

Construction of Femininity in Hajime Isayama's *Attack of Titan*

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Abstract

The roles of women in Japanese anime have become a permeating topic over the years. Many have criticized it for its negative portrayal of women particularly, the over-sexualization and the lack of agency for the female characters. Writers are constantly striving to challenge and change the portrayal of women that are not only negative but damaging for its young audience. The paper argues that the *Attack of Titan* (AOT) constructs femininity in a complex and multifaceted manner, portraying female characters as strong, capable, and agency-driven individuals. The analysis identifies themes such as self-discovery, self-actualization, and the search for identity central to the series' portrayal of femininity. Using a qualitative approach, the study employs literary and visual analysis of key episodes, dialogues, and character arcs in *AOT*. Through the lens of third-wave feminism and intersectionality, the analysis situates the anime within the broader cultural context of Japanese media and global feminist discourse. The findings reveal that *AOT* employs various tropes-such as The Strong Woman, The Non-Damsel in Distress, The Playful/Jovial Woman, The Angry Woman, The Sacrificial Woman, and The Queer Woman-to uplift female characters rather than objectify or diminish their agency, as seen in other anime. The study argues that Isayama's use of these tropes challenges traditional gender norms, granting female characters autonomy and complexity. Furthermore, the animation itself plays a crucial role in this portrayal, allowing for dynamic representations of femininity through expressive character actions, emotions, and physical strength. The paper contributes to ongoing discussions on gender representation in anime by demonstrating how *AOT* subverts conventional portrayals of women, offering a progressive and nuanced depiction of femininity. The study underscores the potential of anime as a medium for feminist storytelling, highlighting how animation can empower female characters and redefine traditional gender expectations.

Keywords: Femininity, Japanese animation, Anime, Feminism, Hajime Isayama, Agency.

Introduction

In recent times, Japanese animation has become popular worldwide. Anime can be described as a Japanese style of animated film or entertainment. It finds its origin in the Japanese word *animēshon*, which emerged in the 1910s. Japanese animation is intriguing to examine since it caters to a wide range of preferences and is different from popular Western animation. In truth, anime is a form of expression that the Japanese have adopted that goes beyond the standard set by Western animations. This contains animation geared toward kids, teenagers, and adults, with themes ranging from simple tales to warfare, crime, thriller, horror, gore, science fiction, romance, and erotica. It has also been appreciated for its unique construction of plots.

Despite its popularity, Japanese animation has been criticized for its portrayal of female characters in a derogatory way. Women often play secondary roles as mothers, sisters, innocent virgins, overtly sexualized beings, and occasionally girlfriends. This can be seen in even

popular animes like *Saint Seiya*, *Slam Dunk*, and *Dragon Ball*. In addition, the female characters are depicted to live their lives for the pleasure of both the male characters and the male audience. This is done through the use of *fan service*. It has also been criticized for the encouragement of pedophilia. This is because, many of the female characters are depicted to have the bodies of pubescent girls, even when they are older.

Even when these animations try to avoid the use of fan service, the depictions of the female characters are still backward. *Dragon Ball* (1960), despite the strong plot and male characters struggling to save the world from evil, still fails in its depiction of women. The women do not have any role, and when they do, they are required to remain subservient to their men. The anime is mostly geared toward men and emphasizes hard effort, toughness, perseverance, and dedication as the keys to success. The female characters on the other hand, despite being willing to work just as hard as the men, are made less intelligent as the men. Most, importantly, when in a dangerous situation, women frequently adopt the stereotypical role of the "damsel in distress" that is all too prevalent in male-oriented anime and manga. This can be seen in the character of Nami in *One Piece* and Kōhei Horikoshi's *My Hero Academia*. In *My Hero Academia*, despite the fact that the characters are gifted with magical and combat abilities, somehow, none of the female students can beat the male characters in fighting. This can be seen in season one of the Sports Festival Arc.

The case of infantilization and subordination can also be seen in the very popular *Death Note* (2015). In this story, Kira, the girlfriend of the protagonist, despite holding or having supernatural abilities is depicted as overtly sexual, the dumb blond and she is infantilized. Almost all the female characters are depicted in that manner. This normalizes the stereotype that women as helpless, childish, dependent, and in need of rescue.

