

## SYMBOLIC ANNIHILATION OF WOMEN IN THE CLASSIC JAPANESE CHILDREN’S FOLKTALE “KAGUYAHIME”

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### ABSTRACT

Folktales intended for children have a significant role in shaping children’s characters, including gender identities and roles. Nevertheless, literary works often portray women in stereotypical roles or even ignore them, which means that those works have carried out the symbolic annihilation of women. This study describes the symbolic annihilations found in a classic Japanese children’s folktale with a female main character entitled “Kaguyahime”, published on the Pictio website in 2014. This research is a literature study that uses a qualitative paradigm with a feminist approach, using Tuchman’s concept of symbolic annihilation. As a result, it is known that the folktale “Kaguyahime” represents the views and thoughts of the Japanese nation that adhere to a patriarchal ideology towards women. Japanese women experience symbolic annihilation in various manifestations, especially trivialization. They are constructed as weak beings who are not autonomous and are in the domestic sphere, which serves as some satisfactory for men’s views.

**Keywords:** *symbolic annihilation; folktale; Kaguyahime; women*

### ABSTRAK

Dongeng yang ditujukan untuk anak-anak memiliki peran penting dalam membentuk karakter anak, termasuk identitas dan peran gender. Meskipun demikian, perempuan dalam karya sastra seringkali digambarkan memiliki peran yang stereotip atau bahkan justru mengabaikan mereka. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa dalam karya sastra tersebut terdapat anihilasi simbolik terhadap perempuan. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mendeskripsikan anihilasi simbolik yang terdapat dalam cerita rakyat klasik Jepang untuk anak-anak berjudul “Kaguyahime” yang dipublikasikan di laman Pictio pada tahun 2014. Penelitian kesusastraan ini menggunakan paradigma kualitatif dengan angangan feminisme dan konsep anihilasi simbolik milik Tuchman. Sebagai hasil, diketahui bahwa dongeng “Kaguyahime” merepresentasikan pandangan dan pemikiran bangsa Jepang yang berideologi patriarki terhadap perempuan. Perempuan Jepang mengalami anihilasi simbolik dalam berbagai wujud, terutama trivialisasi. Mereka dikonstruksikan sebagai makhluk lemah, tidak otonom, berada dalam ranah domestik, dan berfungsi sebagai pemuas mata laki-laki.

**Kata kunci:** *anibilasi simbolik; dongeng; Kaguyahime; perempuan*

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of symbolic annihilation was first introduced by George Gerbner, who examined the cumulative effect of television texts (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Gerbner defines symbolic annihilation as the absence of women or condemnation of women in the media. Gaye Tuchman then adds trivialization to the definition. Tuchman suggests that women are underrepresented in media coverage and discusses the relationship between women's roles in society and how they are portrayed in the media. Tuchman then brings the concept of this into the discourse on gender. According to Tuchman (2000), the concept of symbolic annihilation consists of three things, namely omission, trivialization, and condemnation. Omission means that women tend to be underrepresented or even removed from the media representation space; narratives against women are omitted because specific spaces are culturally attributed to men. Next is trivialization, which means positioning women as minimally as possible as side characters. If a woman appears in the mass media space, she is presented with an insignificant role or only a display. The last is the condemnation, which means that women tend to bear the burden as the party to blame, so they deserve to be punished (Tuchman, 2000; Udasmoro, 2017).

Tuchman (2000) notes that most mass media portray women in traditional roles such as housewives and mothers. Even if women are described as working in the public sphere, the type of work is limited to administrative staff or other jobs that are considered women's work. Women are also constructed to "pursue targets" that are domestic, such as getting married and giving birth to children through various women's magazines. These magazines rarely, or even do not, seek to empower women through education, training, and other ways that can make a woman empowered, autonomous, and independent. On the other hand, a woman's existence is defined based on her relationship with men. These patterns were troubling for Tuchman, mainly the mass media's role in shaping young girls' wants, needs, and expectations. She said that the institutions of mass communication influence behavior and attitudes, and consistent repetition of such themes could encourage the maintenance of women's subordinate position in society. Plus, because the media reflect the dominant values of society, they add a strong link in the chain of socialization that keeps women dependent.

