

***Freeter, Arafo, House Husband:* Shifting Values of Hegemonic Masculinity and Emphasized Femininity in Four Japanese Television Dramas**

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Abstract

This study examines the shifting values of masculinity and femininity in four Japanese television dramas: At Home Dad (2004), Around 40: Chuumon no Ooi Onna Tachi (2008), Freeter, Buy a House (2010), and Wonderful Single Life (2012). This study employs a qualitative method, conducting a descriptive analysis method using Connell's concepts of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. The findings of this study focus on the following: 1). Characters in the four television dramas challenge the dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity by living as freeters, house husbands, and arafos, 2). To criticize hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity, these dramas depict the negative aspects of living a rigid lifestyle encompassed by traditional gender roles and feature main characters who show alternative lifestyles of masculinity and femininity. 3). Hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity values shadow the emergence of alternative masculinity and femininity in contemporary Japanese society.

Keywords: *shifting values; masculinity; femininity; patriarchy; Japanese drama*

1. Introduction

The 1990s in Japan are known as “The Lost Decade” (*ushinawareta juunen*). Shimokawa as cited in Dasgupta (2009:79) wrote that “Japan’s ‘Lost Decade’ pertains to a period of economic slowdown, corporate restructurings, and rising unemployment rates, coupled with a growing sense of collective sociocultural in security and anxiety.”

To understand the socio-cultural issues buffeting Japan after 1990, it is necessary to understand the historical context of The Lost Decade. After World War II, Japan began rebuilding its economic strength, reaching a period of rapid economic growth (*koodooseichooki*) in the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, the working culture of Japanese companies was formed with two main systems: the seniority system (*nenkojooretsu*) and the lifetime employee system (*shuushinkoyoo*).

These systems ensured that employees were promoted after they reached the mid periods of their careers and assured employees that they would not fall victim to restructuring during their working time. Because the company secured the future of its employees, the employees in their turn were required to show their loyalty to the company by working hard until late at night and participating in company events, such as employee outings and *nomikai* (drinking parties). Since companies required their employees to devote themselves to working hard for the company, it was hard for these Japanese employees to find a balance between work and family. This perpetuated the rigid division of gender roles in Japanese society where men work outside the home and play the role of the primary breadwinner for the family, while women stay at home, taking care of the children and doing

household chores. One implication of the Japanese company culture that required full devotion from their employees was the difficulty women encountered in attempting to progress in their careers in the way that men did. Rigid gender roles caused women to struggle to maintain both work and family, and since being a mother and a wife was considered enough of a calling for women, it was thought to be natural for women to prioritize their family over their work.

The roles of the *salaryman* (full-time white-collar male worker) and the *sengyooshufu* (full-time housewife) were developments of Japan's *hegemonic masculinity* and *emphasized femininity* in the early postwar years, during the 1950s and the 1960s. As a result of the slowdown in the Japanese economy in the 1990s, the idea of the salaryman began losing power as part of *hegemonic masculinity*. Dasgupta (2009:83) found that "As even large elite corporations abandoned practices such as lifetime employment guarantee, leaving increasing numbers of middle-aged *salarymen* without job security, questions about the cost to men and their families of subscribing to a discourse of masculinity prioritizing work above all else started to become increasingly audible in the public arena." Company restructuring and the difficulty of obtaining permanent work after graduating from university prompted society to question the myth of the *salaryman* as a symbol of the stability of Japanese society. During the Lost Decade, Japan's economy was marked by the emergence of alternative types of masculinity and femininity, such as the *freeter* (part-time worker), *arafo* (women around 40 years old), and *ikumen* (men who take an active role in childcare).

These phenomena of change in gender roles were also seen in Japanese television dramas. Most such dramas

before the 2000 depicted families with rigid gender roles, while in dramas produced after the 2000, there has been an attempt to show alternative types of femininity and masculinity beyond the *salaryman's* type of hegemonic masculinity and *sengyooshufu's* type of emphasized femininity. This article will examine how these television dramas depict alternative masculinities and femininities.