Research in Literature: Third-Wave Feminism and its Application to *Attack on Titan*

Introduction to Third-wave Feminism

Third-wave feminism emerged in the 1990s as a response to the limitations of earlier feminist waves, particularly second-wave feminism, which was critiqued for centering the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual women while marginalizing others. This movement championed inclusivity and intersectionality, recognizing that gender oppression is interlinked with other forms of discrimination, such as racism, classism, and homophobia.

Third-wave feminists sought to redefine feminism by challenging traditional notions of gender, embracing individual empowerment, and engaging with popular culture. They also foregrounded the importance of representation and critique in media and literature, making feminist lenses critical tools for analyzing narratives that shape societal perceptions of gender, power, and identity.

Intersectionality and Popular Culture

Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is a cornerstone of third-wave feminism. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of various social categories—race, gender, sexuality, and class—and their combined influence on experiences of oppression and privilege. Media and popular culture are key sites for exploring these intersections, as they reflect and shape societal norms and values.

Anime, a globally consumed form of Japanese media, has become an influential platform for storytelling that resonates with audiences across diverse cultural and socio-political contexts. As such, *Attack on Titan* offers fertile ground for applying third-wave feminist theories, allowing for a nuanced examination of how narratives grapple with identity, power, and the complexities of human experience.

Summary of *Attack of Titan*

Attack on Titan is set in a world where humanity lives within three walls to protect itself from Titans, giant humanoid creatures who devour humans without any apparent reason. The story follows Eren Yeager, his adopted sister Mikasa Ackerman, and his best friend Armin Arlert as they join the military to fight against the Titans after their home town is destroyed by them.

The Titans are giant humanoid creatures that roam the world outside the walls of human cities. The Titans are portrayed as terrifying and mindless creatures that prey on humans, driving humanity to the brink of extinction. What makes the animation unique, is that symbolically, the Titans can represent a number of things. One interpretation is that they symbolize the existential threat that humanity faces, whether that be from natural disasters, war, or other catastrophes. They also represent the unknown and the uncontrollable, as the Titans are unpredictable and difficult to understand or manage. Moreover, the Titans can also be seen as a representation of the destructive power of the human ego. In the story, it is revealed that the Titans were created through the misuse of technology and a desire for power and that the humans who created them ultimately lost control of their creations. This can be interpreted as a warning against the unchecked pursuit of power and control, and the potential consequences of ignoring ethical considerations. Overall, the Titans in *Attack on Titan* can be seen as a multi-faceted symbol that represents various themes and ideas throughout the story.

Attack on Titan explores a range of complex themes, including power, freedom, sacrifice, and the nature of humanity. It raises questions about the morality of war and the consequences of violence.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach to analyze the portrayal of gender, sexuality, and identity in *Attack on Titan* through the lens of third-wave feminism and intersectionality. The following methodological steps guide the study:

Literary Analysis: The study conducts a textual and visual analysis of key episodes, dialogues, and character arcs in *Attack on Titan*. This method examines how the anime represents traditional and non-traditional gender roles, power dynamics, and intersectional identities. The anime is situated within the broader cultural context of Japanese media and global feminism. Themes of representation in anime are linked to societal expectations and audience reception, particularly in the context of feminist critique.

Theoretical Framework: Third-wave feminism and intersectionality form the theoretical foundation. Concepts such as gender fluidity, empowerment, systemic oppression, and inclusivity are used to interpret character relationships, storylines, and societal structures depicted in the series.

Scope of the Research and Limitations While focused primarily on gender and intersectionality, the research acknowledges that the anime also explores themes like war, freedom, and existentialism. The study uses a selection of episodes and scenes deemed most relevant to the research questions, rather than the entirety of the series. The research focuses on the portrayal of gender, sexuality, and identity in the anime *Attack on Titan*.

