

Mother-Son Relationship in Anime

The Japanese Women: Cultural Assumptions

Traditionally, since the Meiji Restoration (Late 19th century), the female identity has been tied to the domestic sphere. The traditional feminine ideal is referred to as the “Yamato Nadeshiko.” Exemplifying the attributes of Filial Piety and Feudal Loyalty. Basically, a woman needs to show special respect for men, especially older members, within the family and social structures (such as laws). The expectations for being a good Japanese woman show up in common sayings and even the structure of the language itself. Japanese sayings such as “Good Wife, Wise Mother” express that expectation. Even the Japanese word for “wife”, 家内(kanai), is made up of two kanji that literally mean “inside home.” This word is, now, politically incorrect.

The period after WWII saw a devastated Japan. The rebuilding of its economy and physical landscape was prioritized. The United States drafted the new Japanese constitution which completely dismantled the military. This restricted money flow to other industries which facilitated an increased economic recovery. However, the military was a governing structure for the conditioning of the ideal Japanese citizen. This open vacuum was filled by the school system. Essentially creating the modern 学連社会 (gakureنشakai), or school society, where the dutiful and successful student is the image of a successful Japanese adult. This helps strengthen an environment where the mother is a central figure in raising a successful student.

Amae 甘え: Interpretations of Dependency between “Mother-Son” Relationship

The concept of “Amae” in Japanese culture can enlighten how the specific mother-son relationship functions within a Japanese cultural context. The literal translation of Amae is “lack of self-reliance” or “depending on others.” A basic understanding of the typical mother-son relationship in Japan is based on a child’s dependency to their mother. The child is viewed as an entity fully reliant on their mother. Their identity is manifested in their relationship with their mother and the mother, likewise, has her identity manifested in their motherhood. The mother is culturally expected to know and act on every need of a child. The child, in turn, is expected to completely rely on the mother. This is a fusional relationship that, unlike western concepts, grows instead of declines as the child grows up. A relationship of self-sacrificial interdependence. A typical child in America is expected to seek independence from their mother where a Japanese child grows interdependence with their mother. This is where we can see the Amae concept come into play both in infancy and adulthood. The seeing of “self” attached to someone else creates the implicit need for dependency on that individual. For more information read Lachkar, Joan. 2014. The Rising Power of Japanese Women: A Pop Culture Revolution. The Journal of Psychohistory. 41, no. 4: 301.

The Bento:

The bento is an iconic piece of Japanese culture and shows up in anime frequently. The bento usually contains rice, vegetables and some sort of protein with the food products inside the bento arranged in an artistic manner. The approach I'm using to analyzing the bento in looking at the mother-son relationship is to fashion the bento as a symbol. I mentioned the physical elements of the bento in the first few sentences but ironically the importance of the bento as a food item is overshadowed by its cultural implications often referenced in anime. Scholars have argued that the labor that goes into making the bento is a task that not only represents the woman herself but also is a symbolic representation of their prowess as a mother to a larger community of mothers.¹ The reason I bring up the bento in exploring the mother-son relationship is because of how important the bento becomes in romantic relations between males and females in anime. The thinking, creation and, eventual, presentation of the bento to the male protagonist is an important step in their romantic involvement. These romantic situations involving the bento are connected to the mother-son relationship in two ways.

1. The presentation of the bento shows that the female would be able to perform essential functions of motherhood, such as cooking. (Based on what they have seen from their mom)
2. The bento represents a connection to warm feelings associated with their mother.

I argue that the subconscious implications of the bento in the mother-son relationship are worth exploring.

For my first point, in a culture that encourages the values of domestic femininity, the presentation of female "motherhood" qualities such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of children is highly encouraged. Anime keeps to this line in exemplifying the positive values of domestic skills with females. In romantic anime, the connection between the male and female characters are strengthened from the acceptance of gender roles. Males work and females take care of the home. This is a broad generalization of anime I am aware but take a look at a majority of "typical" romantic and rom-com anime; it shows up more than you think.

