

Manifestation of a Vengeful Spirit as a Representation of Gender Inequality in Japan: An Analysis of the Film Teke-Teke (2009)

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse how the character of Reiko Kashima in Koji Shiraishi's film *Teke-Teke* (2009) represents gender inequality in Japanese society. A qualitative descriptive method employing a cultural studies approach was used to examine the film as a cultural text. The findings indicate that the figure of the vengeful spirit (*onryō*) is constructed as an embodiment of women's anger over traumatic experiences involving indifference and violence. The transformation of the victim into a terrifying entity symbolizes the inability of the social system to provide a sense of security and justice for women. The research findings indicate that the acts of violence committed by the supernatural entity in the film are both a manifestation of trauma and a form of symbolic resistance against injustice, indirectly criticizing the suppression of women's rights within the structure of Japanese society. This study concludes that horror representations serve as a medium for social critique of the patriarchal structures that place women in a subordinate position. Practically, this study contributes to the enriching popular culture studies and deepening the analytical understanding of gender representations in contemporary Japanese horror films.

Keywords: *Teke-Teke, Gender Inequality, Vengeful Spirit, Japanese Culture*

INTRODUCTION

Japanese horror films or J-Horror, are a medium that reflects social anxieties through the figure of the restless spirit known as the *onryō*. The depiction of *onryō*, predominantly female figures, symbolises structural injustice and oppressive social expectations towards women in Japanese culture. This aligns with Danandjaya's perspective in Hamidah et al. (2018), who state that Japanese society believes certain spiritual entities to be manifestations of negative influences or actions occurring in the real world. In line with this, Akbar and Haryanti (2022), in their study on the figure of *Kuchisake Onna*, demonstrate that variations of this vengeful spirit's story often stem from women's tragic experiences, such as being victims of medical malpractice, abuse by a partner, or domestic violence. The presence of *Teke-Teke* reflects the social pressures on women's physical appearance. This is a problem in Japanese society where men are often considered more important than women. *Teke-Teke*, a film by Koji Shiraishi tells us what happens to women who die in ways because they were

treated unfairly and experienced sexual violence. These women come back as Teke-Teke with scary supernatural powers.

Japanese society still has social pressures on women. The imbalance in the power dynamics between men and women is also clearly evident in various aspects of life. The findings of Krismanto (2024), who states that although gender awareness has increased among modern women in urban Japan, its application in everyday life still faces many obstacles. Women are usually seen as the ones who need help. They seem to always need someone to look out for them. Women are like this, in people's minds because they believe men are stronger and can do things that women cannot do. Women are seen as people who need men to protect them. So they cannot follow social rules as well as men can. It is this structural injustice and the assumption of women's weakness that is subsequently represented in the film *Teke-Teke* (2009). This film can be understood as a cultural text depicting how women's anger, long suppressed due to their subordinate position, finally emerges in the form of supernatural manifestations. This perspective is reinforced by Mota (2025), who states that horror narratives can be read as cultural text to reveal how manifestations of trauma and shifting identities are represented through the body and social symbols, Mota demonstrates that horror serves as a means to understand the tensions of human identity in the face of cultural pressures. It makes us think about issues that are often ignored. The horror genre is a way to look at these problems and figure out what is going on with them.

Sabrina's research from 2024 shows that women are not treated fairly. This study looks at how women are doing in their daily lives especially at work. This study also explains that the character Shibata experiences verbal abuse from her colleagues, which is demeaning and disruptive. This reflects how unequal power dynamics can affect women's positions within social environments. This research explains that gender inequality can manifest in various forms, such as marginalisation, subordination, violence, and unequal division of roles, as outlined by Fakhri in Sabrina (2024). These conditions can create situations where exploitation and violence occur against more vulnerable individuals, including women. The social constructs that develop within society shape perspective on women and men. Women are often expected to fit into roles. These expectations ultimately restrict women's scope of action, both in social and professional life. While previous research tends to focus on sociological or mythological aspects in general, this research expands the study by specifically analyzing how cinematic elements in the film *Teke-Teke* are used as a symbolic language of resistance against patriarchal structures that silence women's voices.