Tropes and the Construction of Femininity in *Attack of Titan*

As stated earlier, the portrayal of female characters has often not been positive in the history of Japanese animations. In keeping with the labour structure of Japanese culture, where women are still not considered capable of making critical decisions, female characters are rarely shown in decision-making roles. In contrast to the actions of the male characters, whose accomplishments and crucial choices made, while acting in a superior role continue to be accentuated and frequently serve as the foundation of the primary plot, women's workplace activities are rarely portrayed as being vital. However, the few instances in which female characters in anime choose a job over traditional family responsibilities are portrayed as motivated but lacking in femininity (Grigsby, 1998). According to Matanle et al. (2014), the career-focused female character of the anime was shown with exaggerated postfeminist traits like her absence of modesty, aggressiveness, and sexual forwardness. This is also the common portrayal of women in telenovellas such as, *When you are Mine*, *Theresa*, *Gardener's Daughter*, *Rubi*. These women are given terrible ends such as terminal illness, insanity and sometimes, death. One can say that these women were punished for being strong, hardworking and for not being a damsel in distress. In spite of the fact that these traits are praised in Japanese men, they are discouraged in women. As a result, the female characters are painted negatively and cast as a problem for the male protagonist. According to Grigsby and Matanle et al. (2014), female characters who focus on their careers are frequently depicted without love or a family, implying that women must choose between advancing their careers and starting families. These portrayals are not far from the truth, as the overwhelming of highly skilled Japanese women give up their careers after getting married or having children because they are dissatisfied with their uninteresting positions or lack of opportunity (Kimura, 2007)

Consequently, the main objective of this study is to determine how much gender inequality is both reproduced and challenged by AOT. In addition, this study looks into the ways that *Attack of Titan* incorporates postfeminist elements. *Attack of Titan* remains one of the animation which has a complete portrayal of women with agency. Isayama's AOT is quite unique, particularly in his portrayal of both gender and sexualities. AOT has a balance in the manner men and women are portrayed. It can also be observed that there is a level playing field for all genders. All the female characters are completely developed and do not fit into a single stereotypical stereotype, albeit having their eccentricities. Additionally, they go through significant character arcs that highlight their depth and uniqueness. This paper will further buttress the tropes of femininity in AOT

The Trope of The Strong Woman

This paper explains strength as a physically strong woman. This is because majority of the female characters exhibit both mental and emotional maturity. Taking the lead in this case is

Mikasa. She is the love interest of Eren Yeager, the protagonist. She is the second most skilled fighter coming after Levi Ackerman. At the training of the 104th Cadet Corps, she ranked first in the top ten, beating both men and other women. She is regarded as an asset to both the Survey Corps and humanity. Her one flaw in the entire series is her obsession with the protagonist. Mikasa's motivations are a driving force in the series. She is fiercely loyal to Eren and will do whatever it takes to protect him, even if it means going against orders or risking her own life. Her desire to protect those she cares about is rooted in her traumatic past, and her determination to never lose anyone again is a key aspect of her character. However, in season 4, Part one, that obsession was explained to be the result of her Ackerman blood which is required to serve the king. But despite this flaw, she becomes a tool that rescues people in distress including the protagonist of the series. She takes a stand against her love for Eren in order to save all of humanity. Her character is a sharp contrast against other female characters in other anime and even western movies. Oftentimes, other female characters gladly drop their careers, and dreams for the sake of love. This can be seen both Hollywood movies, Bollywood movies as well as Telenovellas.

The Non-Damsel in Distress

A character that fits into this category is Historia Reiss, formerly known as Christa Lenz. She goes through a significant character change throughout the course of the seasons. She grows from a naive girl to a strong and dedicated woman. Despite the willingness of others to save her, she turns the situation around and saves others. Her small and petite frame does not hinder her from performing her responsibilities as a soldier. Even when she was told that she was to become the queen of Paradis, she requested to fight and prove herself to the people that she would lead. She risked her life to defeat her father who was on his way to destroy all of humanity.

At the beginning of the series, Historia is introduced as a meek and submissive character who is often pushed around by others. However, as the story progresses, she begins to question her own identity and place in the world. She learns that her true identity is Historia Reiss, and not Krista Lenz, the name she was given to conceal her true identity. This realization marks the beginning of her growth and transformation as a character. Historia's transformation is closely tied to her newfound agency. She begins to take control of her own life and make decisions for herself, rather than letting others make decisions for her. She joins the Survey Corps and becomes a skilled fighter, proving to herself and others that she is capable of much more than she ever thought possible.