For my second point, the bento as a food object is just as closely related to the person who makes it. For a "typical" Japanese child, the bento is a creation of the mother. The bento has long been a food object connected with the laboring mother. To argue that the implications of the bento have a complete lack of association with the mother is to deny years of psychological connection between bento-mother. The bento is a symbol of the mother and as such resonates with some level of familiarity, especially when made by a female figure. Psychotherapist Elayne Savage says that, "...familiarity is a big reason people may choose someone like Mom or Dad as a partner. When you grow up familiar with a certain type of person, you're attracted to that

¹ Bastian, Misty L. 1999. Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan: Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan. *American Ethnologist*. 26, no. 2: 96.

same type of person because it feels comfortable, whether you like it or not..."² The subconscious comfort found in a female figure that echoes familiarity represents, in this case, a strong connection with their mother.

Oedipus vs. Ajase Complex:

Discourse on psychoanalyzing the sexual urges of a child toward their mother typically rely on a Freudian Oedipus theoretical understanding. That being, a desire to get rid of the father to have all of the mother's attention and love. Certainly, there is credibility in attempting to analyze repressed father anger in children. However, the underlying assumption of the Oedipus Complex is patriarchal (male based). The assumed tension revolves around the father over the mother's affection. In a western context, this can be applied more successfully as the child is, more or less, expected to emulate his father. The father-son dynamic creates a competing need for the love of the mother. However, understanding the family dynamic from a Japanese cultural standpoint reveals more than that specific father-son competing dynamic. As discussed above, the cultural significance of Amae in the mother-son relationship creates a more matriarchal family dynamic. In contrast to a patriarchal based theory where the desire places significant importance to the male figure in the family, the matriarchal focus in a Japanese context shakes the dominance of Oedipus Complex in applicability. This argument against the Oedipus Complex is, however, not new. Heisaku Kosawa argued against the Oedipus Complex in 1931.³ The theory he proposed was the Ajase Complex. Based on a Buddhist myth, the Ajase Complex proposed a theory that aligned more with Japanese culture. The Ajase story is quoted below:

Ajase was the son of a king in India. His mother, fearing the loss of her youth and beauty, wanted to bear a child so she could retain her status. A prophet told her that a hermit who lived in the forest would be reborn as the king's son. The queen, however, wanted the child as soon as possible and killed the hermit, who then entered her womb. The child that she bore was named Ajase. Just before being slain, the hermit had told the queen that he would be reborn as her son and curse his father. The queen, fearful of what she had done, tried to abort and kill the baby, but she failed and Ajase survived. When Ajase grew up and learned the secret surrounding his birth, he became angry with the queen and attempted to slay her, but was dissuaded from this act by a minister. At that moment, Ajase was attacked by a severe guilt feeling and became afflicted with a dreadful skin disease characterized by so offensive an odor that no one dared approach him. Only his mother stood by and lovingly nursed him. Despite his mother's devoted care, Ajase did not readily recover. Seeking relief, the queen went to the Buddha and told him of

² Perron, Celeste. "Why You're Likely to Marry Your Parent." CNN. February 11, 2009. Accessed July 24, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2009/LIVING/personal/02/11/lw.programmed.to.marry.parents/>.

³ Kosawa, Heisaku. (1931). Two kinds of guilt feelings. The Ajase complex. *Japanese Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 11, 1954.

*her sufferings. The Buddha's teachings healed her inner conflict, and she returned to continue to care for her Ajase. Eventually, the Prince was cured to become a widely respected ruler.*⁴

Two major themes emerge from this story:

1. The conflict does not lie with the father figure (king) but rather with the mother.
2. Only after receiving forgiveness and care from his mother did Ajase recover.

The first point is interesting because the story relies on exploring the specific mother-son relationship. The king is mentioned but bears no weight to the prince's eventual success. This is an important aspect to the way this story can be interpreted from a Japanese point of view. Heisaku Kosawa chose to use this story because it addressed a specifically Japanese concept. The reliance on the subjective dominance of Oedipus theory is malleable. The psychological interpretations of both Heisaku and Freud can be looked at in what they are specially trying to explain. Simply an eastern vs western thought process.

The second point addresses a major point of discussion above, the "amae" concept. The guilt/forgiveness aspect illustrates the essence of the mother-son dependence dynamic. Ajase's hateful actions result in his downfall. His eventual surrender to his mother amongst his own reluctance drives home the point of the negative reality of self-dependence. When Ajase gives into his mother, he is eventually healed. Even more than that, he goes on to rule as a widely respected ruler. His reward for giving into his mother is physical well-being and success.

Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mother-Son Eroticism

Moving forward from our previous section, let's take a look at a "generic" mother-son hentai and explore what cultural implications we get some from it. First, let's look at where the cultural "fad" of mother-son erotica hit its peak. Below is a quote from scholar Misty Bastian:

*"In the 1980s a number of stories about mother-son incest were reported in the popular press in Japan. The elements of each were remarkably consistent: An adolescent male entering the period of intense study leading up to entrance exams is distracted by sexual desire. His mother, who has assumed the role of a kyoiku *mama, notices the distraction and worries that it will obstruct the boy's work. To prevent this, she offers to become her son's lover and thereby satisfy his pressing need. The boy complies and the two commence an affair. The sexual relationship, found deeply pleasurable by both partners, quickly turns the boy into a model student. In the end the boy typically passes his exams and is appreciative to his mother for her help. The incest, however, does not end. Rather, the confusing relationship between man-woman and mother-son is left unresolved at the story's close."*⁵

The eroticism of the scenario can be looked at multiple different angles. For this article I will focus on exploring the explosion of interest in the mother-son taboo from 3 angles.

1. The cultural implications of the mother choosing to engage in the sexual relationship.

⁴ Okonogi, Keigo. "Ajase Complex." International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis. 2005. *Encyclopedia.com*. (July 19, 2015).<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3435300046.html>

⁵ Bastian, Misty L. 1999. Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan: Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan. *American Ethnologist*. 123.

As discussed above, I have argued the mothers expected place in the home with her identity being closely associated with her son's success. If we take that stance on interpreting what her actions mean than we can better understand what she is trying to accomplish. The mother has an identity that finds success in her son's success and her job is to do anything that can make that happen. The stories then create a "problem" concerning his uncontrollable sexuality. Now, we have a situation where a problem is interfering with their future success. As a mother, she needs to address this issue that will potentially destroy his future. Her actions to address the issue create a paradox. In addressing his rampant sexuality, she on one hand helps him remove his distraction and therefore succeed. But on the other, she violates all of the cultural rules of what's expected of mothers. But Of course, this problem is blown out of proportion in multiple ways because the story is ultimately about showing erotic material but the base from which it is built is entrenched in expectations of both the hardworking student and the mother who is expected to help him succeed.

2. Popularization of a cultural fantasy.

The popularization of mother-son incest in hentai has polarizing opinions to say the least. From high level traditionalists to low level students the opinions vary in range from congratulatory to sickening. Even in the late 1970's early 80's the situation and popular reporting of the issue was in a polarizing state. Status quo media commentators stressed the tragedy of incest culling from sources such as the Daiyaru Hinin Sodanshitsu (1979) a telephone counseling agency that publicized it was receiving calls of mother-son incest.⁶ However, a majority of the calls were suspected to be boys using incest as a fantasy.⁷ What, then, is fantasy? The fantasy I describe here is an idea connected yet disconnected from reality. A desire that exists outside of the normal reality from within which you exist. The popularity of the mother-son incest is not to be confused with a factual number of actual incestuous relations. Scholar Kakinuma argues that Japan has no more occurrences of incest than in other similar countries such as the United States.⁸ This fantasy of the mother-son incestuous relationship is a cultural fantasy which gained popularity due to its polarizing nature and, normally, unobtainable status.

3. The role of the non-existent father.

Finally, the issue not addressed is the role of the father. The father is many times left out of the mother-son incestuous dynamic because of his assumed role. In a strange way, the destruction of family values created by the incest is an action meant to help the boy become a productive member of society as discussed above. The father is merely a symbol of what the boy is to become. Conquering the mother is a way to both succeed his position as thus become him. The two points above argue more toward an Ajase Complex while this point is more Oedipus Complex because the two theories can be mutually compatible. The constant absence of the father is a critique on the salaryman expectation of the Japanese male. Ironically, the boy's actions to replace him only continuous the same absent Japanese father.

TL;DR: Cultural standards in Japan made incest a very prominent and publicized fantasy.

⁶ Bastian, Misty L. 1999. Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan: Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics, and Censorship in Japan. *American Ethnologist*. 127.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Thanks for reading everyone. This one took forever to finish. If you made it here then chances are you support what I'm trying to do at animehistorian.weebly.com. Click the donate button if you want to show your support.