This study aims to demonstrate that the *Teke-Teke* represents a symbolic form of resistance against unequal power structures and demonstrates the subordinate position of women. To achieve this objective, the study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a cultural studies approach. Data collection was carried out through visual observation and the recording of film scenes, which were then analysed using the Miles and Huberman model, comprising data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. Through this method, the film

LITERATURE REVIEW

Legends are a form of folk narrative that play a significant role in shaping the perspectives of people across nations. Danandjaya (1997) explains that legends are prosefolk tales believed by their authors to be true events. Japan is a country that deeply values legendary traditions. Japanese belief in the supernatural makes the existence of spirits an integral part of human life. Danandjaya, in Hamidah et al. (2018), also states that Japanese people believe in the existence of certain spiritual entities that are considered threatening, often seen as manifestations of evil influences or evil acts. One prominent form is the vengeful spirit, known as the *onryō*, which is a significant phenomenon in Japanese mythology.

The Japanese believe that *onryō* are real entities that return from the dead to avenge injustice they experienced during their lifetime. Fauzian (2017) explains that in their mythological narratives, *onryō* not only kill but also inflict psychological and physical suffering on their victims as a form of retribution. This vengeance

knows no boundaries, giving rise to a series of curses that are difficult to stop and continue to spread widely in social life.

The representation of *onryō* in various cultural narratives is often linked to the ongoing issue of gender inequality in Japan. According to Walby (1990), patriarchy is a social system and practices that place men in a dominant position, while women are oppressed and exploited. In practice, social and cultural norms also justify violence perpetrated by men against women as a form of power domination. This is evident in various forms of violence, such as rape, domestic violence, father and daughter incest, and sexual harassment in the workplace.

This systemic condition is clearly evident in Japanese society. Kobayashi, in Sari (2020), states that women in Japan have long faced social pressures rooted in traditional values and discriminatory norms. To this day, gender bias continues to be indirectly perpetuated, limiting women's freedom in both public and domestic spaces. In line with research by Maulana and Patriantoro (2026), patriarchal systems in society often reduce women to mere diplomatic and economic tools. The existing social structure robs women of their right to self-determination, as they are forced to submit to the interests of the male family to maintain their reputation and honor. This condition makes women vulnerable to systemic violence and social pressure, so their tragic deaths are seen as the only way to gain power through supernatural entities. In this context, horror films are present as an effective medium to represent this social phenomenon in the public space, where the figure of a female ghost becomes a symbol of resistance against the social structure that has so far silenced them.

Films are no longer simply viewed as entertainment or suspenseful spectacles. From a cultural studies perspective, cinema can be understood as a social text that captures societal anxieties. The meaning of women in Japanese horror cinema has also shifted, from being positioned as a source of fear due to supernatural threats to a symbol of empowerment in resisting oppression. The restrictions on women's freedom and justice within a patriarchal system often make resistance difficult in the real world. Therefore, horror films depict that this resistance can only be realized when women transcend death and emerge as supernatural entities with destructive power, as explained by Sakina and Purba (2024). Analysis of horror films such as *Teke-Teke* allows the work to be understood as a medium for criticizing gender inequality. The terrifying figure of the female ghost also emerges as a symbol of resistance against patriarchal structures that have silenced women's voices in the world.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach from a cultural studies perspective. Qualitative research is a naturalistic method that positions the researcher as the primary instrument for gathering in-depth data and capturing the deeper meanings behind observable phenomena. Through the natural conditions of the research subjects, this approach aims to uncover specific values and cultural essences that cannot be fully explained through statistical data alone (Sugiyono, 2017). The selection of Sugiyono's theory is based on its relevance in providing clear and systematic research stages for qualitative research, thereby enabling the researcher to explore information in depth and accurately interpret the meaning behind cultural phenomena.

The subject of this study is the film *Teke-Teke* (2009) by Koji Shiraishi. This analysis focuses on the visual scenes, cinematic elements and narrative that depict the traumatic experiences of the character Reiko Kashima. The researcher selected only those scenes directly related to trauma, violence, and sexual abuse. This was done to ensure that the results of the analysis align with the research objectives.

Data collection was carried out through visual observation and the recording of relevant cinematic elements. The collected data was then analysed using the Miles and Huberman (1994) model. This model was chosen because its steps are interlinked, making it easier to organise complex data into findings that are more easily understood and structured. The analysis process consisted of three stages. The first step is data reduction, in which the researcher identifies scenes and narratives relating to the trauma experienced by the character. The focus was on scenes depicting the violence and sexual abuse suffered by the character. These scenes are important because they show why the character changed into a spirit that wants revenge. Subsequently, during the data presentation stage, the selected findings were organised into a narrative or

descriptive analysis. In this section, elements within the film are linked to perspectives on patriarchal theory. The final stage is to draw conclusions. In this section, the researcher examines the significance behind the terror instilled by the character, as well as the background that prompted her actions to kill people.