Historia's growth is also tied to her developing sense of morality. She begins to question the actions of the military and the government and eventually comes to realize that many of their actions are morally questionable. She decides to take a stand against the corrupt system and fight for what she believes is right, even if it means going against orders or risking her own life. Finally, Historia's growth can be seen as a form of redemption. She starts out as a character who is defined by her submission and lack of agency, but through her experiences, she is able to overcome her past and become a strong and independent person. Her growth is inspiring and shows that it is possible to overcome even the most difficult circumstances. Overall, Historia's growth in *Attack on Titan* is a key aspect of her character development. Through her newfound

identity, agency, relationships, morality, and redemption, she becomes a strong and capable character who is able to inspire others and fight for what is right.

The Playful/Jovial Woman

The most joyful character in the series is Sasha Braus. She is noted for her obsession with food. But despite that, she was willing to sacrifice her life to help the needy. She was kind, courageous, friendly, and not to mention the best sharpshooter they had. She grows from being a selfish young girl to a woman who would risk her life for others. She makes a great impression on the younger character Kaya.

Sasha is known for her sense of humor and ability to make others laugh. She often uses her wit and sarcasm to lighten the mood during tense situations, and her jokes and one-liners are a source of comic relief throughout the series. Her sense of humor is a defining aspect of her character and helps to make her a fan favorite. Another aspect of Sasha's jovial nature is her love of food. She is often seen eating or talking about food, and her enthusiasm for all things culinary is infectious. Her. Despite the bleak and often terrifying world of *Attack on Titan*, Sasha maintains an optimistic outlook on life. She believes in the goodness of people and the possibility of a better future, and her positive attitude is a source of hope for the other characters. Her optimism also helps to balance out the darker aspects of the series and adds a touch of levity to the story.

Finally, Sasha's growth throughout the series is another aspect of her jovial nature. She starts out as a somewhat one-dimensional character, defined by her love of food and sense of humor. However, as the series progresses, she becomes a more well-rounded character, with her own fears, desires, and motivations. Her growth is a testament to her strength and resilience and adds depth to her character. Overall, Sasha Braus is a jovial woman in *Attack on Titan*, known for her sense of humor, love of food, optimism, loyalty, and growth. Her character adds a touch of lightheartedness to the series, while also providing important moments of depth and emotion.

Sadly, Sasha's journey as a round character comes to a tragic end when she is killed in action. This further adds to her complexity, as her death shows the cost of war and the toll it takes on even the most beloved characters. Her death also serves as a reminder of the stakes of the larger conflict and the importance of the characters' mission.

The Angry Woman

A major trope used in the animation is the trope of the angry woman. Oftentimes, this trope is used to display negativity. However, Isayama uses the trope to drive the plot. The angry character in this case is Annie Leonhar. Despite being a villain in the first season. One cannot help but admire her strength and perseverance. She is skilled in combat and warfare. She would not hesitate to fight whoever opposes her, including Mikasa.

One of the key benefit of Annie's anger is her motivation. Her anger makes her passionate about her mission and her desire to uncover the truth about the Titans. She is fiercely loyal to her cause and is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve her goals. This passion is what drives her actions throughout the series, and makes her a compelling character to watch.

Annie is a complex character with a range of emotions that she keeps hidden beneath a stoic exterior. Her passion is often expressed through her intense emotions, whether it be anger, sadness, or frustration. This makes her a character that viewers can relate to on a human level, and adds depth and complexity to her personality. Annie's growth throughout the series is also a testament to her passion. She starts out as a somewhat one-dimensional character, defined by her mission and her cold demeanor. However, as the series progresses, we see her become more complex and multifaceted. Her passion for her mission is tempered by her growing realization of the cost of war and the toll it takes on those around her. This growth adds depth and meaning to her character and makes her one of the most compelling characters in the series.

Another character that exhibits the angry trope is Gabi Braun. She is the youngest female fighter. She was indoctrinated and brainwashed at a young age to see the people of Paradis as devils. Her aim was to destroy all the people within the walls. Yet, at the end of season 4 part one, we see her growth and development. She was able to recognize her flaws as a human being and she strived to better herself.

