

**Gender Norms and The Female Heroines of Studio**

**Ghibli**

**By**

**Alexa Newman**

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Accepted

\_\_\_\_\_ Sponsor

Renqiu Yu

\_\_\_\_\_ Second Reader

Lisa Keller

\_\_\_\_\_ Third Reader

Shaka McGlotten

### **Introduction**

In this project, I aim to show how the female heroines of Studio Ghibli are progressive in Japanese society. Secondly, I am going to explore how traditional gender norms were reflected in three Studio Ghibli films. Thirdly, I am going to compare and contrast said Studio Ghibli films- *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, and *Princess Mononoke*, to another female led animation, *Sailor Moon*. My paper examines the background history of

anime, Studio Ghibli, and Japan's struggle with moving past traditional gendered expectations. It also examines Studio Ghibli and how they tell stories of girlhood without using stereotypes and forcing gender norms on the characters. I have several key questions that I would like readers to keep in mind while looking through my project. The first question is: How do the female characters in the Studio Ghibli films resist gendered expectations? The second question is: How are the female characters of Studio Ghibli and Sailor Moon similar and different in their expression of gender norms?

The female characters in *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, and *Princess Mononoke*, have masculine and feminine traits. They are allowed to be brave and have fighting abilities like male action heroes, but are also kind and expressive in their emotions. They are not put in a box because of their sex, and the films show a diverse range of outward and inward gender expression. The female characters of Ghibli and the female characters shown in *Sailor Moon* have many similarities and differences. Firstly, they both show women in the action genre, which is rare in Japan. Secondly, they also have characters that differ in how they adhere to gender norms. Thirdly, both animations highlight women in a position of power. However, *Sailor Moon* does play on problematic stereotypes at times, unlike Ghibli.

## Chapter I: Background

Japan's anime industry has inspired viewers domestically, as well as internationally. It has come to be an artform that has global significance. Anime was adapted from *manga*, Japanese comic books. The term was coined by Hokusai Katsushika, who was a print artist during the Edo period. After World War II, people wanted cheap entertainment, and the art of *manga* began to influence and be influenced by American culture. Manga is consumed by audiences of all ages, with many genres to appeal to the diversity of readers. In 1994, 2.27 billion manga books and magazines were published, making up 35% of all published material. (Grigsby, 64-65) During the 1960s, anime started to gain relevance in Japan. It was exported to Asia and America, then in the 1970s it came to western Europe, particularly Italy, France, and Spain. (Pellitteri,4) In Japan, anime originated from the film adaptation of a popular manga in 1963 called *Astro Boy*, by Osamu Tezuka. Tezuka challenged Western animation by creating anime, a style distinct from popular Western animators of the time such as the Fleischer brothers and Walt Disney. His anime, *Astro Boy*, rebuffed traditional conventions of its time by heavily focusing on storyboarding and was limited in its animation by only using eight out of twenty four frames, using single still frames for long amounts of time, putting one cell behind another to indicate movement of a character or scene, sectioning an image so only a single part of it moved (e.g. the mouth to imply speaking, the eyes to make the character blink), and keeping a bank of images to be reused. (Clements, 215-216) It became an instant success because of Japan's history of media and character merchandising. Anime became a lucrative business, reaching untapped markets internationally and domestically. (Steinberg,19) Today, most anime are not held to the same limits that Tezuka was, but there are several key characteristics of anime that have not changed over the years. Firstly, all anime characters have large, oval eyes. The rest of the face has little

detail, making the eyes the most distinctive part of the face. Secondly, anime uses color palettes to represent a particular mood that the animator wants the viewer to feel. The composition of a particular scene is not by chance, there is always a specific purpose. In the popular anime series, *Naruto*, the color palette and hierarchy is used to express character relationships. Thirdly, the complex storylines of anime attract audiences of all ages, from young children to adults..(Horno-Lopez, 40-41, 44-46) Because of Tezuka's goal to make anime as powerful as books, the character's mind and behavior became a major focus of the storylines as well, using their exaggerated proportions to show their emotions. In America, the 1990s and mid 2000s is really when the general public started to watch anime. Shows such as *Sailor Moon*, *Dragon Ball*, *Naruto*, *Pokemon*, and *FullMetal Alchemist* captured the attention of Americans, and they skyrocketed in popularity. (Choo, 28, 30)