Muramatsu (1979) as cited in Gossmann (2000) divided female protagonists in Japanese television dramas in the 1960s to 1970s into two types, i. e. *tanomoshii haha* (reliable mothers) and *taeru onna* (suffering women). In her study, Muramatsu argued that Japanese television dramas of the time showed that women would be happy if they fulfilled their role in the domestic sphere as mothers and wives. If women try to live their lives outside the domestic sphere and escape the role of *tanomoshii haha*, they suffer from a powerless position in society because they do not live according to the dominant norms, as a wife and mother.

Gossmann (2000) developed Muramatsu's study, analyzing changes in gender roles in Japanese television dramas in the 1990s. The findings of her study showed that mothers were infallibly portrayed as positive characters in the 1960s, but by the 1970s, dramas began to shift and show mothers (and wives) as "negative characters"; one instance might be the role of a dominant mother-in-law or a wife who leaves home because of her participation in an extramarital affair.

Even though there was more variation in the depiction of the characters of mothers and wives in dramas of the 1990s, such depictions are still found within the frame of marriage, and alternative femininity and masculinity are not depicted beyond the overriding images of the *salaryman* and *sengyooshufu*. This

study is a preliminary examination of shifts in masculinity and femininity in Japanese television dramas after 2000 that focuses on contextualizing alternative femininity and masculinity in an attempt to break the values of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative method, conducting a descriptive analysis method of the scripts of four television dramas: *At Home Dad* (2004), *Around 40* (2008), *Freeter, Buy a House* (2010), and *Wonderful Single Life* (2012).

The reasons for selecting those television dramas above as primary data for this research are as follows: Those dramas depict various form of alternative masculinity and femininity such as *freeter*, *at home dad*, and *arafa*. Those dramas also reflect the conflict between hegemony masculinity and emphasized femininity as gender role dominant discourse versus alternative masculinity and femininity that attempt to challenge those dominant discourse. By putting these television dramas together as cultural text, I aim to read these dramas critically and closely to see how the main characters questioning, challenging, and negotiating their gender roles position in contemporary Japanese patriarchy society.

To analyze the data, I will use Connell's (1987,1995) paradigm of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. Masculinity here defined as the totality of the qualities and attributes associated with men. The word hegemony derives from the theory of cultural hegemony developed by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), who argued that the values, norms, and beliefs of the ruling class are dominant norms and become common sense values for all. Connell (1987) coined the phrase *hegemonic masculinity*, defining it as those values of masculinity that are

accepted as common sense and that marginalize other values and masculinities that do not fit with the ruling values.

To support the norms of hegemonic masculinity, values of femininity contrary to the values of hegemonic masculinity must be constructed. Femininity is defined as the totality of the qualities and attributes associated with women. Connell (1987) labeled the femininity that supports and strengthens *emphasized femininity*, which can be defined as values of femininity that put themselves forward as the truest and realest values for the women. In patriarchal society, the values of emphasized femininity are submissiveness, passivity, quietness, meekness, supportiveness, and skill in taking care of the home and children, in effect, values that strengthen the values of men as having authority.

Japanese society after World War II found a representation of hegemonic masculinity in the *salaryman* and the image of emphasized femininity in *sengyooshufu*. In this article, I will use the expressions *alternative masculinity* and *alternative femininity* to denote lifestyles in contrast with the norms of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. In what follows, Japanese names for characters in the dramas are written in Japanese order: family name first, followed by the given name. If only one name is used, it is that character's given name.

