

THE TAPESTRY OF RASHOMON

AN ANALYSIS OF ITS SOCIAL BACKGROUND

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Abstract

The film *Rashomon* of Akira Kurosawa is a work of art (Tatara 2011), produced in the 20th century that can be compared to no other classical work produced in the era. Kurosawa has not only represented the human activities of the social, political and economical environment but had also reflected in depth the deeper realities of humanity itself (Macfarlane 2003).

The literary journey he undertakes is a result of the depression that had sunk to the depths of his innermost mind. In doing so one could observed that he had been influenced by the techniques belonging to the world and culture of the short story writer *Ryunosuke Akutagawa* who had composed *Rashomon* and *In a Grove*. In producing *Rashomon* he had concentrated more on transcribing the plot to a film script.

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Introduction

Visual medium is the strongest vehicle in the art of cinema is used through the superb artistic management of the camera in the Picture Composition. While entertaining a belief in the supremacy of the artistic freedom of the cinema he had used the stylized mode in the area of acting. In this, he had been influenced by the Japanese traditional Classical dramatic compositions. Japanese art provides us with two alternative concepts. One is, the Innovative interpretation of a selected section of the existing naturalistic world and the other, the mental formation of an idealistic world for our aspirations to materialize. Out of these two, Kurozawa had selected the latter to make his dream a reality through *Rashomon*.

Background

Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998) is counted among the three foremost Japanese film directors of the 20th century. The other two were *Misoguchi Kenji* (1898-1956) and *Osu Yasujiro* (1903-1963). The influence of world cinema was felt even from the earliest period. The political as well as economic relations Japan had with America as well as the West were the reason behind it. This new medium of the cinema had its impact on both the Japanese silent cinema as well as sound films. Yet Japanese cinema had no significant impact on the cinema of the world within the first. This situation was overcome only in 1950 with the creation of Akira Kurozowa's classic *Rashomon* (Sheldon 2015). Needless to say there were a number of social political factors, which influenced Akira Kurozowa in the creation of this work.

Social political background

With the end of the Second World War and the implementation of judicial verdicts against Japan the Japanese came under strong condemnation. The finger of accusation for war crimes was pointed directly at Japan. A number of Japanese War Heroes were condemned to be hanged (Smith 1996). Japan came under economic sanction as well. The silence of the World against these judgments isolated Japan from the rest of the world. Investigations into war crimes and military violence were set up. On the basis of these investigations, Japanese War Heroes were imprisoned. This serious situation pushed Japan into the edge of a trauma.

Impact of historical incidents

What is the truth? This became a crucial question. What is reality? Especially in terms of military investigation is truth personal and subjective or is it communal or is it ultimately a relative issue? These questions had undoubtedly haunted the mind of Akira Kurosawa. Not only Kurozowa, it was a question that tormented the minds of most sensitive Japanese artistic minds of this period. Certainly the question of truth had to be understood in terms of the perspectives adopted by each subjective person. Certainly it could not be a pure or absolute universal expression. This is what Akira Kurosawa understood. And this is what established the psychological foundation for the creation of his immortal classic *Rashomon*.

Once again what is the truth? It may be something mystique and impalpable or the residue of an event. Also truth was undoubtedly relative. Nevertheless truth could also be universal and therefore something that could not be objective. This seems to be what Akira Kurosawa understood when he contemplated and researched the literary work that stands behind *Rashomon*.

Influence of internal literature

Accordingly Akira Kurosawa paid attention to two stories behind the film *Rashomon* (1915) as well as *Yabunonaka* (1922) of *Rynosuke Akutagawa* (1897-1927). Apart from this Kurosawa certainly made an attempt to go back to the sources of the stories as well.

Critics say that *Akuthagawa's* story *Rashomon* has been influenced by two stories found in *Konjaku Monogatari* (Henninger 2009). They are: The story of the thief who climbed the steps of the city gate in order to observe the corpses of dead people. And the other story is: the story of the old woman who entered an army camp to sell dried fish. There is another source belonging to the early 13th century called *Hojaki* which is also supposed to have influenced *Akuthagawa* in his creation of *Rashomon*. An analysis of this relationship is found in Prof. *Ariya Rajakaruna's* introduction to the film script of *Rashomon* translated into Sinhala (Rajakaruna 1989).

