scene of mother-child bonding (see Fig. 1).

As an old-fashioned heroine, Koharu is an anachronism in a contemporary society that no longer respects “traditional” ideals, a reminder of a glorified past, when human kindness was held in higher esteem than material wealth. This conflict between the “old” and the “new” becomes evident in another scene from the first episode depicting a visit to a local festival. The socio-economic disparity between Koharu’s family and their neighbours is thrown into sharp relief as Nozomi, wearing a second-hand T-shirt, interacts with other children dressed in colourful summer kimonos. As the young girl marvels at the candy apples her friends have purchased, her mother looks on wistfully; unable to afford any of the goods on sale, Koharu has brought her own, home-made food. Nozomi, however, appears unperturbed; picking up one of Koharu’s *inari-zushi* (rice wrapped in sweetened fried tofu – a snack

popular with children), she proudly declares it to be the “food of kings”.

The symbolism of the contrast between the modern American candy apple and the traditional Japanese *inari-zushi* cannot be lost on the viewer. The latter, modest but lovingly made by mother’s hand, provides more nourishment than the former, which, for all its flamboyance and novelty, lacks substance. In other words, there can be no material substitute for maternal love. This messaging echoes other nostalgia-evoking media that have implicitly criticised the social changes that have resulted from modernisation, including the increased emphasis on material wealth and a perceived loss of appreciation for social connection (Hidaka 2017: 61). The festival setting becomes somewhat ironic. An event that is supposed to celebrate Japanese traditions and facilitate communal bonding has become a site of modern consumerism and an exposition of social disparity. One could read this juxtaposition as a cynical view of the recent boom in nostalgia, which has reduced the experience to a commodity, to be purchased, consumed and disposed of without any deeper engagement.

Any unqualified glorification of the post-war era risks obscuring the plight of those that were left behind during Japan’s rapid advance from post-war devastation to economic powerhouse. Koharu represents one of the “left behind”, a victim of the capitalist values of competition and individualism that emerged during this period. This is rendered with heightened sentimentality in a later scene from Episode 1, in which Koharu is forced to beg for spare change from a local government bureaucrat after her application for welfare is rejected, in spite of her obvious need. The sight of the desperate mother on her knees, as the official looms over her reflects her powerlessness in the face of an indifferent society that has forsaken communal ties in favour of greed and self-interest. The capitalist urban space, a product of modernity, is presented as a source of misfortune and unhappiness, a typical trope of melodrama (Gledhill 1987, Viviani 1987).

The scenes described above reveal the inconsistencies in framing maternal love as a vestige of the distant past. The glorification of Koharu as a “traditional’ mother figure in the festival scene ignores the reality that the prosperity that ac-



FIGURE 2. THE SPATIAL DISTANCE BETWEEN KOHARU AND SACHI SYMBOLISES THE DISHARMONY IN THEIR RELATIONSHIP IN *WOMAN* (EPISODE 1.03).

companied Japan's post-war progress enabled the practice of *amae*-rooted motherhood Koharu is meant to represent. This paradox is brought into sharp relief by the tragic-mother narrative the drama employs to invite empathy for its protagonist. By casting Koharu as a victim in this way, the drama inadvertently admits the role of capitalism and material wealth in the construction of the maternal ideal.

3. GOIN' HOME: REDISCOVERING THE MATERNAL NATIVE PLACE

In order to find salvation from the rejection and isolation of contemporary society, Koharu must return to the nurturing maternal realm of her native place. Poverty and illness force her to re-establish her relationship with her mother Sachi; it is this reconciliation that becomes the central focus of the narrative, reproducing many of the discourses concerning childrearing and the maternal role that emerged during the post-war era. Reuniting after a long estrangement, their relationship is initially strained, as each blames the other for their perceived abandonment. The failure to make a "happy circle" is symbolised by the spatial distance between Koharu and Sachi in a scene from Episode 1.03 (see Fig. 2). Not only do the two sit apart, they face away from each other, emphasising the gulf in their perspectives. Nevertheless, Koharu's position at the low dining table, a site of nourishment and interaction, suggests a desire to achieve *madoi*, or familial harmony, with her mother. As a symbol of traditional culture, the table is a nostalgic representation of the hearth of the *urusato*.

