

# Nature vs. Culture in Hayao Miyazaki's *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*

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**Abstract.** The issue of environment/nature and women is often discussed because nature and women are still often marginalized in various sectors of life in almost every nation. Therefore, this article raises the environmental and gender issues theme in Hayao Miyazaki's anime *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*. This article results from literature research using a qualitative paradigm with feminist media studies and gender perspective design. This study aims to describe the depiction of women from the contemporary Japanese culture's perspective concerning nature as visualized in this anime. The analysis found two things, namely (1) nature/women as modes of production and reproduction, and (2) nature/women are independent and empowered. In conclusion, this anime's female characters are depicted as independent and empowered, although these characters are occasionally shown as women generally stereotyped, which shows humane. The relationship between the leading female and male characters in this anime symbolizes the binary opposition pairs of nature (female) vs. culture (male). In the real world, nature is considered inferior to culture and can be exploited at will. However, this exploit does not occur in this anime, nor does the domination of men over women. Maybe Miyazaki wanted to show that nature is not subordinate to culture, as women are not subordinates to men. Therefore, they can coexist harmoniously in this big world.

## 1 Introduction

The environment/nature and women issue is still an exciting topic to discuss. Until now, women continue to fight for equality, no longer only for women themselves but for all human beings regardless of their sex and gender. Likewise, people are still voicing their concern about preserving nature from greedy hands who only want to benefit as much as possible from nature without caring about its sustainability. Women also carry out efforts to fight for the preservation of nature. This effort is known as ecofeminism as a part of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism seeks to explore how writers depict nature in their literary works. Just as perceptions of gender gradually change, literary works that represent these things are not only produced by a particular culture but also play an essential role in producing that culture [1].

Many literary works raise issues about women and nature, conventional literary works in the form of texts such as novels and short stories, as well as more modern and popular

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ones such as films and anime, for example, books by Indonesian novelist Ayu Utami and several anime directed by Hayao Miyazaki produced by Studio Ghibli, Japan. However, this article will only discuss the anime *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* [2], which is the corpus of this research. The selection of the research corpus in the form of anime is based on the premise that anime, as a part of pop culture, is generally more acceptable at various age levels than classical literary works, so they are more likely to reach a wider audience [3].

This study aims to describe the representation of women from the contemporary Japanese culture's perspective concerning nature as visualized in this anime. Swale said that animation could be defined as a "text" bearing distinctive representational traits vis a vis cinema [4], which became one of several reasons why I chose anime as a research corpus. Meanwhile, this anime was chosen because, in this anime, there are issues about gender and the environment which are still very relevant to today's global problems. In addition, the name Hayao Miyazaki seems to guarantee the quality of the anime he directed because Miyazaki, an icon of Studio Ghibli, is considered to have an extraordinary contribution to contemporary pop culture by the international film community [5]. Some of his works are focused on ecology, one of which is the anime which became the corpus of this research, thus earning Miyazaki the nickname an environmentalist [6].

Besides being considered to focus on environmental and ecological mandates, Miyazaki's works are also considered more in favor of women than other animated films with similar themes. The anime *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* is one example. This film is similar to Disney's animated film titled *The Little Mermaid*, an adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's work. Both films tell about a mermaid's effort to be able to live on dry land. Nevertheless, the mermaid in Miyazaki's anime is shown as an independent and empowered character. That contrasts with the mermaid in Disney's because her depiction is very much in line with the stereotype of women; weak and dependent on others, especially men [7].

The anime *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* tells the story of the friendship between a 5-year-old boy named Sosuke and Ponyo, a goldfish princess Sosuke once found trapped in a glass bottle on the beach named after released her. Ponyo then uses her father's magic potion to transform herself into a little girl. Soon after, the two children embark on an adventure of a lifetime to save a town by the sea and fulfill Ponyo's dreams of becoming a human that lives in the dry land.

This anime has been widely studied from various points of view. One of them is Noviana's research which tried to discover the Japanese people's view of the sea as described in this anime through semiotic meanings [3]. Other research belongs to Rifā-Valls, who explored the representation of girl power in Miyazaki's *shōjo anime* or anime for girls, including this anime, through feminist media studies [8].