Her anger is driven by her passion for her homeland, Marley. She is fiercely loyal to her country, and believes that the Eldian people are responsible for the suffering of the world. Her passion is expressed through her desire to prove herself as a warrior, and to protect her people from what she sees as a threat from the Eldians on Paradis Island.

Gabi is a character who is driven by her emotions. She is passionate and impulsive, and her feelings often lead her to make hasty decisions. Her emotions are often expressed through her anger and frustration, particularly towards the Eldians on Paradis Island. This makes her a character that viewers can relate to on a human level, despite her sometimes controversial actions.

Gabi's growth throughout the series is a testament to her passion. She starts out as a character defined by her hatred towards the Eldians, and her desire to prove herself as a warrior. However, as the series progresses, we see her become more complex and multifaceted. Her passion for her country is tempered by her growing realization of the humanity of the Eldians, and the complexity of the conflict. This growth adds depth and meaning to her character, and makes her one of the most compelling characters in the later part of the series.

The Sacrificial Woman

The act of women sacrificing their lives for their family is not anything new. And it is a trope used in movies. This can be seen in *Finding Nemo* (2003), *Bambi* (1942), *Brother Bear* (2003), just to mention a few. This trope is also used in AOT. Carla Yeager exemplified this trope. Carla Yeager is Eren's mother.

What makes Carla unique is the fact, in other animations, parents or mothers usually sacrifice their lives for their children without fear or anxiety, thereby displaying strength and courage. In a way, their strength is almost super human. On the other hand, Carla sacrifices her life while also being vulnerable. Even though she sacrifices her life for her children, we can see her strength while being vulnerable. Knowing she was about to be eaten by a titan and seeing her children escaping into safety, we can see and hear her whisper in pain "*please don't leave*". This is a heartbreaking moment. Despite urging her kids to escape to safety, she did not want to be left alone. Fully displaying that she is human and not a super human.

Carla's sacrificial role in the story begins in the first episode of the series, where she is killed by a Titan while trying to protect her son Eren and Mikasa. Her death serves as a catalyst for Eren's desire to join the military and fight against the Titans. Carla's death also serves to highlight the brutality and hopelessness of the world that the characters live in. Despite her efforts to protect her son and her family, Carla is ultimately unable to save herself from the Titans. Her death shows the audience that in the world of *Attack on Titan*, even the most innocent and helpless characters are not safe from the Titans. Furthermore, Carla's death also serves to develop Eren's character. After witnessing his mother's death, Eren becomes more determined to fight against the Titans and avenge his mother. His motivation to become a soldier and join the Survey Corps is driven by his desire to protect humanity and prevent others from experiencing the same loss he suffered.

Ymir is another young girl who falls under this category. She was the first titan. Her life story is sad and overwhelming. She becomes a slave to King Fritz. And after coming upon Titan power, she live the rest of her life obeying the king. She was forced to bear his children. At the end of her life, she sacrifices her life to save the king. Sadly, even after her death, her children are forced to eat her body so that her titan abilities would be passed to her children. Even in death, she continues to obey the wishes of the Royalty. With the help of Eren, she sees that she deserves to be free and she stops the protection of the titans. The Founding Titan Ymir Fritz is a character in *Attack on Titan* who plays a significant sacrificial role in the story. She is the progenitor of the Eldian race, and her story is intricately linked to the history of Eldia and the Titans. Ymir Fritz's sacrificial role in the story begins with her backstory. According to legend, Ymir Fritz was a girl who made a deal with the Devil and gained the power of the Titans. She later became the progenitor of the Titans, and her powers were divided among her nine successors, who became known as the Nine Titans. Ymir Fritz's story is also closely linked to the story of the Eldian Empire and its rise to power. After gaining the power of the Titans, Ymir became a slave to the Eldian king, who used her powers to build the Eldian Empire. Her story highlights the themes of oppression and the abuse of power. In the present day story of *Attack on Titan*, the Founding Titan is revealed to be the ultimate goal of the story's antagonists, the Marleyans, who seek to capture the power of the Founding Titan and use it to conquer the world. The Founding Titan is held by a member of the royal family, who possesses the ability to control the memories of all Eldians. The Founding Titan's sacrificial role in the story comes into play in the climax of the story. Eren Yeager, the protagonist of the series, gains control of the Founding Titan's power and uses it to destroy the Marleyan military and end the cycle of violence between Eldia and the world. However, this comes at a cost – Eren's use of the Founding Titan's power causes him to lose touch with his own humanity and ultimately leads to his own death. The Founding Titan's sacrificial role in the story highlights the themes of sacrifice, the greater good, and the cost of power. Ymir Fritz gave up her own life to gain the power of the Titans, and this power has been the cause of much bloodshed and suffering throughout the history of Eldia. Eren's use of the Founding Titan's power ultimately leads to his own death, highlighting the cost of using such a powerful and destructive force.