Tuchman (2000) said that by ignoring women or portraying women in stereotypical roles as victims or as consumers, the (mass) media, including literary

works, have carried out the symbolic annihilation of women. Folktale is one of the literary works that, unfortunately, we still could see ignoring women in its story, whether in its traditional oral form or its modern form, namely printed books, electronic books, audiobooks, and audio-visual media.

Folktale, which is strictly defined by Abrams (1999), is a short narrative in prose that has been transmitted orally, and the authorship is unknown. Many of these tales eventually achieve written form. However, the term is often extended to include stories created by a known author that are told continuously, either by word of mouth or in written form. Folktales include myths, fables, tales of heroes, and fairytales, that can be found worldwide. For Kitayama, he defined folktales as popular stories from anonymous authors that some people tell from the past (2005). These stories are similar to myths but have more to do with humans than with supernatural beings. Folktales are transmitted orally from generation to generation, reflecting the thoughts and views held by certain people or nations historically, making folktales a cultural product that can examine various issues associated with and exist within certain people or societies. Also, folktales can be used to discover how they can overcome those issues.

In her thesis, Sawai (2013) wrote that folktale is widely used to record things related to history and culture, such as customs and religion, which are part of the society where the folktale emerged. For example, a folktale entitled “Genji Monogatari” originates from Japan. This folktale which Shikibu Murasaki wrote in the XI century, tells about the life of Prince Genji, which literary researchers consider pretty representative of the life of royalty at that time (Sawai, 2013).

Folktale is said to have unique characteristics (Aarne, 1961; Franz, 1997; Kobayashi, 2010), including Japanese folktale. According to Sawai (2013), the Japanese folktale has three special characteristics, namely: 1) having unique ways to use it in the past; 2) being a reflection of social norms at the time the folktale was born, and 3) being a reflection of Japanese customs and culture. The first characteristic can be seen, e.g., in the folktale “Momotaro” or “The Peach Boy” in English, as propaganda for the Japanese government during World War II. The hero Momotaro is considered to have similarities with Japan in this nation’s effort to liberate their people from the imperialists. In this propaganda, the Japanese government equated the Americans and Europeans with *oni* or ogres. The second characteristic shows that the mentioned norms in folktale are the norms developing, e.g., the positioning of Japanese men as the party

who have absolute rights to make decisions and initiatives and the development of male chauvinism. The third characteristic shows that what is reflected in folktale is the customs and culture adhered by the people, e.g., the *amae* culture. The word *amae* is often interpreted as ‘dependency,’ but instead, the psychology of implicit request, expecting a favor or support from others. Others indicate parents, spouses, teachers, or superiors (Doi, 1992).

One of the social norms that is a unique characteristic of Japanese folktale mentioned above is the positioning of men who are generally “better” than women as a manifestation of gender relations that apply to the patriarchal Japanese nation. As stated by Noviana (2020), Japanese women for centuries ago have received unequal treatment due to their gender, as reflected in their folktales.

In Japan and almost every nation, women are often treated unequally and ignored in society, including those in literary works. It is because literary works, like children’s folktales, represent what is happening in society. Folktales have a significant role in shaping children’s characters. According to Tuchman (2000), she said mass media’s role shapes young girls’ wants, needs, and expectations, including forming gender identities and gender roles. It is because folktales rarely escape contact with someone’s life in their childhood.

There are not many previous studies that discussed symbolic annihilation in literary works. The first example is the journal article of Klein and Shiffman (2009), who examined animated films or cartoons that aired on American television. They found that American cartoons had a long history of underrepresentation and socially symbolic annihilation of out-groups, which remained almost unchanged over 65 years (1930-1995).