## 2 Methods

This study uses the qualitative paradigm with feminist media studies and gender perspective design. The data collected include events, objects, dialogues, and figures related to nature and the female characters in the research corpus, Hayao Miyazaki's anime *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, released in 2008. Data collection uses observation and record techniques. The data analysis uses interpretive qualitative discourse analysis with feminist media studies and gender perspective design, focused on how women are represented in their relationship with nature and others. In addition, some data were analyzed using a semiotic approach to determine the meaning of the signs contained in the data in the form of images. With these methods, the representation of women from the contemporary Japanese culture's point of view depicted in this anime can be described.

## 3 Result and Discussion

### 3.1 Result

This research found two things using feminist media studies and gender perspective design to examine how Japanese women are portrayed in Miyazaki's anime *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*. These are (1) nature/women as modes of production and reproduction, and (2) nature/women are independent and empowered.

### 3.2 Discussion

Lebra said men are placed above women in Japan, just as the head is above the body. This status asymmetry involving female inferiority, subordination, and vulnerability ties in with legal patricentricity in property ownership, household headship, and succession [9]. Meanwhile, Ortner mentioned that a woman's place is in the domestic sphere. She also said that a woman is being identified with, or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to a man, who is identified with the culture [10]. At this point, we can see that the dichotomy of nature vs. culture is mostly the same as of women vs. men. Therefore, it can be said that analyzing the female characters is the same as analyzing nature in this anime.

#### 3.2.1 Nature/women as modes of production and reproduction

Besides their modes of production, people are also well known for how women are also in the modes of reproduction, biologically and socially. According to Marx and Engels [11], the mode of production for individuals is what they stated below.

“a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and how they produce.”

In other words, the mode of production refers to the varied ways that human beings collectively produce the means of subsistence in order to survive and enhance social beings. As the leading female character, Ponyo proves her mode of production by making a candle-operated toy boat become a real boat with her magical power.



Fig. 1. The real boat from the candle-operated toy boat that Ponyo made.

With that boat, as in Figure 1, she and Sosuke can go somewhere safer and seek Lisa, Sosuke's mother, after the tsunami attack that floods their little town. Aside from Ponyo, Lisa and other women in the town proves their mode of production by working in public or/and cooking at home.

Miyazaki defamiliarizes the idea of passive and domesticated Japanese women by trying to "liberate" them in this anime. The women's mode of reproduction is what Miyazaki is trying to liberate; it is not women's obligation alone because men also play their part. However, the part where men play here is more extensive, even enormous. It is because, from the very start of this anime, the audience can watch how Fujimoto, Ponyo's father, is the one who makes all the living beings of the sea with his magic potion, as in Figure 2 below.



**Fig. 2.** Fujimoto in the making of living beings in the ocean.

Fujimoto was a former human witch. He married Gran Mamare, the sea queen, and had Ponyo and her brothers and sisters. He is responsible for making living beings of the sea, not Gran Mamare. Even though Gran Mamare is the queen of the sea, she is never shown to be making any living beings in this anime.

However, Miyazaki still shows women with their mode of reproduction by representing a mother and her baby. When Ponyo sees them evacuating by boat, she happily gives the baby her soup but then gets angry when the mother eats it. The mother then explains to Ponyo that a baby can not eat yet, so the mother has to eat to provide breast milk for her baby, which women can only produce when she gives birth to babies.

In Zuckerman's theory, dominance was closely linked to male competition for control of resources (females). Females then emerged as natural raw material for the imposition of male order through the consequences of reproductive physiology [12]. Nevertheless, Miyazaki shows no domination nor competition in this anime, for women and men play the same part in the mode of reproduction.