The anime industry is still new, but it has seen remarkable growth despite the market's slowdown since 2018, according to the Anime Industry Report of 2019. There are currently nine windows in the animation market: Videograph, TV, Movie, Internet, Music, Overseas, Pachinko, Live Entertainment and Merchandising. Due to digitization, Internet has increased and Videograph has declined. The overseas market growth has also diminished. A factor is the slowdown of the Chinese market because of the strict regulations on media. However, the regulations were less severe on the Internet until recently. The Chinese government also imposed the media censorship on the Internet, so as a result, there have been less people willing to purchase and watch anime. The box office revenue of animations in theatres has doubled in the past 20 years. In 2018, the box office revenue was 42.6 billion yen, or \$396, 221, 918.40. The

anime industry has increased at a rate of 10% per year since 2013. (Sibilsky, 39) The largest Japanese animation production company is Toei Animation. (Choo, 29)

Today, Studio Ghibli is one of the most renowned animation studios in history. It was founded by Hayao Miyazaki, Isao Takahata, and Toshio Suzuki. Miyazaki named the animation studio “Ghibli” after a WWII Italian airplane, which is an Arabic word for the winds of the deserts in North Africa. Miyazaki’s films, in particular, have affected the animation industry forever, because of how popular his films became- domestically and internationally. He was born in the city of Tokyo, Japan, in 1941. The majority of his childhood was during the era of World War II, where he began to draw airplanes and flying machines due to his father working for Miyazaki Airplanes. His mother influenced his beliefs to a large extent, she taught him and his brother to question the world around them. His childhood passion for drawing airplanes influenced him to continue his artwork, and he began to do design work for magazines. Later on he began to work in the field of Japanese animation for several studios. The first animation studio Miyazaki ever worked for was Toei Doga, an animation division in a popular studio, and directed his first anime film, *Lupin the III: Castle of Cagliostro*, in 1979 there. (Bolton, 234) After the film’s release, he started to work on a manga (a Japanese word for comic book) that became so well liked that he left his animator position and adapted a film based on it, called *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, in 1984. *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* ushered Studio Ghibli out of their relative anonymity, and it propelled the founding of Studio Ghibli a year later, in 1985. Miyazaki’s film *Kiki’s Delivery Service* was released in 1989, which was the highest Japanese film of the year. *Princess Mononoke*, a film about a warrior princess, broke the all-time box office record for a domestic film by earning \$150 million. However, a later film,

*Spirited Away* topped that number with earnings of \$253 million, and received an Academy Award for best animated feature. Miyazaki's films had an established fan base domestically, but *Spirited Away* was the movie that brought Studio Ghibli to prominence in America. Ghibli continued to dominate box offices worldwide until Miyazaki's last film before his retirement in September 2013, *The Wind Rises*. His films are known for having young heroines whose stories are based around a coming of age, and are set in immersive worlds that are usually fantastical in nature, although some of them are set in Japan. His animation is hand-drawn and detailed, and his storylines captivate audiences of all ages. (Bolton, 235, 238)

Japan also has a long history of traditional gender norms. During the Meiji period, the division of the sexes began. The new system was one where women were in the private sphere, and men were in the public sphere. The gendered division of the workplace began, and specific jobs were associated to the different sexes. The ideal man and woman were ideas that were influenced by the West and their gender norms. As Japan began to modernize, the new ideal man and women were both people of *bunmei kaika*, civilization and enlightenment. (Molony, 11, 15-16, ) The idea of a woman being a homemaker and a working woman replaced the previous ideal of being a "good wife and a wise mother." The new idea of womanhood was ideal for the new economy, however, society still believed that a woman's place was in the home. This made it difficult for the average woman, who had to balance her responsibilities at home, and contribute to the economy. Women are expected to be feminine and almost childlike, as girlhood is fetishized, and youth is highly valued. A woman's worth is based on her husband and his status in society. There are major power imbalances in heterosexual relationships. Gender norms expect women to be the obedient wife, as such, patriarchal ideas are linked to high rates of

domestic violence. In 2013, research shows that a significant portion of the population holds the belief that women should adhere to traditional gender roles. (Belarmino, Roberts, 273- 275) In a highly modernized society such as Japan, gender norms and patriarchal ideas are embedded in expectations of women. The dichotomy of the ideal woman is very hard to achieve. They are expected to be working women who are good citizens and participate in the economy, but they also have to be the obedient mother, wife, and caretaker. The idea of the private and public sphere still lingers, and to this day, women continue to strive for equality.