The mother-child bond can only be restored through a process of regression into the past, with Koharu playing the dependent child desiring maternal indulgence and Sachi re-enacting the role of the nurturing mother by attending to her physical and emotional needs. The turning point comes in Episode 6, in one of the most nostalgically resonant scenes of the series. After Koharu collapses from ill health, Sachi brings her sleeping daughter a meal. Lighting plays a crucial role in creating the nostalgic mood: the light from the setting sun coming in through the open sliding paper doors bathes the scene in a soft, yellow glow (see Fig. 3). The sense of a sentimental longing for the past is heightened by the gentle strains of the Largo, symbolising Koharu's return to her "native place". The casting of veteran actress Tanaka Yūko in the role of Sachi is also significant. Tanaka is best remembered for her role as the eponymous heroine of the immensely pop-



FIGURE 3. SACHI TENDS TO HER AILING DAUGHTER KOHARU IN WOMAN (EPISODE 1.06).

ular NHK serial drama, *Oshin* (1983-1984).⁴ *Oshin*'s self-denial, self-restraint and endurance for the sake of her children offered an attractive image of motherhood, which continues to be idealised by contemporary Japanese (Holloway 2010: 48). Broadcast during an era associated with high levels of consumption, its appeal rested on its reminder of the values that were believed to have been lost during Japan's era of high economic growth, such as compassion, kinship and the warmth of the family (Kido 1999).

Close physical contact – a key element of *amae* parenting – plays an important role in the bonding process. Hands do much of the work, offering comfort and reassurance through the act of touching, holding or stroking. They directly facilitate Koharu's reversion to her childhood self. For example, in a key scene from Episode 1.09, the connection between Sachi and daughter Koharu is re-established through a virtual game of cat's cradle; the superimposition of a transparent black-and-white image of a child's hands making the same movements symbolise Koharu's regression, enabling her to submit fully to the role of the indulged child. What follows is a torrent of emotion, as Koharu, recalling her feelings at the time of her abandonment, first pushes her mother in anger, then begins to sob loudly as she is embraced by her mother. Her repeated cries of "*okāsan!*" (mother) evoke the emotional intensity of the post-war *hahamono* films. As the tolerant, compassionate mother, Sachi creates a safe maternal space within which Koharu is able to access memories of her childhood, act out her frustrations and ultimately seek reassurance.

4 *Oshin* holds the record for the highest ratings for a Japanese drama series, reaching a peak of 62.9 per cent (NHK 2008).

There is a similar reversion in the final episode, as the pair reminisce about the past once more. Koharu's face beams as she recalls a childhood memory of being kept warm and protected by her mother during a typhoon. They have the following exchange:

Koharu: Have I grown? (ōkiku natta)
Sachi: You have.
Koharu: I've wanted to show you all along how I've grown.

The use of the phrase *ōkiku natta* – more common in conversations between adults and young children – emphasises Koharu's childish desire to be indulged with praise from her mother. Then, in an echo of the scene from the first episode depicting Koharu's intimate conversation with Nozomi, there is another shot reverse shot sequence, this time of Koharu and Sachi resting their heads on the low dining table, hands clasped, the latter relating stories from her own childhood. Their coming together at the table represents the completion of the "happy circle", the achievement of familial harmony.