The Queer Woman

It is worth noting that the female and male characters in AOT were not sexualized and they are multi-dimensional. Just like their male counterparts, these female characters are 'strong,' complicated, flawed, and varied in their quirks. Hange's gender identity is deliberately left up to the interpretation of the viewer. Not only this, but their identity is never called into question by any other character. Ironically, for a world in which humans are fighting for their existence, Hange's personal existence is never an issue – or even a question – for those around them

Hange Zoe is a character who challenges traditional gender norms and expectations through their portrayal in the series. Hange's gender identity is not explicitly defined in the series, but their behavior and interactions with other characters suggest a non-binary or gender non-conforming identity. Throughout the series, Hange is shown to be a highly intelligent and skilled member of the Survey Corps, the military unit tasked with fighting the Titans. They are also portrayed as eccentric, curious, and often reckless, with a keen interest in Titans and their biology. Hange's behavior and interests do not conform to traditional gender roles and expectations, which often associate women with more passive and nurturing roles. In addition to their behavior, Hange's appearance also challenges traditional gender norms. Hange has short hair and is often dressed in masculine or gender-neutral clothing, including the Survey Corps uniform. Hange's appearance and mannerisms do not conform to traditional notions of femininity, which often place emphasis on physical appearance and beauty. However, Hange's gender identity is never explicitly defined in the series, and is referred to using gender-neutral pronouns in the original Japanese language. This ambiguity surrounding Hange's gender identity allows viewers to interpret the character in a way that feels authentic and resonant to them. Hange's portrayal in the series challenges traditional gender norms and expectations by presenting a character who does not conform to traditional ideas of femininity or masculinity. This portrayal can be seen as a form of gender representation that allows for more diverse and complex representations of gender in popular media. In conclusion, Hange Zoe's gender identity in Attack on Titan is not explicitly defined in the series, but their behavior and appearance challenge traditional gender norms and expectations. This portrayal allows for a more diverse and complex representation of gender in popular media, and can be seen as a positive step towards greater representation and inclusivity.

Conclusion

What makes AOT unique is the way Isayama gives his female characters agency. He provides them with the power, autonomy, and ability to make decisions and take actions that drive the plot of a story. In other words, the female characters are an active participant in the narrative, rather than simply a passive object acted upon by other characters.

When a female character has agency, she is not just a supporting character or a love interest for male characters, but rather, she has her own goals, desires, and motivations that are important to the story. She is able to make choices and take actions that move the plot forward, and her decisions have consequences that impact the other characters and the outcome of the story.

Having agency is important for female characters because it allows them to be fully realized, three-dimensional characters with their own strengths, weaknesses, and complexities. It also

provides female viewers with role models and representation in popular culture, and helps to challenge gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles.

Through a third-wave feminist lens, *Attack on Titan* offers a rich and layered exploration of gender, identity, and power. The series challenges traditional gender roles by portraying multidimensional female characters and addressing intersectional themes. However, it also necessitates critical engagement with problematic depictions, such as the use of sexual violence and objectification, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of its feminist implications.

By applying third-wave feminist theories to *Attack on Titan*, this analysis contributes to broader discussions about representation in media and the role of popular culture in shaping societal narratives about gender and identity. This underscores the importance of continual critique and dialogue in feminist scholarship, ensuring that diverse voices and experiences are meaningfully represented.

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