### 3.2.2 Nature/women are independent and empowered

Miyazaki defamiliarizes the “traditional” Japanese women’s images in this anime. He shifted these images with them as leading roles, independent, and occupying the public spheres. While the “traditional” Japanese women are timid and weak, dependent on others, especially men, and can be seen only in domestic spheres, the female characters in this anime are the opposite. Ponyo, as the leading female character, is such an energetic little goldfish/little girl. She is very curious, never afraid to try something new, likes seeking challenges, and can decide on her own, and many more traits show that she is not just a stereotyped Japanese little girl.



**Fig. 3.** Ponyo tries to sneak out from her vessel’s house at the bottom of the sea.

As a goldfish princess, Ponyo is not allowed to wander to the surface, which is dangerous for little fishes. However, she tries to sneak out from her vessel’s house at the bottom of the sea to see the surface because her curiosity is enormous, as in Figure 3. After she saw the surface and met Sosuke, the little boy who freed her from a jam bottle, she decided to put her best effort into becoming human and living in the dry land. This storyline is similar to Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*, where Ariel (woman) helps Prince Eric (man), whose ship is sinking, but in a reversed position; Sosuke (man) helps Ponyo (woman). Ponyo and Ariel then fall in love with the man, but Ponyo is far luckier than Ariel; in the end, she becomes human and lives with Sosuke and his family. This happy-ending story is typical for the younger audience, who does not yet know life’s grey areas.



**Fig. 4.** Sosuke freed Ponyo from a jam bottle.

The scene that shows how Sosuke helps free Ponyo, who was trapped in a jam bottle, as in Figure 4, shows that the woman sometimes needs others to help her, which is humane, even though that woman was not in the form of a human. On the other hand, Ponyo’s mother, Gran Mamare, is the queen of the sea, not the god Neptune. As a queen of the sea, the graceful Gran Mamare’s character shows that a woman can be a leader and govern a

vast area, in this case, the sea. Although her scene is not as much as Ponyo's, the audience knows that she indeed has the traits of a good leader, e.g., deciding something wisely. Protecting and nurturing the sea and its surroundings, including all beings, is her nature as a leader and a mother, making her more "mother-naturedly".



**Fig. 5.** Gran Mamare protects the nursing home by the sea during a tsunami attack.

Gran Mamare uses her power to protect the nursing home by the sea during a tsunami attack, as in Figure 5, and the ships in the ocean. All the living beings in the nursing home and those ships are safe. This scene follows what Žižek said about animated film logic, as follows [4].

“The logic of the cartoon to underscore his conception of a universe in which a human being can survive any catastrophe; in which adult sexuality is reduced to a childish game; in which one is not forced to die or to choose one of the two sexes.”

During those tsunami attacks, nobody was seriously injured, let alone died. It proves what Žižek said about animated film logic; no one can hurt anyone. It also shows how loving and caring the queen of the sea is for others. Moreover, the audience can see that the sea and the dry land are in the same frame in Figure 5; fishes are “swimming” freely in the air, giant jellyfish acting like an umbrella for Gran Mamare, and an enormous giant jellyfish acting as a shield for the nursing home. This scene is probably intended to show the audience that two worlds can live harmoniously: the sea and the dry land, nature and culture, and women and men. Furthermore, in Figure 5, Gran Mamare stands side by side with Lisa, who works in the nursing home. This scene also proves that women in this anime are not only in the domestic sphere, but they can occupy the public sphere, too.

## 4 Conclusion

From contemporary Japanese culture's perspective, based on the anime *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea*, the female characters depicted in this anime are independent and empowered. Although these characters are occasionally shown as women generally stereotyped, e.g., sometimes depending on others, that shows humane. The relationship between the leading female and male characters in this anime symbolizes the binary opposition pairs of nature (female) vs. culture (male). In the real world, nature is considered inferior to culture and can be exploited at will. However, this exploit does not occur in this anime, nor does the domination of men over women. Moreover, Ponyo, as the leading female character, plays a liminal character who alters femininity and aligns herself with the grotesque (a shapeshifter), the non-human (animals, in this case, goldfish), the gods (a daughter of the queen of the sea), and nature (a woman). Maybe Miyazaki wanted to show that nature is not

subordinate to culture, as women are not subordinates to men. Therefore, they can coexist harmoniously in this big world.

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