3. Results And Discussion

3.1 *Freeter* and house husband: the alternative masculinities

The Japanese television drama *Freeter, Buy a House* (broadcast by the Fuji channel from October 19 to December 21, 2010) depicted the life of a *freeter* in his twenties. The main character in the drama, Take Seiji, is a 23 years old university graduate. He has quit his permanent job after working for three months, because he felt that he did not fit in there. After

quitting, he has worked as a part-time worker or a *freeter*, which is a word used to denote part-time workers of 15-34 years old not categorized as housewives or students (Cook, 2013). Cook argued that university graduates in the 1990s faced greater difficulties finding a permanent job, than the preceding generation due to the slowdown in the Japanese economy. However, expectations of university graduates, particularly those of males, have not changed at all. Society expects university graduates to find stable and permanent work to secure their livelihoods. Misunderstood by those around them, men who work as *freeters* in their 20s and 30s face difficulties both in their finances and their mental and social well-being.

In *Freeter, Buy a House*, Seiji is depicted in contrast with his father, Take Seiichi, an accountant working at a moderate-sized company in Tokyo. Seiichi does not support his son's choice to become a freeter and feels that Seiji must show loyalty and work hard for one employer.

Seiji's character is depicted as having opposite traits from those of Japanese hegemonic masculinity: he has no permanent job or responsibilities, he gives up easily, and is very emotional. Seiichi, on the other hand, dominates his family, especially his wife, is a hard worker, has persevered in his employment, and has been working in the same company throughout his whole career. We can read the placement of the two characters of this drama that represent hegemonic masculinity and alternative masculinity together in one scene as a symbol that the position of hegemonic masculinity in Japanese society is encountering resistance and the hitherto solid position of hegemonic masculinity is being questioned by the younger generation.

If Seiji had been a woman, Seiichi might not have opposed her path as a university graduate *freeter* as harshly as he does. Because Seiji is male, in Seiichi's opinion, he should act like a real man, finding permanent employment and working hard to provide for his family. In this drama, Seiichi represents Japanese traditional thinking about men. Having a stable job is a requirement for recognition and acceptance as a real man, being a symbol of stability, security, and economic power, and a legitimation of power in patriarchy society. If a man does not have a secure job, he is a loser, underestimated by those around him, and placed at the periphery of society. Seiji's resistance of Seiichi promotes the awareness that there is a possibility of following a different life path than the lifestyle of a *salaryman*.

At Home Dad (aired by the Fuji channel from April 13 to June 29, 2004) portrays another type of alternative masculinity, the house husband. With a stable and permanent job at a high position, the main character, Yamamura Kazuyuki, has never thought he would be fired. He has a wife and a 4-year-old daughter. His wife does not work and has dedicated her life to taking care of the home and their daughter. At the same time that Kazuyuki is fired, Miki finds work at a magazine Miki used to work before she married Kazuyuki, and a friend from that period gives her employment. Thinking of their daily needs and the fact that the mortgage must be paid, Kazuyuki and Miki agreed to switch roles: Miki will work full-time and be the primary breadwinner for the family, and Kazuyuki will be a house husband, stay at home, do household chores, and take care of their daughter.

This show presents Kazuyuki's inner conflict. He once had a good career and was the only breadwinner in his family, but now he must subdue his ego

and accept that his wife provides for him. Another couple on the show are also in the same state as Kazuyuki and Miki: their neighbors, Shoko and Yusuke. Yusuke mentions to Kazuyuki that even though he tries to convince himself that there is nothing wrong with being a house husband, he often feels that he is not a success in society and has low self-esteem. Yusuke also says that he often faces difficulties in his daily life. For instance, when he fills out forms, he must write “not working” and cannot write “house husband” in the occupation column. This simple thing confirms that being a house husband is still not accepted by; along these lines, Yusuke says to Kazuyuki: “Even though we feel that we are doing all right, no one around us is comfortable with our state.”

Although Kazuyuki faces difficulties adjusting to his new role at first, eventually he is able to fully take care of his daughter and perform all the household chores. This shows us that gender roles are fluid and negotiable. Men can take care of children and the home, part of a role previously culturally constructed as belonging to women. On the other hand, women can work in the public sphere and be breadwinners for their families. Seen in terms of capabilities, men and women are each capable of working outside the home or doing household chores and taking care of children. However, the problem lies deeper than practical things such as capabilities. It is the internalization of patriarchal values enforced by the school, parents, and religious teachings that causes performers of alternative gender roles to feel uneasy and uncomfortable. The character of Kazuyuki in *At Home Dad* embodies that uneasiness in regard to various gender roles.