There is yet another story from the same source (*Hojaki*), which had, some influence on the creation of *Rashomon*. It is called the *Ten square Foot hut* as translated into English. This work has been very helpful in creating the decadent atmosphere of ancient Kyoto. Apart from these Japanese sources there is also reference to a foreign source, which is believed to have influenced the creation of *Rashomon*, and that is a story called *under the bridge* by a lesser-known French writer called Fredric Boutet (Rajakaruna 1989).

The second source of the story *Rashomon* was *Aguthakawa's* short story named *Yabuno Naka* (in a grove) (Henninger 2009). This short story was the primary source for the film script of *Kurozowa's* *Rashomon*. *Akutagawa's* own short story *Rashomon* has only a secondary importance in creating the film script. It is on the basis of these two primary sources that Kurosawa Akira and *Hashimoto Kinobu* drew up the film script of *Rashomon*.

Influence of universal literature

These are the Japanese as well as non-Japanese literary sources that influenced *Akuthagawa* in the creation of *Yabuni Naka* (in a grove)

1. Roads of Destiny - 1909 Oliver Henry (1862~1910)
2. Moon Light Road – 1907 Ambrose Bierce (1842~1914)
3. La Fille Du Pontieu – 1823 Clovis Brunel (1884~1971)
4. The Ring and the Book – 1868 Robert Browning (1812~1889)

The Japanese sources are derived from three stories from *Kunjaku Monogathari*. The stories deal with:

1. The story of wife and husband who were tied at the top of the mountain.
2. The seduction a beautiful maiden who had come on a pilgrimage.
3. The story of the two thieves Thajomaro and Chobu.

Of these three ancient stories the first story has been the most crucial. The second story is only on minor importance. And the third has the least influence. There is no any doubt that the film director *Akira* Kurosawa also has had access to the same sources as *Akuthagawa* in the creation the film script of *Rashomon*.

As mentioned above the torture and execution of Japanese war heroes and the numbing silence that prevailed in Japanese society in the after math of the war would certainly have disturbed and pained the mind of *Akira* Kurosawa. It is this predominant mood of Japanese society that led him to probe the deeper questions of truth, the relativity of truth as coupled with the search for a stabilizing absolute in the context of *Rashomon*.

Resulting Artistic creation

The film *Rashomon* is built up-on a very simple structure. And yet the director is able to subtly analyse the nature of human life while creating an enchanting cinametic narration. It involves three locations, eight characters and four monologues. All centering around a single episode.

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|-------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Bandit | - <i>Tajomaru</i> (Mifune Toshiro) |
| 2. Samurai | - Mori Masayuki |
| 3. Samurai's wife | - <i>Masgo</i> (Kyo Machiko) |
| 4. Woodcutter | - Shimura Takashi |
| 5. Priest | - Viaki Minoru |
| 6. Commoner | - Ueda Kichijiro |
| 7. Witch | - Homma Fumiko |
| 8. Soldier | - Kato Daisuke |

Although there are eight characters only seven of them can be counted as human because the character of the witch is presented not as a special character but as the monologue of the spirit of the dead Samurai. The four monologues are presented as follows in a culminating rhythm form.

- I. The Bandit's story
- II. The Samurai's story
- III. The Samurai's story
- IV. The woodcutter's story

Vision

The success of the film *Rashomon* is largely depend on the characters of the story as well as the senario built around them.

"Before writing a good film script a writer has to be familiar with the great literature of the world. One has to study. One has to investigate. Why are they considered great? At the same time one has to watch great films. Study the ideas of great directors. At the sametime one has to develop an intuitive understanding of the cinema". These are the words of Akira Kurosawa.

He also says "A great director can produce a great film with the help of a great script. That goes without saying. But the contrary also true. A great film director can produce a great film even from a weak film script. "

Akira Kurosawa continues, "Cinema can be compared with other arts. Why? because it includes features of literature, drama, painting, sculpture etc. All within itself. And yet cinema is uniquely itself."

In-depth analysis of literature surveys

O. Henry (1862~1910) was a popular American short story writer of the 20th century. Surprises, curiosities, combined with an element of fantasy were the features of his writing. His short stories were translated into Japanese in the early part of the 20th century. Although some critics tendered to undervalue the work of O. Henry as stories, which were suitable for light entertainment in Japan at least there, was a sizable reading public for O. Henry's short stories? They particularly seem to like O. Henry's surprisingly. These features of O. Henry seem to have influenced Kurosawa in the creation of the film script of *Rashomon*.