DISCUSSION

In the horror tradition, Japanese horror is all about vengeful spirits. These Japanese horror vengeful spirits are like the embodiment of unending pain that just does not go away even when you are dead. When horror vengeful spirits attack they do not just want to kill their victims. Japanese horror vengeful spirits want to destroy the well-being of their victims too. They use fear to slowly weaken the horror victim. Fear is a part of Japanese horror and it is used to scare the victim really badly.

Reiko Kashima's tragedy reached its climax when the profound trauma she felt drove her to take her own life. However, death did not end her injustice and actually triggered her return as a vengeful figure. People were very scared of Reiko Kashima because she looked so scary and creepy. Fauzian (2017) explains that vengeful spirits tend to appear in physical forms that resemble the circumstances of their death, especially if the death occurred due to a tragic event such as a natural disaster, murder, or suicide. The appearance of fatal injuries suffered at the time of the incident. The events that led to Reiko Kashima's tragedy and how society reacted can be seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2. These figures show a timeline of what happened leading up to the legend. Reiko Kashima's story and the narrative that formed in society are connected through these events.



Figure 1. Newspaper clipping in scene Teke-Teke (2009) screenshot by the researcher

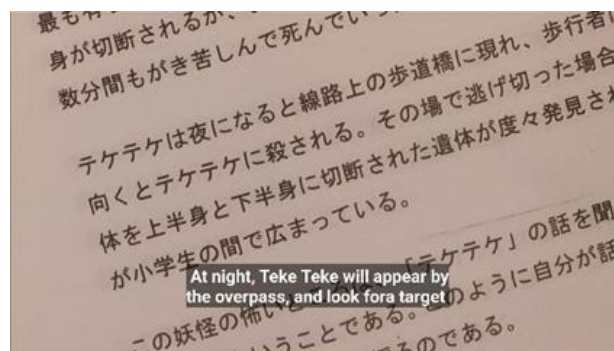


Figure 2. Explanation of the Teke-Teke urban legend in scene Teke-Teke (2009), screenshot by the researcher

Figure 1 shows a newspaper clipping in the movie *Teke-Teke*. This media archive reinforces the legends connection to community events. The Teke-Teke legend is a part of cultural studies. When we look at this news clipping it shows us that urban legends like the Teke-Teke are often based on stories that sound like they really happened. This news clipping does a couple of things. It sets the scene for the story of the Teke-Teke legend. It also makes people more likely to believe that the Teke-Teke legend is real. The Teke-Teke legend is something that people think about and talk about. This news clipping helps to make it feel more real to people.

Figure 2 explains the Teke-Teke legend to a character in the film. This explanation demonstrates how stories about vengeful spirit are passed down through oral narratives from one individual to another. From a cultural studies perspective the spread of the Teke-Teke legend reflects how societies construct and maintain beliefs in the supernatural. These stories are not simply scary tales, but also serve as a means of depicting shared fears and reflecting the values held by the community.

Teke-Teke's appearance is characterized by dismembered bodies and fatal attacks, with victims killed in similar ways within a short period of time. This phenomenon suggests a pattern of indiscriminate revenge, in which the entity forces its victims to experience tragic deaths similar to the physical trauma they have previously experienced. The visualization of Teke-Teke is shown in Figure 3.

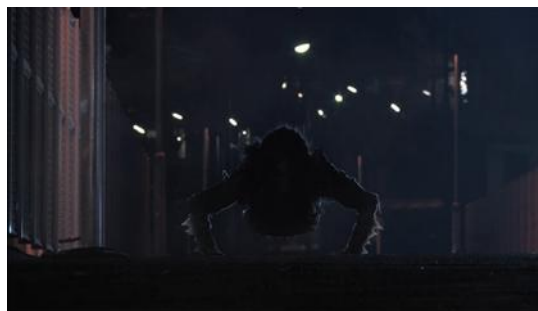


Figure 3. Visualization of Teke-Teke in *Teke-Teke* (2009), screenshot by the researcher

Figure 3 depicts a Teke-Teke figure with its body split into two pieces. In Japanese horror tradition, the appearance of a vengeful spirit typically retains a physical appearance associated with its manner of death. The image of the dismembered body symbolizes the trauma and suffering the character experienced during its life. Thus, Teke-Teke's terrifying form not only aims to create a horror effect but also represents the physical and psychological wounds that gave rise to the vengeful spirit. Based on Mota's (2025) findings, the body in horror narratives acts as a space where trauma and identity intersect. The body is positioned as a complex intersection of trauma, identity, and cultural influences. This confirms the view that, in the Japanese horror tradition, the horrific form of the body is a manifestation of the tension between social norms and personal experience.