3.2 *Arafo* women: between marriage and single life

In this section, we will discuss alternative femininity values. Two corpus data will be discussed in this part: *Around 40* (aired by the TBS TV channel from April 11 to June 20, 2008) and *Wonderful Single Life* (aired by Fuji TV channel from October 11 to December 20, 2012).

The ideal of *ryoosaikenbo*, the good wife and wise mother, is an image of women dating from prewar Japan (Koyama, 1991). While men are expected to meet the standard of *risshinshusse* (standing on one’s own feet and being successful in society), women are expected to meet the standard of *ryoosaikenbo* (Saito, 2003). This means that marriage is essential to Japanese women, because this is the only way they can meet the standard of being a good wife and wise mother by entering the institution of marriage. The socialization and internalization of the *ryoosaikenbo* ideal is enforced especially through education in girls’ schools (*jogakkoo*). The Japanese government supported the establishment of such schools and controlled girls’ education in the ideology of *ryoosaikenbo*.

Although Japan entered a new era after World War II, acquiring a more democratic system that included equality of the genders regulated by Japanese civil law, the ideal of *ryoosaikenbo* remains alive in the minds of the Japanese people (Uno, 1993). This contrast could be analyzed as surface level changes and deep level continuity. Physically, cultural constructs of society are changing. For instance, in postwar Japan, men and women had the same right to get an education and gender equality was assured under the law. At a deep level, however, in the norms of society and in people’s minds, the ideals of *risshinshusse* and *ryoosaikenbo* dominate in Japan as images of ideal men and women.

Cameron as cited in Heilbrun (2008:16) writes, “for men can be men

only if women are unambiguously women.” “Men can be men” here means being men according to patriarchal values, and its realization can only occur if women are unambiguously women. However, what is it to be unambiguously woman? An unambiguous woman is one who meets the standard of patriarchal values, a woman who supports the belief that men are dominant and have real power and authority. Culturally constructed characters of real men and women can be defined only if they work in binary opposition. Men are expected to be active, exhibit strong leadership, work hard, and have economic and social power. To enable men to meet these standards, there must be binary opposition- a role that is passive and submissive, has no ambition, and less power. This binary opposite to the real man is what Cameron calls “unambiguous women”.

The shows *Around 40* and *Wonderful Single Life* portray ambiguous women who break the norms of patriarchy and act as obstacles to strengthening men’s power.

In 2008, the word *arayo* (an abbreviated form of the phrase around forty in Japanese pronunciation) began to be commonly used. It is used to describe “women born between 1964 and 1973, who came of age during Japan’s Bubble Era, and who entered the workforce as the country’s Equal Employment Opportunity Law was being implemented in 1986.” (Freedman & Iwata-Weickgenant, 2011:295). Compared to the generation before them, *arayo* women have more freedom to choose between work or family (Freedman & Iwata-Weickgenant, 2011; Tanaka, 2008).

Around 40 depicts the three different lifestyles of three women in the second half of their 30s. The main character Ogata Satoko, is a 39-year-old single woman who has a good career as a psychiatrist. This drama’s opening scene takes place at her

high school reunion, where Satoko feels uncomfortable because she is the only one in her class that is not married and her singleness is questioned by her high school friends. Feeling desperate, Satoko registers at a dating agency but finds that women of her age and career have difficulty finding their choice of men, because generally, such men are already married. Although some are not married, if they are not as successful as Satoko, they will feel inferior.