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## **Chapter II: Girlhood and Miyazaki's Shojos**

Studio Ghibli's heroines are some of the most progressive female characters in modern Japanese animation. They retain some feminine characteristics while still having stereotypically masculine traits such as bravery, determination, and assertiveness. In *Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Princess Mononoke*, and *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, the female protagonists are allowed to express themselves in ways that are not limited due to their gender.

*Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* was released in 1989, and was an action movie. In Japan, having a female protagonist in an action-based film is unusual, as the majority of animated heroes are male. The main character, Nausicaa, is a young princess who is determined to save her village from not only the toxic environment around them, but from an invading army. She defies traditional gender norms in several ways. While she does have feminine

characteristics such as kindness, selflessness, and maternal ability, she also has masculine traits, including mechanical and scientific ability, fighting skills, and bravery. Instead of having traditionally feminine interests that are appearance based, she is interested in science and the natural world. She is involved in researching the toxic spores that surround her village, going directly to the jungle to collect specimens. She is fully realized as an independent person, she has her own form of transportation, and does not need help navigating the world and is an independent woman. Unlike traditional expectations of femininity, her clothing is utilitarian in usage.. Her formal wear is more feminine but most of the time she is adventuring and traveling, so her clothing has attachments for weapons and satchels. She blends in with the villagers because of the color and style of her outfits. Her weapons are mostly used as tools, she only uses them to protect the villagers from insects and invaders. (Sabine, 24, 28-31, 34) Nausicaa directly participates in defending her village, and after the Tolmekians killed her father, she in turns kills her father's murderer, fulfilling an ancient prophecy that was supposed to be fulfilled by a man. There are other strong women highlighted in *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*- the Tolmekian commander is a woman who is not interested in fighting for the sake of it, but is seeking to promote her people's best interests, and Obaba is an elderly village woman who has great powers, thus highly respected in the village. The film does have one major flaw- Nausicaa's body is highly sexualized. Her outfit is typical of Japanese animation, a short dress with long boots, exposing her upper and lower thighs, and there are several scenes in the beginning of the film where the viewer can see up her skirt. Despite the sexualization of Nausicaa, the film sets an amazing precedent for Ghibli's female heroines breaking gender norms.

*Kiki's Delivery Service* premiered in 1989, and the main protagonist, Kiki, displays feminine and masculine traits, such as independence and bravery. She directly defies gender norms by leaving home at her age, a young girl leaving home to start a business is surprising, especially in Japanese culture. (Napier) Her year out on her own symbolizes puberty, and that she is becoming a young adult. The broom is a domestic object that is given a positive association and assists her with self-determination, ultimately allowing her to save Tombo, her male love interest. (Sabine, 51-52) Unlike the other Ghibli heroines, Kiki is still finding out her identity, and has the desire to be liked. Throughout the film, she goes between following social norms and behaving in a way that is authentic to her. Traditionally, women have been thought to be in need of protection, and in *Kiki's Delivery Service*, there are times where Kiki needs a male savior, and there are also times where Kiki is capable of self-protection, and saves others from dangerous situations. At times, Kiki is directly compared to other girls in her age group and is shown to be more androgynous in her appearance and values. Because she does not adhere to societal expectations of gender, she often feels like an outsider amongst her peers. In the film, there are examples of other women living non-traditional lifestyles. Ursula is a young woman who Kiki meets on an adventure. She is a female artist and is self-reliant, serving as a role model for Kiki. She encourages her to follow her own spirit and to find her own inspiration regardless if it is what society thinks is acceptable or not. *Kiki's Delivery Service* shows characters who fall in various places when it comes to gender expression. Kiki, the main character, has feminine and masculine characteristics, and the other female characters show a range of gendered characteristics.