The terror perpetrated by this vengeful spirit is rooted in the suffering caused by the ongoing social pressures she endured throughout her life. In the first *Teke-Teke* film, it's explained that Reiko Kashima was a victim of violence and sexual abuse. The backstory specifically mentions that the perpetrator was an American soldier, which deeply traumatized the character. This confirms that very brutal act committed by the spirit reflects the trauma she experienced.

Meanwhile, the second version presents a different perspective, depicting the perpetrator as coming from an upper-class family. This version places greater emphasis on the inequality within the social structure. In the narrative, the perpetrator is depicted as the son of an influential figure, suggesting that the terror perpetrated by a vengeful spirit was a reaction to oppression by an elite group that was difficult for the law to reach. Detail regarding the perpetrator's identity and his relationship to the power structure that oppressed the victim can be seen in Figure 4.



Figure 4. A sexual violence perpetrator in Teke-Teke (2009), screenshot by the researcher

Figure 4 depicts a perpetrator of sexual violence from an upper-class background, demonstrating an unequal power relationship. The perpetrator's social status hinders the victim's efforts to seek justice. Based on Walby's (1990) patriarchal theory, this social environment allows men with economic and social power to maintain their dominance over women. In this scene, Reiko Kashima, a commoner, lacks the strength to defend herself. Furthermore, rumors spread rapidly, further diminishing the power of the upper-class person to come forward.

Political and economic factors are part of the system that exacerbates sexual harassment cases in Japan. Affriliana (2022) explains that when perpetrators hold important positions of power or political structures, they tend to have the ability to manipulate and cover up legal cases against them. The perpetrator's economic power compared to the victim also creates disparities in access to justice. As a result, perpetrators can leverage their material power and social influence to silence cases, making it difficult to uncover the truth.

Fear of damaging his image as an influential figure drove the perpetrator to suppress the case by exploiting his power. As a result, Reiko Kashima was unable to obtain justice, especially after the negative assumptions formed by the perpetrator influenced public perception of her. In this desperate situation, suicide became the only way she believed to end her suffering. According to Zhang et al. in Affriliana (2022), gender inequality in Japan places women in subordinate positions in various sectors. This situation not only limits their role in society but also weakens their ability to speak out against injustice, as the existing social structure tends to favor men in positions of authority. This hierarchical and oppressive social structure reinforces the dominance of those in power, often leaving weaker groups without access to justice. Reiko Kashima's status as a woman further exacerbates her situation, particularly due to the social stigma that views women as weak and powerless. Jahan in Sari (2020) emphasizes that gender-based violence against women is both a form and a consequence of gender inequality itself. This situation is further exacerbated by discriminatory legal systems and social norms that create exclusions, ultimately denying women their right to education, economic stability, and basic freedoms. The inability of the legal system to guarantee justice for Reiko Kashima due to the perpetrator's use of power and social status can be seen in the scene in Figure 5.



Figure 5. The traumatic background of Reiko Kashima in Teke-Teke (2009), screenshot by the researcher

Through the eyewitness perspective in Figure 5, the tragic background that triggered Reiko Kashima's revenge is more clearly revealed. The scene in Figure 5 shows that Reiko Kashima's experience of sexual violence resulted in severe physical and psychological suffering. Culturally, this traumatic background illustrates the gender inequality inherent in social structures that fail to provide protection and safe spaces for victims of violence. Figure 5 also explains that adults in high political positions do not want their reputations tarnished by bad news about their children. As a result, the truth of the incident is obscured by assumptions circulating in society. This is in line with the findings of Maulana and Patriantoro (2026), who revealed that gender inequality in Blue Eye Samurai is manifested through the restriction of women's rights to their own lives for political gain. This research confirms that gender discrimination is not only manifested in physical violence but is also reflected in cultural symbols that continue to perpetuate women's position under the control of men.

In one of the scenes shown in Figure 6, it is shown that Reiko Kashima suffers from a psychological disorder that causes deep trauma. This is evident in her behavior, which often involves throwing away red objects in response to the experience. The trauma stems from the sexual abuse she experienced, which also left her with scars. As a result, she developed a fear of the color red, which she associates with blood and the suffering she experienced at the time.