Besides Satoko, there are two other central figures in the drama, Takeuchi Mizue and Morimura Nao, Satoko’s best friends from high school. Mizue lives as a *sengyooshufu* and her husband, Akio, is a typical Japanese salaryman. They have one 15-year-old son. Traditional gender roles are criticized on the show through the portrayal of Mizue and Akio’s desperation in adhering to hegemonic masculinity and emphasized feminine values. Akio has been fired but does not dare tell the truth to his wife and son, because he feels it is his obligation to provide for his family. Every day, he wakes up in the morning and puts on his *salaryman* suit and pretends to go to his workplace to ensure that his wife and his son do not know what he is facing.

The rigid separation of gender roles between man and woman is questioned in the depiction of these two characters. Generally, patriarchal norms are thought to poorly serve women and limit them, but they also limit and are a disservice to men, which can be seen in Akio’s internal conflict. The internalization of values of hegemonic masculinity by Akio makes him feel useless after he loses his job. Furthermore, such values of hegemonic masculinity as being ambitious and showing strong leadership, are not easy to give up; these hold Akio back and do not allow him to tell his problems to his wife and son.

On her side, Mizue feels that her life is hollow and wants to break her routines by finding a job. Without telling her husband, she begins working in marketing, promoting new restaurants. At first, she has trouble adjusting to her work, but gradually, she becomes used to it and is able to actualize herself by working. Even though she is busy and tired, she tries to take care of her home as best as she can, cooking for her son and his husband. This is in line with Hochschild's (1989) discussion of "the second shift." Hochschild argues that even though women can go out of their homes and work, they continue to have a greater obligation than men to do house chores and take care of children. Hochschild (1989) concludes, "Most women without children spend much more time than men on housework; with children, they devote more time to both housework and child care. Just as there is a wage gap between men and women in the workplace, there is a "leisure gap" between them at home. Most women work one shift at the office or factory and a "second shift" at home."

Satoko's other friend, Morimura Nao, is an editor at a women's fashion magazine. Thinking that it would benefit her career, she married a powerful man at her company. The reality is different from what she had thought it would be. Her husband intimidates her and does not respect her. Unhappy and unable to be herself, after careful thinking, Nao chooses to leave her husband. In the end, she learns that her life should depend on herself and not on others.

Around 40 exhibits three different lifestyles of three women. The show illustrates that *arayo* women have the privilege of choosing and designing their life paths. While for women in prewar and early postwar Japan, their parents or their surroundings defined their lives, usually through *miai* (*miai* (arranged marriage),

these *arayo* women themselves define and pursue what works best for their life. However, this freedom to choose has consequences for these women's lives: they must be ready to engage in conflict with others and with their inner selves. These conflicts in the journey of defining and designing their life paths are a central theme in *Around 40*.

Wonderful Single Life portrays the life of a 44-year-old single woman with a good career named Kirishima Haruko. She is confident in her decision to not get married and is focused on her career. On the other hand, another main character, Tanaka Chiharu, is a 35-year-old single woman who is uncomfortable with her status. As the story develops, Satoko becomes a role model for Chiharu. At the beginning of the story, Chiharu is dispirited by being single in her 30s. However, seeing Satoko's way of life, Chiharu recasts her thoughts on marriage, concluding that marriage is not a necessary goal that needs to be achieved and even though she is not married, life goes on and she can embrace it to the fullest. Chiharu finds that her life is fulfilled and made happy not by entering marriage but by following her heart. At the end of the story, Chiharu realizes that the decision to marry should come from her own will and not because of societal pressure. While the story of *Around 40* focuses on the possibilities of women having many different ways of life, *Wonderful Single Life* questions the discourse of marriage and tries to socialize and normalize the discourse of being single.