This heartening portrayal of mother-daughter reconciliation reaffirms the discourse glorifying *furusato* as an idyllic maternal realm. Koharu's regression into the past to receive the maternal nurturance she was denied as a child also appears to reproduce the ideology of *amae* as necessary to establish a sense of security. Furthermore, this process allows the rehabilitation of Sachi as a "good" mother, effectively rewriting history by erasing Koharu's memories of abandonment. However, the practice of reversion and re-enactment also undermines the notion that maternal instinct is an inherent quality or immutable state of being. Rather, to paraphrase Butler (1988), motherhood may be regarded as a social construction that is constituted and reconstitutes itself through its performance. This notion of motherhood as performance rather than essence is emphasised in a subplot featuring another return to one's native place that is far from idyllic. Having constructed the maternal fantasy, the drama proceeds to deconstruct it by exposing the myth of the selfless, undesiring mother.

4. DISMANTLING THE MYTHS OF *FURUSATO* AND MOTHERHOOD

An alternative mother-child reunion involving Koharu's deceased husband, Shin, is presented through a series of flashbacks in Episode 7. In the present day, Koharu and her

children travel to Shin's hometown to learn more about him. There they discover a letter from Shin, written shortly before his death, in which he describes his own homecoming as an adult. The picturesque landscape presented in the opening scenes – a rustic mountain village surrounded by luscious forest – reproduces familiar cultural imagery of *furusato*. When Koharu arrives in the village, she is immediately transported to her youth, bounding along the mountain road, her arms stretched out like a child imitating an aeroplane. The countryside represents freedom and youthful exuberance, a welcome respite from the harshness of adult life in the city. Flashbacks depicting Shin's return to the village initially suggest the stirrings of a sweet reflection on a childhood filled with bucolic escapades. "The mountains one can see from here are the mountains I saw everyday as a child", he narrates, as he stops at a shop to pick up a pack of his favourite Morinaga milk caramels, a classic Japanese sweet, known for its traditional taste and iconic Shōwa-era packaging, associated with nostalgic memories of childhood.

However, the fantasy of the *furusato* as a safe haven is soon dismantled when Shin arrives at his mother's home and it becomes apparent there is no warm maternal embrace or lovingly-cooked meal waiting for him there. The only sign of life in the small, dark apartment is a dismal bunch of flowers standing in an empty beer can. In fact, for all its rural charm, the village is the site of a horrifying family secret. Shin's single mother abandoned him at the age of eight to be with a lover in Tokyo, forcing him to fend for himself for three years. He was able to conceal her neglect by taking over her maternal duties, washing his own clothes, preparing his own meals and even cutting his own hair. Instead of the close-knit community suggested in popular cultural representations of *furusato*, the village becomes a place of insularity and indifference, where the neglect of a child can be ignored or go unnoticed for years.

Framed from the perspective of the child, the depiction of the mother is overwhelmingly unsympathetic. Unlike Sachi, who felt forced to leave Koharu in order to escape domestic violence, the actions of Shin's mother are deemed less forgivable because they were motivated by her desires as a woman, which overrode any maternal aspect. As such, she has violated the fantasy of the selfless, undesiring mother. The notion that she is a selfish monster devoid of maternal instinct is reinforced by the suggestion she may have intended Shin to die in order to benefit from a life insurance policy. However, in exposing the cruelty of an individual woman, the story of Shin's childhood also undermines the fantasy of the family centred



FIGURE 4. SHIN'S MOTHER'S EMBRACE CONCEALS HER LACK OF MATERNAL AFFECTION IN *WOMAN* (EPISODE 1.07).

on a selfless mother. What in other circumstances might be a comforting image of a mother embracing her young son, her hand stroking his hair (see Fig. 4), is betrayed by adult Shin's narration, which reveals that the words she whispers in his ear are not messages of love but threats designed to intimidate him to continue the façade of family life. The maternal touch as an expression of affection and reassurance becomes a hollow performance, an act that deflects from the mother's true feelings towards her son. Equally, the son is forced to reciprocate in this theatre, suppressing his yearning for his mother's return by imagining his situation as a fun adventure. Even the milk caramels acquire a bittersweet significance. They were the "reward" Shin received as a boy from his mother for keeping their "secret". As she places them in child Shin's hand she promises to return for him, but never does. The lost charm of the sweets represents the unfulfilled hopes and illusory nature of *furusato* and motherhood.

