

Social Inequality in a Developed Nation: A Global Humanitarian Perspective in the Film *Manbiki Kazoku (Shoplifters)*

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ABSTRACT

The current research seeks to identify the issues of social inequalities and human security crisis highlighted in Hirokazu Kore-eda's movie, *Manbiki Kazoku (Shoplifters)*. Despite Japan being renowned for its top welfare systems, this paper will examine whether the movie offers an insight into people who are deprived of their basic human rights due to their socio-economic status, which falls below the poverty line in urban areas. Following the qualitative descriptive research design, this paper applies a combined methodology from Cultural Studies and Human Security theories within the field of International Relations. This paper demonstrates that *Shoplifters* provides deep insights into the problem of invisibility of poverty and the state's inability to ensure the fulfillment of the citizens' fundamental rights. As seen in the survival tactics adopted by the Shibata family members (including the lack of education), there is a considerable mismatch between the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 1; SDG 4; SDG 10). The inference from this study is that prosperity on the macroeconomic level within the Global North does not equate to the securing of human security among the populace at the grass roots level. This study highlights the importance of recognizing undocumented individuals and advocates the use of cultural artifacts as valid instruments within the field of Development Studies.

Keywords: *Social Inequality, Manbiki Kazoku, Human Security, SDGs, Cultural Studies.*

INTRODUCTION

Japan is known to be a powerful nation economically and serves as an example of a welfare state in the Global North. When Japan is portrayed internationally, what is shown is progressiveness in terms of technology, a high standard of living, and a perfect degree of social cohesion. But on the other side of the picture is an entirely different reality that pertains to those who occupy the peripheral communities in urban Japan.

In the award-winning movie *Manbiki Kazoku* (Shoplifters) by Hirokazu Kore-eda, the invisible population is represented. The movie tells the Story of the Shibata family, who is made up of individuals living outside the norms of society. These individuals have been forced to engage in small-time theft, crime, and poor pension support provided by the government. Using the concept of cultural studies, this movie goes beyond being an entertaining story about a family to becoming a mirror image of the structural problems within Japanese society.

From an International Relations standpoint, the issues presented in the movie reflect serious problems associated with Human Security in a country considered to be developed. The lack of access to sufficient amounts of food, proper shelter, and education reflects the failure in the fulfillment of international obligations regarding the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is especially visible by means of focusing on SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) in the story of *Manbiki Kazoku*. Thus, one has to question the responsibility of the state towards its weakest citizens.

Consequently, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate how the film reveals the fallacy of the welfare state notion and can be viewed as a humanitarian critique of social inequalities worldwide. It is important to focus on the film from both cultural and international perspectives in order to uncover poverty that is present in first-world countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic discourse related to Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Manbiki Kazoku* has revolved around its sociological implications, mainly the breakdown of the existing Japanese family structure and the portrayal of the poor. For example, in their study, Setyaningsih & Saraswati (2022) describe *Manbiki Kazoku* as a scathing criticism of the poor and the stigma associated with poverty. In line with this, Ichsan (2024) together with Aprilia & Parmin (2022) discuss how poverty is depicted in films and how the movies critique the socio-economic conditions, adding that Kore-eda uses Shibata's family to illustrate the underlying weakness of Japan's capitalist society. Moreover, Breeze (2021) believes that Kore-eda's family stories constitute "quiet activism" which calls for socio-political revolution. Even though the above studies shed light on the social implication of the movie, they only focus on sociological or semiotic literary approaches, without considering any international outlook.

On the other hand, the notions of Human Security and SDGs in the Global North in International Relations and Development Studies have been thoroughly studied. As an example, Bradbury et al. (2022) study the structural consequences of child poverty and income support in Japan, whereas Caballero et al. (2024) highlight the significance of empowerment and human security in the lives of disadvantaged groups in Asia, particularly in Japan. Furthermore, Masuda et al. (2022) illustrate the role of Japanese local governments as transitional intermediaries, enabling localization and multi-stakeholder partnerships for achieving the SDGs. Nevertheless, conventional methods of assessing the role of local governments in achieving the SDGs rely on policy review and institutional analysis..

In this regard, there exists a noticeable gap in the scholarly literature on the subject matter of the interplay between cultural depiction and global humanitarian frameworks. Very few pieces of literature have employed contemporary films as a means through which to analyze whether or not a developed country complies with international requirements, such as SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). The current paper seeks to fill this gap in the scholarly literature by incorporating cultural studies in combination with the Human Security framework of International Relations theory.

METHODOLOGY

The research uses a qualitative descriptive method of investigation in the examination of issues of social inequality and human security that exist in the movie '*Manbiki Kazoku* (Shoplifters)'. The main sources of data include the movie itself, which was directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda, whereby extracts of particular scenes, dialogues, and stories told by various characters are taken as the units of analysis. The other source is the review of secondary sources such as articles and journals related to Japan's social welfare policies and United Nations SDGs.