Among other literary works said to have influenced *Rashomon* is the story *The Moonlit road* by *Ambros Brioris*. The subject matter of *Rashomon* is revealed through for monologues. This feature can be seen in the *Moonlit Road* which directly influenced the short story *Yabuno Naka* from which *Akuthagawa's Rashomon* is partly derived. What we see in the story are three statements of three different people regarding the mysterious death of a married woman. The three statements are:

1. The statement from the son of the deceased woman.
2. The statement from the husband of the deceased woman.
3. The statement of the dead woman herself.

We see here the influence of the short story the *Moonlit Road* on *Rashomon*.

Next we refer to '*La Fille du come de pointeau*' a French short story of the 13th century. This short story narrates the story of a woman who attempted to kill her husband because of the shame arising from being abused or raped in the eyes of the husband. *Rashomon* shows the parallel situation. In the soliloquy of the Samurai's wife she admits to having killed the

husband. Therefore we are free to surmise that *Akuthagawa* may have been influenced by the French short story in the writing of his own *Rashomon*.

The 3rd source of influence could have been the *Ring and the book* by the English poet Robert Browning (1812-1889) there we come across the monologues of several people woven around a single criminal act. The character of *Pomvielia* and the character of *Masago* in the film *Rashomon* are quite similar.

“The use of monologues exemplifies the truth that truth is multi-facilitated and that each aspect of the event has to be recognized in order to apprehend the reality of any event. *Akuthagawa* also uses multiple monologues. Because he too is interested in exploring a question of truth and his ultimate conclusion is that a truth or reality of life cannot be understood. This vision of *Akuthagawa* could have been influenced by his reading of the English poet Browning.” (Rajakaruna 1989).

Methodology

Rashomon can be placed within the category of great films, which illustrate the creative use of three foremost factors in the art of the cinema. Paying our attention to proves this:

1. Film script
2. Photography
3. Editing

Rashomon illustrates *Kurozowa's* sophisticated attitude towards these three factors. Not only did Kurosawa employ these factors. He also excelled these three factors in his creation of *Rashomon*.

As mentioned earlier in this discussion ‘truth’, in a primary concern of this film. Kurosawa understands truth as a relative as well as human construction. Natural phenomena sun and rain, fire and water are impersonal phenomena. Man cannot fix his judgment on any of them. But in the vision of *Kurozowa* the human factor is far more influential, forceful, and dangerous than any of them.

Nature and folklore

Elements of Japanese folk culture have influenced *Rashomon* both in its concept as well as in its form. Nature, environment and inanimate objects are brought into the film as we find them in traditional Japanese Noh drama. The extract from the monks dialogue at the beginning of film illustrates this fact.

"War, earthquakes, cyclones, Tsunami, pestilences are eternal tragedies. While nature brings us those tragedies we have human beings who kill and rob each other day and night. Human beings died like worms. I've seen a great deal of human slaughter but I have yet to hear a blood curdling story like this."

I have already referred to Kurosawa's use of nature. It's hard to find a film of Kurosawa, *which* does not capture rain. *Miyagawa Kazuo* (1908~1999) the cameraman of *Rashomon* has referred to occasions when Kurosawa made him focus the camera on the sky waiting for a dark cloud to appear.

"Kurosawa's film depicts violent feelings. The violence is enhanced through exaggeration. This is linked to his images of nature. In summer the strong heat the cruelty of winter, violent rain, and storms these are the images that Kurosawa emphasizes. Though these images Kurosawa creates not only a natural background but also a mental climate."

Formation of visual impact

One of the chief artistic qualities of this film relies on the photographic quality. In the second half of the 20th century Kurosawa's photographic quality became almost a textbook for Asian as well as world cinema. The use of background photography in enhancing the storyline happened for the first time in the world cinema through Kurosawa's *Rashomon*. The series of images depicting the woodcutter's entry into wood can be taken as an example of this fact. "*Rashomon* is known to be a film based on masterly photography and camera work. The woodcutters' entry to the wood is a very touching moment. This was applauded at the Venice film festival as the first instance where the camera entered the woods in narrative cinema"



Figure 01 – Scene From *Rashomon* Film, depicting the nature

The sun and sunlight are both used in *Rashomon* as characters in the narrative or as witnesses to the events. The truths that human beings tell each other are relative truths and yet there is another layer of truth more absolute and eternal. This is the truth represented by nature. The truth of the the key events of the film such as violence and the sexual violation of the wife of the Samurai are not revealed through human language. Is the truth then revealed through the sun, the earth and the woods? This may seem contradictory. Because there cannot be two truths or two forms of the truth and so this leads to the realization that truth is relative. The evidence of nature captured through strong camera work¹ is enhanced through its synthesis with music.