The second is the dissertation of Emma Heishman (2018), who focused on the symbolic annihilation of women in the specific historical event of slavery in South America. Through the study of cinematic images of American slavery, her research addresses how mass media have significantly constructed the cultural-historical identity of American women. Furthermore, the socio-political situation in the United States when this dissertation was written makes this research particularly relevant. Social movements which publicly denounce the whitewashing of Hollywood productions and the overt sexual assault that has permeated the movie industry have demonstrated the extraordinary power Hollywood yields in shaping the fabric of American society.

Another study focused on American film is Dralega's article about symbolic annihilation in "Black Panther" film (Dralega, 2018). She found that this movie "annihilated" hegemonic femininity, which usually requires a woman to be gentle, kind, white, heterosexual, and child-bearing. A woman would also not only be required to stay at home, but she would also keep the home clean, cook, and be submissive and attentive to her husband's needs and desires. However, "Black Panther" obviously disrupts such hegemonic notions of femininities through counter representations by depicting the female protagonists in various embodiments rarely seen in western cultural frames.

Meanwhile, McCabe and her colleagues (Janice McCabe, Emily Fairchild, Liz Grauerholz, Bernice A. Pescosolido, & Daniel Tope, 2011) conducted their research on 5,618 children's books published throughout the twentieth century in the United States to examine gendered social orders. They found that males are represented nearly twice as often in titles and 1.6 times as often as central characters compared to females. This disparity is then believed to be evidence of symbolic annihilation and has implications for children's understanding of gender.

Another study on children's books was conducted by Sigalow and Fox (2014), who examined three decades of award-winning Jewish children's books. Those books perpetuated gendered religious stereotypes that associate men with agency and women with communion. They also found that those books construct images of a "domestic Judaism" for women and a "public Judaism" for men and how women have been symbolically annihilated from these books' titles and central character roles.

Hidayati, Fadhila, and Prasetyo (2020) conducted a study focused on short stories. They focused on how women during the revolution era are narrated in six short stories. The results show that women are always present with men, which shows the existence of symbolic annihilation. Through narratives in social practices, women's characters are destroyed by placing them back into the domestic sphere, perpetuating patriarchal domination.

Symbolic annihilation found in fiction stories or news broadcasts can also be found in books about Indonesian heroines. Asran, Oktaviani, and Anwar (2021) found that R.A. Kartini and Cut Nyak Dien are still often subordinated in the children's storybooks of the national hero series. Some traditional stereotypes are still attached to both of these heroines. Even though they are national heroes, they are also represented as empowered but only when they get help from men.

From these previous studies, we can see no research about symbolic annihilation in Japanese folktales yet. Then, the question arose: Do classic Japanese children's folktales with the female main character(s) also show a tendency to carry out symbolic annihilation? This question arose because the narrative of women in various media, including literary works, still shows that women are positioned under the control of patriarchal ideology. Therefore, this study aims to describe the symbolic annihilations found in one of the oldest Japanese children's folktales with female main characters.

The folktale I studied here is entitled "Kaguyahime", taken from a children's electronic picture storybook, or *ebon* in Japanese, written by Yu Tanimoto (2014). According to information on the Pictio website, the folktale, which has the original title "Takatori Monogatari" or "The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter", is the oldest Japanese folktale that appeared in the Heian Period (794-1185) or around the middle of the 10th century. The oldest manuscript of this folktale found dates back to the Muromachi Period (1336–1573). The author is unknown, but it is thought to have come from the nobles, considering that the castle as the residence of the noble family at that time was described in great detail ("日本の昔話「かぐや姫」【PDFの絵本】 | 絵本のPictio," 2014). As the oldest folktale in Japan that is still being told today with a variety of mediums, it can be said that all Japanese people are familiar with the "Kaguyahime" folktale. Meanwhile, the picture storybook medium was chosen because most children prefer reading books containing many pictures.

## METHODS

This research is literature research that uses a qualitative paradigm with a feminist approach. Before collecting data, an intensive and comprehensive reading was carried out on the folktale "Kaguyahime" obtained from the electronic version of children's folktales picture storybook from the Pictio website, which was re-written by Yu Tanimoto and published in 2014. Also, some articles and books about symbolic annihilation, such as Gaye Tuchman's "The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media", George Gerbner's "Living with Television: The Violence Profile", and Takeo Doi's "Anatomi Dependensi".