The research methodology entails a multi-step approach aimed at evaluating the subject matter comprehensively. The first step involves a selective observation aimed at identifying visual cues and other narrative features that denote the "invisible poor," such as the life conditions of the Shibata family and their use of illegal survival mechanisms. The

step is crucial for collecting the empirical proof of governmental failure from the cultural perspective. The second step involves analyzing the gathered data by means of Cultural Studies, which entails using Stuart Hall's theory of representation in order to determine the manner in which the film breaks down the myth of an affluent and uniform Japanese society. By doing so, the researcher can avoid describing the film and consider its content as a socio-cultural phenomenon instead. The third step involves comparing the results with the Human Security approach used in International Relations studies as well as SDGs 1 (No Poverty), 4 (Quality Education), and 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

DISCUSSION

In this way, the portrayal of the Shibata family in the film *Manbiki Kazoku* can be considered a powerful tool for unveiling the weak spots in the welfare policies of the country. In effect, the plot of the movie provides a direct confrontation against the myth of Japan being the egalitarian society in the Global North. In analyzing the movie from the perspective of Human Security and SDGs, we seek to dismantle the myth about homogeneity and economic prosperity. Japan is often presented as one of the most prosperous countries in the world. Nevertheless, it becomes clear that the film demonstrates the weaknesses of the state's social protection system. As stated by Christensen et al. (2025), the Japanese government's support of SDGs usually aims to disguise the true reasons behind the inability of the state to solve such pressing social issues as poverty. Consequently, the process of analysis consists in the identification of visual elements within the film and their correlation with the concept of failure to fulfill human rights.

In regards to the SDG 1 parameters (no poverty), the strong dependency on the insufficient state pension of Hatsue, Aki's informal employment in the prostitution sector, and Osamu's minor crimes indicate a major paradox in the accountability of the state. In the light of international relations theory, the local poverty is seen as a critical flaw in the ability of a developed state to shield its citizens from economic misery. In accordance with Alam et al. (2025), Japan has played an important role in sustainable development and cooperation in the international arena by means of its ODA, becoming a major player in encouraging the SDGs at the international level. However, the lack of ability on the part of the state to eradicate the problem of extreme poverty in urban areas shows that there is a paradoxical difference between its foreign policy identity and its domestic reality.

The economic disenfranchisement can be linked strongly to the stigma surrounding poverty in contemporary capitalist societies. According to Ichsan (2024), Kore-eda uses the characters to highlight the weaknesses that have been concealed by the state. The Shibata family lives in secrecy and is one of those invisible poor that the state does not bother to notice. Meehan et al. (2023) note that human security is undermined by the influence of modernity, which links basic needs like access to water and sanitation facilities only to the ownership of private homes. This leads to an institutional trap in which macroeconomic stability does not guarantee security for vulnerable urban communities, thereby making households such as the Shibata family invisible and lacking basic human rights within a wealthy nation.

Additionally, another crucial and alarming element in the film is the complete denial of the rights of the children, which constitutes an utter failure to meet the objectives of SDG 4 (Quality Education). For instance, while Shota receives no education whatsoever, he is taught by Osamu that only those kids who cannot study at home are forced to attend school. Likewise, although Juri, who was badly abused within her own house, is saved by the Shibata family and becomes part of their unit without any documentation, she becomes completely invisible for the state institutions concerned with education and welfare services.

As noted by Caballero et al. (2024), human security and empowerment are crucial for vulnerable groups in Asia, which is essential for ending poverty. Supporting this argument is Bradbury et al. (2022), who argue that child poverty in Japan is a highly structural problem in which the government's approach to the traditional model of employment does not provide adequate protection for those working in the informal sector. This institutional failure, in relation to undocumented children, highlights the role of exclusion from education in increasing vulnerability. This situation ensures that vulnerable children cannot acquire knowledge and skills to empower themselves and escape poverty. Education is more than a social good; it is a basic human right.

Ultimately, this systemic exclusion also embodies the very principles of SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). The juxtaposition between the Shibata household and its surroundings of high-rise modern apartments acts as an effective narrative element depicting deep social disparities. While Masuda et al. (2022) emphasize the possibility of

collaboration between Japanese local governments and the private sector in the localization process, the story of the Manbiki Kazoku offers a clear illustration of an entire community that is devoid of any connection to such empowerment possibilities. Therefore, this work provides effective criticism of the Global North perspective on common prosperity. It becomes clear that Human Security cannot be achieved under conditions of systemic marginalization within a country's socio-economic structures.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In summary, the film *Manbiki Kazoku* by Hirokazu Kore-eda stands out as an essential and advanced tool of analysis in unraveling the illusionary perception of Japan as an impeccable and uniform society free from social inequities. Through a critical examination of the underlying structure of the Shibata household using an international relations and human security approach, it is clear beyond any doubt that Japan is failing to meet its obligations to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals as defined by the United Nations, especially in the Global North context. The use of unlawful means as the only way to survive, alongside the absolute denial of schooling to the children, is a glaring example of a severe breakdown in SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) in domestic policy formulation and implementation. In addition, the concept of the "invisible poor" reveals a very serious discrepancy between the international image of Japan as an active advocate of humanitarian norms and its internal situation, where disadvantaged groups are isolated from legal and social safety nets. Thus, this paper suggests several important suggestions for future practice. First of all, policy-makers and social welfare agencies of developed countries need to radically change their attitude towards socially disadvantaged and marginalized communities through introducing proactive approaches and policies ensuring equal rights for all social strata of a particular country. The state should go beyond mere bureaucratic procedures to actively help invisible groups to disrupt the poverty vicious circle within generations. Finally, this research highly recommends future scholars working within the scope of Development Studies to consider cultural products as a legitimate source of analysis. Combining cultural research with global humanitarian issues can offer greater insight into issues of inequality and states' adherence to international obligations that would be impossible using purely economic data.

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