Those unfilled hopes are as much the mother's as they are the child's. Wrapped inside the dominant discourse of a deviant mother is the narrative of a woman disillusioned by the limitations of her rural setting and the reality of chil-

drearing – an experience she inelegantly sums up as "cleaning up your shit" – which have stifled her dreams of a better life in the city. These images demonstrate the emptiness of both the *furusato* and maternal tropes; their connectedness here strengthens the critique of both. The reunion between an adult Shin and his mother offers some insight into her anguish over her inability to perform the maternal role. Shin has returned to show his mother that he is now an adult (note the similarity to the sentiment that will later be expressed by Koharu when she tells her mother she wants to show her she has grown). Before parting, he makes a final reference to his abandonment, addressing her by the epithet he used as a child: "Mummy, I was fine. I enjoyed keeping my promise to you. Because I loved you. Because what was fun for Mummy was fun for me [...] Mummy, thank you. I am doing well. Take care". Shin's regression into his childhood self stands in contrast to Koharu's. It acts not as an indulgent plea for the love of his mother, but rather as an opportunity for retribution. His resolute commitment to the performance of the dutiful son is a stark reminder of her inadequacy, becoming a weapon with which he is able to inflict on her the pain he was forced

to endure as a child. The long strangled moan she emits in response is a measure of her torment over her failure to submit to the maternal fantasy.

This chasm between Shin and his mother reflects the disparity in outlooks between Japanese men and women, with the former continuing to hold on to outdated notions of gender and family, while the latter demonstrate increasing resistance to the maternal ideal. However, Shin's adherence to the illusion of familial harmony also functions as his means of surviving the horrors of his upbringing. The alternative – to admit that his mother did not love him – would be unbearable in a society that holds maternal love in high regard. *Woman* does not deny that nostalgic memories of the past are a romantic fantasy, but nevertheless encourages maintaining the illusion as a means of coping with the difficult realities of life. It admits that family history is not one of incontrovertible facts. Again, the motif of rewriting history is suggested, as Shin refashions his childhood abandonment as a fun adventure and, upon reading his letter, his wife, Koharu, and daughter, Nozomi, choose to believe this version of events. According to Koharu, “there is no such thing as happiness or unhappiness, just a heart that can feel happiness”. The apparent message is that, while nostalgic memories of childhood may simply be a construction of one's imagination, their significance is not undermined.

5. CONCLUSION

This examination of the nostalgic representations of *furusato* and motherhood in *Woman* has revealed how the myths surrounding these concepts are constructed, only to be dismantled by the inconsistency of their logic and the contrast drawn between a reformed mother and an unrepentant one. Superficially, there is a vast disparity between Shin's tragic homecoming and Koharu's affirmative experience. However, both expose the artifice of idealised images of maternal love and familial harmony to varying degrees. On the one hand, the reconciliation between Koharu and Sachi reproduces the discourse of the idyllic native place centred on a devoted mother, encouraging the viewer to indulge in its glorified depiction of *amae* nurturing. On the other, the motif of regression and re-enactment also exposes the performative nature of motherhood and family, an admission that a loving relationship between mother and child cannot be presumed. The revelations regarding Shin's formative years only serve to emphasise this point.

These conflicting accounts of motherhood reveal the disparities in perspective not only between mother and child, but also between women and men in post-capitalist Japan. Whereas men continue to look back to the past in search of relief from an uncertain future, women have increasingly sought to improve their present circumstances by achieving equality in the home as well as the workplace. The nostalgic representation of motherhood and home in *Woman* appears to offer some comfort to those that yearn for the maternal ideal. However, its nostalgic rendering is also an admission of its implausibility in contemporary society, challenging conventional notions of motherhood and femininity.

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