Both *Around 40* and *Wonderful Single Life* feature a male character who escapes from the values of hegemonic masculinity. Ohashi Sadao in *Around 40* and Kudo Junpei in *Wonderful Single Life* are part-time workers with low self-esteem and weak characters. At the end of the story, each has developed a relationship with the

main character, Sadao with Satoko, and Junpei with Chiharu. These relationships are not dominated by men. The shows feature equal relationships between a man and a woman. In Japanese dramas before 2000, most male characters are portrayed as protectors and patrons of the women in relationships with them, while in these two dramas, there is no image of protector and the male role of patron is absent. Both male characters are far from dominating their relationships, and the power relations between men and women in these shows are more fluid and negotiable. The line between the one who exercises greater power and the one who exercises less is obscured. This is represented, for instance, in scenes where both the man and the woman pay the restaurant bill, each allow their partner to pursue their dreams, and respect each other's choices in life. This flexibility reflects the fluidity and the negotiability of power relations between men and women.

3.3 Between status quo and the changing idea of gender: resistance to and continuity in preserving hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity

In the TV dramas discussed, *salaryman* and *sengyooshufu* characters exhibit alternative masculinity and femininity lifestyles. For instance, Seiji in *Freeter, Buy a House*, has conflicts with his father, a *salaryman* who considers the lifestyle of a *freeter* to be the lifestyle of a loser. Chiharu in *Wonderful Single Life* experiences pressure from her friends and her family to quickly marry. Her mother even tries to create a *miaikekkon* (arranged marriage) for her.

The main characters' choice to live an alternative life rather than following the standard norms to be a *salaryman* or a *sengyooshufu* can be interpreted as a reflection that hegemonic masculinity and

emphasized femininity in contemporary Japan is questioned, challenged and negotiated. However, the dominant discourse of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity is still strongly rooted in Japanese society, as can be seen in conflict between hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity values and alternative masculinity and femininity values. The main characters often had a moment of doubting themselves whether it is alright or not to live an alternative life different from mainstream hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity discourse.

What is interesting here is that it is not directly a formal institution such as school or country, but part of main characters' daily life, such as father, mother, friends, who resist alternative masculinity and femininity. Those who pursue status quo values are blended into the main characters' daily lives and perpetuate dominant constructions of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity as natural and the most correct lifestyle.

Bartky (1990:75) finds that "The absence of formal institutional structure and of authorities invested with the power to carry out institutional directives creates the impression that the production of femininity is either entirely voluntary or natural." How men or women should act, live, and fulfill their gender roles are constantly internalized in their daily lives through conversation between family members, school friends gathering, small talk between colleagues at office. It makes the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity looks very natural and it leads society to think that this is a normal thing, this is how we have to live our life. This kind of perception close the door for dialogue, for rethinking and revisiting those dominant discourse of gender roles in contemporary Japan.

4. Conclusion

From the analysis of the four Japanese television dramas, it can be concluded that Japanese TV dramas after 2000 portray alternative masculinity and femininity, while before 2000, most Japanese television dramas depict characters within a prism of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. In these corpus data, three alternative lifestyles of masculinity and femininity are found: *freeter*, *house husband*, and *arafo*.

Television characters who exhibit alternative masculinity and femininity experience inner conflicts in their lives and often continue to think on some level that the life of a *salaryman* or a *senryooshufu* is the best way of life. Those around then support hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity as the best values and force the characters discussed here to question their choices in life.

The basic question arising from these findings is whether the depictions of alternative masculinity and femininity in these four television dramas function as a driving force to change values in society. Gossman (2000) found the following:

Television dramas are an important and influential form of popular culture in many countries, often providing value that goes beyond mere entertainment. For many viewers, television serves as a kind of “significant other” against which they develop, maintain, and revise their self-concepts, including perceptions of gender and role-identification (Gossmann, 2000:207).

Thus, it can be concluded that television dramas are more than mere entertainment, being able to effectively shape agents of socialization and spread changing values. In watching dramas, viewers reflect, question, and rethink the gender roles they accept, and as they obtain new insights from these dramas,

they are able to develop and change their habits of thought on social values.

The four television dramas discussed above portray social phenomena in contemporary Japanese society, while simultaneously functioning as agents of socialization of new and changing values regarding masculinity and femininity.

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