Figure 6. The symbolism of the color red as a representation of trauma in *Teke-Teke* (2009), screenshot by the researcher

Through the source's explanation in Figure 6, it is clear that Reiko Kashima tends to avoid red objects around her. In this scene, the color red is displayed contrastingly in the frame, thus attracting the viewer's attention. The presence of this color not only functions as an aesthetic element but also symbolizes the trauma experienced by the character. From a cultural studies perspective, this shows that trauma resulting from sexual violence can be deeply embedded in the victim, with the color red acting as a trigger that reminds them of dark experiences in the past. Mota (2025) argues that character dynamics in horror narratives demonstrate that the manifestation of trauma identity transformation are related to the social environment. The characters depicted represent the conflict between social norms and human traumatic experiences. In this context, the character of *Teke-Teke* personifies the clash between social norms and human traumatic experiences, reinforcing the view that horror emerges as a consequence of damaged interpersonal relationships and the failure of identity to cope with the pressures of social norms.

The trauma continued to haunt her even after she transformed into a vengeful spirit. Reiko Kashima haunted and attacked anyone carrying a red object, as the color constantly evoked memories of the suffering she endured in life. The form of trauma through red objects is shown in the scene that can be seen in Figure 7.

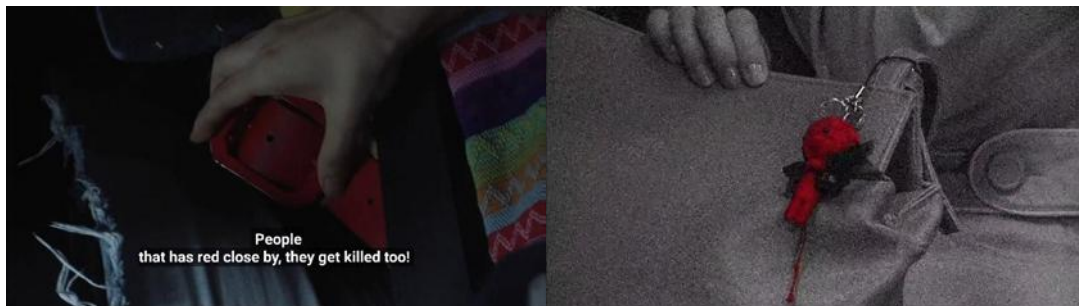


Figure 7. The symbolism of the color red as a trigger of terror in *Teke-Teke* (2009), screenshot by the researcher

Figure 7 shows how the color red triggers a recurrence of terror perpetrated by the *Teke-Teke* spirit. The presence of red objects in the scene elicits an aggressive response from the entity, indicating that the trauma it experienced during its lifetime persists after its death. Symbolically, red represents the blood and suffering of victims of sexual violence. Therefore, the aggression evoked by this color can be understood as a form of anger over injustice and unresolved psychological wounds. From a broader cultural perspective, the color red often carries negative connotations, representing aggression, cruelty, and even immoral acts. In their study, referring to Morioka et al. (2006), Achmadi and Ihwanny (2023), explain that the variation in the meaning of red is strongly influenced by cultural perspectives. In the context of the horror narrative *Teke-Teke*, the color red can be symbolized because it originates from the trauma experienced by the character Reiko Kashima.

The *Teke-Teke* attack pattern also exhibits a distinct trend, with the majority of victims being women, as seen in both versions of the film. In the first version, the attacks focused on individuals wearing red, a color known to trigger trauma. Meanwhile, the second version broadened its terror targets to include anyone with an identifiable connection to the perpetrator. Despite these specific criteria, ultimately no one was completely safe from the terror.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study found that Koji Shiraishi's film *Teke-Teke* does not merely recount the tragic death of a woman at a level crossing. Visually, the figure of this female ghost with her body split in two is indeed known as an urban legend that randomly terrifies people on pedestrian bridges. In fact children have nicknamed her the 'god of death' because her victims have almost no chance of survival. Upon closer examination, Reiko Kashima's life story reveals a heartbreaking experience as a victim of violence and sexual harassment perpetrated by a group of men. Ironically, despite experiencing such severe trauma, Reiko did not receive justice. The perpetrators, who came from elite circles and wielded significant influence, used their power to silence Reiko to protect their reputations. The truth of the incident was deliberately obscured by various assumptions, including rumors blaming the military. The film's narrative deliberately depicts vengeful spirits as a tool to empower oppressed women. Through this format, the film presents supernatural forces as a force for women whose voices in the real world have been silenced by patriarchal structures. The gender inequality experienced by Reiko demonstrates the disempowerment of women within legal and social structures. This terror is not merely a mystical element, but a critique of societal double standards that often place women in subordinate positions. Based on these findings, future research is recommended to expand the discussion on the representation of female spirits in other Japanese horror works to more comprehensively understand patterns of gender inequality. Furthermore, further research could examine how visual symbolism in horror films plays a role in constructing social critiques of gender issues in society.

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