*Princess Mononoke* premiered in 1997, and has many examples of characters who express their gender in many ways. The male protagonist, Ashitaka displays stereotypical masculine traits whereas the female protagonist, San, displays mostly masculine traits. Ashitaka is a prince and is someone that not only his own townspeople look up to, but in other villages, he is a figure that they look to for guidance. He holds traditionally masculine values in high importance, such as honor, chivalry, and leadership. When he goes to the land of the West to search for a cure, he meets Lady Eboshi, the antagonist, and San, also known as Princess Mononoke. San has mostly masculine traits, and rarely shows any feminine traits. She is depicted as feral, and has masculine traits of bravery, skill in weapons, and independence. Lady Eboshi, the main antagonist, displays masculine and feminine traits. She is masculine in her ambition, dominance, bravery, skill in weapons, self assurance and desire for warfare. However, she shows her feminine traits when it comes to the people of Irontown. She is nurturing and kind to her workers, and they are devoted to her.. The depiction of the female villagers is mixed. In Irontown, the gender division of labor is equal, as some women are shown to have traditionally feminine jobs whereas others work, which differs from traditional division of labor. During a scene with Ashitaka and the male villagers, one of them says that the female workers are “defiling the iron” implying that because of their past working in brothels, they are impure and dirty. The stereotype of the nagging wife is one that is played upon as well. *Princess Mononoke* has a varied depiction of gender, and is often considered one of Ghibli’s most progressive films because the female characters express traits that are traditional and nontraditional for their gender.

*Sailor Moon* is one of the first animes that featured a female heroine, and has since gone on to receive international success. The popularity of the series has skyrocketed since it was released in the 1990s, and shows no sign of stopping. There have been several collaborations with well-known companies, such as a makeup line with Colourpop and a clothing line with Forever 21, Uniqlo, Hot Topic and Torrid. A live action series, a reboot series, a re-release of the English dub, and a re-release of the manga has been introduced to the current generation of children. Several celebrities are also fans of *Sailor Moon*, such as rappers Saweetie and Megan Thee Stallion, Megan Fox, an actress, and the musician, Halsey. (Johnson)

Despite being a trailblazer in terms of being one of the first major female-led animes, *Sailor Moon* still used many problematic stereotypes to push storylines, such as body image, negative stereotypes of girlhood, and the sexualization of their bodies. Body image is also a problem in the anime as characters frequently make negative remarks about Usagi's weight and eating in general. Whole episodes are centered around weight loss, a filler episode called "Learn How to Be Skinny From Usagi" was released. In it, Usagi is upset because she gained weight. When she talks to her friends about her problem, she is suggested to go swimming as a sport to try to get thin, even though she is already thin. When the group go to the teacher's gym, after finding out that a female teacher lost weight, an advertisement is shown above. It shows a very thin woman working out with the caption "One kilogram in five days, five kilograms in two days; in three days, you, too will be beautiful." Five kilograms is roughly eleven pounds, which is an unhealthy amount of weight to lose in two days. (Hewlett)

*Sailor Moon* also has been criticized for its depiction of gender norms. Despite being a female superhero, she often needs saving. She struggles with using her newfound powers, and her male counterpart, Tuxedo Mask, comes to her rescue. He is constantly helping her in situations where she can defend herself. Her negative traits, which are mentioned often, are all stereotypical feminine traits- being overly emotional, vapid, and unintelligent. An example of this is in the first episode. When her and her friend discover that a female crime fighter stopped a jewelry thief, they are more interested in talking and shopping for jewelry rather than talking about the crime fighter or the actual crime. Usagi's body is heavily sexualized throughout the entire series. Her Sailor Scout uniform consists of a very short skirt and thigh high boots which caters to a phenomena known as *zettai ryouiki*, which refers to the area of the thighs and the legs that are between a woman's skirt and stockings, especially in anime. *Zettai ryouiki* is a popular fetish for Japanese men that sexualizes the depiction of girl's bodies. During her transformation scene, where she changes from her regular appearance to her superhero appearance, she is completely nude. The bodies of these fourteen year old, middle school students, are being sexualized and used for the male gaze.