Before creating on the celluloid Kurosawa was in the habit of sketching it on paper. There are altogether four hundred and twenty such pencil sketches. Out of these twelve provide the background for the credits. Even this is enough to prove the evidence of the great importance Kurosawa gave to photography in the creation of his cinema. Needless to say his skill as a painter was one of the factors that enabled him to create one of the greatest creations of the cinematic art. The only Sri Lankan film maker who can be compared to Kurosawa in this

¹ (Kurosawa 1950)

regard is *Mahagamasekare*. *Mahagamasekare* too made use of sketches from beginning to end in his film '*Thun Man Handiya*.'

As in the period of silent cinema *Kurozowa* makes use of the image as his foremost instrument. The length of the film runs into 2406m., and its running time is 88 minutes. Within this framework *Kurozowa* uses 440 frames. This is roughly double the number of frames in any ordinary film.



Figure 02 - Scene from the *Rashomon* Film, Samurai's wife and Thajomaru.

The key event of *Rashomon* are the rape of the Samurai's wife and the death of the Samurai. Of the two events it is the first event on which Kurosawa concentrates most sharply. This is followed by a duel between *Thajomaru* and *Masago*. It ends with the Samurai's wife coming under the subjugation of *Thajomaru*². At this point Kurosawa makes use of strong and harsh sunlight to emphasize the event.

I had the privilege of meeting *Miyagawa Kashuo* who was Kurosawa's cameraman and I think it is relevant to include some of his ideas here. It will be noted that as of now almost all the personalities involved in the creation of *Rashomon* are no longer with us. The only person left is the artist *Kiyo Michigo* who played the role of *Masago* the wife of the Samurai.

As mentioned earlier *Miyagawa Kasuo* was an outstanding photographer who served under three of the most renowned Japanese film directors of the 20th century such as *Misugechi Kenji*, *Oatsu Yasuhiro*, *Kurosawa Akira*. The cameraman made use of large mirrors very close to the actors in order to highlight the sweat flowing down their bodies to make it seem almost three-dimensional to the audience. This is how the cameraman manages to create the mood and intensity of the situation that Kurosawa demanded. Not only close ups he was also able to use long shots when or as required by the script³.



Figure 03 - Scene from the *Rashomon* Film, Depicting the use of long shots when required

It is for the first time in world cinema that the set of images following the woodcutter's journey into the forest is coupled with a similar set of images of a dolly track moving back. The woodcutter who begins his journey from the left of the dolly track next moves to the right

² (Kurosawa 1950)² {Kurosawa, 1950 }

side to the dolly track and then continues to walk parallel on the right side of the dolly track. Next he sees the camera on the track pulling back and the woodcutter follows the dolly track and walks forward parallel to the left side of the camera.

This really creates confusion because while the woodcutter seems to be casually walking down the track we are not sure from which angle the camera is focused. This creates a sense of mystification in the minds of the audience. We are not sure of any other instance in world cinema where nature has been used as a living factor through the expert handling of the camera.

Convention on Acting

It is significant that director Kurosawa in the pursuit of his theme of independence assimilated this idea from his native Japanese tradition. The presentation of the thief and princes *Masago* are made through an exaggerated and melodramatic style of acting. This reminds us of a traditional Japanese concept of *Yugen* in the traditional drama of *Noh Gaku*. That Kurosawa wanted it to be in that exaggerated form is evidenced in *Kurozowa's* instruction written in the script.

Determination

Rashomon, which is centered on a scene of violence, followed by a number of soliloquies ends on a very quiet and serene note. This ending has attracted the attention of many critics since it seems to suggest the end of one cycle and the beginning of yet another. The director, who starts on the premise that no word of any human being is to be trusted, suddenly turns a volte-face and ends the film with a series of shots capturing a small child. Whatever happens before the film ends with the Buddhist priest handing over the child to the woodcutter⁴, which means that whether we like it or not we are left no choice, but to trust in man. This brings to a climax the well known Japanese dictum '*kaku arubeki sekai*' create the real world in your ideal perception.



Figure 04 - Scene from the *Rashomon* Film, Ending scene of the film.

⁴ (Kurosawa 1950)

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