A screenshot from "How to Be Skinny From Usagi"



The Sailor Scout uniform



Sailor Moon's transformation

Miyazaki's female heroines and the Sailor Scouts in *Sailor Moon* share many similarities. Both animations highlight girls in the action genre. In addition, their female characters are diverse in how they adhere to traditional expectations of girlhood.. In *Sailor Moon*, several of the girls are fully independent and don't require any rescuing. They also have different aspirations- some, such as Sailor Moon and Sailor Jupiter, have aspirations that are traditionally feminine, such as being a bride and raising a family. Some of the Sailor Scouts have ambitions of entering male dominated careers, such as Sailor Mercury, who wants to be a doctor. (Darrah, 15)

The Ghibli films also show women who fall on a scale of femininity. Mononoke is feral and refuses to be involved with men, whereas Nausicaa has masculine qualities, but is also nurturing and kind to all. There are side characters and antagonists that do not fully conform to normative ideas, such as Lady Eboshi and Ursula. Both *Sailor Moon* and Studio Ghibli's female characters

are known as *shojos*, young female characters who are dreamy and hyper- feminine. Usagi, the titular character in *Sailor Moon*, is known for her feminine qualities. Miyazaki's *shojos* have feminine characteristics, such as kindness and innocence, but their unfeminine qualities are what makes them notable. His *shojos* differ from the traditional *shojo* because of their assertiveness, independence, and how they "confront the variety of obstacles before them in a manner that might well be described as stereotypically masculine." (Napier, 154) They are usually young women alone who have active independence, going against societal norms in Japan, because the majority of characters who show active independence are male.

Despite their similarities, they differ in their approach of what it means to be a young woman in a society full of gender norms. Both *Sailor Moon* and Studio Ghibli's female characters are known as *shojos*, young female characters who are dreamy and hyper- feminine. Usagi, the titular character in *Sailor Moon*, is known for her feminine qualities. Miyazaki's *shojos* have feminine characteristics, such as kindness and innocence, but their unfeminine qualities are what makes them notable. His *shojos* differ from the traditional *shojo* because of their assertiveness, independence, and how they "confront the variety of obstacles before them in a manner that might well be described as stereotypically masculine." (Napier, 154) They are usually young women alone who have active independence, going against societal norms in Japan, because the majority of characters who show active independence are male.

The females of Studio Ghibli differ from *Sailor Moon* in the depiction of girlhood and what it means to exist in the world in a female body. Although some of the female characters,

such as Kiki and Marnie, struggle with confidence and fitting into society, body image is never discussed. The characters have a lack of confidence in their abilities and in themselves, but not in their bodies or weight specifically. They do not adhere to gender norms as strictly as the characters in *Sailor Moon* do- the majority of heroines have a male companion, but they do not solely rely on his help. Instead, their friendship is focused on as opposed to the romantic aspect and there are periods in the movie where they have to problem- solve on their own. They also possess a combination of traditionally masculine and feminine traits, and both are equally encouraged.

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## Conclusion

After my research on gender roles in Studio Ghibli and *Sailor Moon*, I have many findings on gender roles in Japan and how they affect the media. By doing my research for my background chapter, I have a new appreciation for the female characters of Studio Ghibli. I realized that Studio Ghibli truly is one of the most progressive animation studios in Japan. Despite their traditional expectations of women, their female characters defy normative ideas of femininity. In *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Sea*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, and *Princess Mononoke*, the heroines are allowed to have feminine and masculine qualities and do not conform to patriarchal ideas of what girlhood should be. They are not held back by their gender, instead, it gives them a unique perspective throughout their adventures. In Studio Ghibli's movies, there are a range of characters who are unique in their gender expression.

Similarly, *Sailor Moon* also defies expectations by being one of the first and most well-known animations with a female action hero. The Sailor Scouts are different in their gender expression, some wish to be in traditionally feminine roles, and outwardly accept normative ideas, but others express themselves more androgynously and want to have careers in male-dominated fields. Although the creators do use stereotypes of women for plot points, it does not take away the amazing legacy of *Sailor Moon* and what she has done for Japanese women.