The data was collected in conversations, actions, events, and pictures explicitly and implicitly related to the two female characters in this folktale, namely Princess Kaguya and Grandmother. The data is then analyzed based on the concept of symbolic

annihilation proposed by Gaye Tuchman (2000) and the male gaze theory proposed by Laura Mulvey (1989) through the point of view of feminist literary criticism. According to Jonathan Culler, feminist literary criticism is the act of “reading as a woman”, which means avoiding reading as a man, identifying self-defense and distortions from male reading, and can provide corrections (Strong-Leek, 2001).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

By using the three symbolic annihilation points proposed by Tuchman (2000), it is found that the two female characters in the folktale “Kaguyahime”, namely Princess Kaguya and Grandmother, experience four things. First is the limitation of space and role of women, second is the loss of women’s autonomy over themselves, third is the limitation of ability and self-development of women, and fourth is the exploitation of women. These points are explained by excerpts from the story, dialogue, or figures in the “Kaguyahime” folktale.

The first is the limitation of space and the role of women. The women represented by Princess Kaguya and Grandmother were domesticated; they were constructed only in the domestic or private sphere. A domestication is a form of trivialization of women. Grandmother’s role in the family and society was belittled by only doing household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and serving family members. Her lack of role can be inferred from the absence of a single sentence about what Grandmother does every day, in contrast to Grandfather, who looks for woods in the forest as a source of income by selling them in the city market (Tanimoto, 2014). Tuchman (2000) notes that most mass media portray women in traditional roles such as housewives and mothers, as in the folktale “Kaguyahime” story.

As with the domesticated Grandmother, Princess Kaguya never once does anything or goes out of the house. Princess Kaguya is always shown in a sitting position, beautifully dressed and well-groomed in this electronic picture storybook illustration.



**Figure 1. Princess Kaguya; beautifully dressed and well-groomed; with Grandfather and Grandmother**



**Figure 2. Princess Kaguya; beautifully dressed and well-groomed; with The Emperor**



**Figure 3. Princess Kaguya; is beautifully dressed and well-groomed; even when she feels sad because she has to go back to the moon**

From the three figures above, we can see how Princess Kaguya is depicted in this book. No matter what she felt and thought at that time, she always looked beautiful. Thus, the domestication of Princess Kaguya and Grandmother, the insignificant role given to them, and the positioning of Princess Kaguya as a mere display emphasize the symbolic annihilation.

The second is the loss of women's autonomy over themselves. Women do not have autonomy over themselves by being constructed to obey whatever is decided by the other party. Kaguya is a princess who came from the moon. Unfortunately, instead of living with her own family, she was "given" to the Earthlings to be raised into adulthood. There was no explanation whatsoever as to the reason or otherwise, except that Princess Kaguya would be picked up to return to the moon on the next full moon when she became an adult. This act of forced pick-up made Princess Kaguya sad.

「私は、本当は月の人間です。次の満月が来たら、迎えが来て月の都に帰らなければなりません。それが悲しいのです。」 (Tanimoto, 2014)

*"Watashi wa, hontou wa tsuki no ningen desu. Tsugi no mangetsu ga kitara, mukae ga kite tsuki no miyako ni kaeranakerebanarimasen. Sore ga sabishii nodesu."*

"Actually, I am a moon human. On the next full moon, someone will come to pick me up and I have to go back to the moon's capital. That is what makes me sad."



Princess Kaguya could not fight back when the moon people picked her up to return to the moon. This pick-up was forced because apart from her wish to stay with Grandfather and Grandmother on earth, the moon people who came to pick up her used their supernatural powers, so they did not get resistance.

雲に乗った月の人「さあ、かぐや姫。月に帰りましょう。」と、声をかけると、屋敷の戸が開き、かぐや姫はすいよせられるように外に出てしまいました。(Tanimoto, 2014)

*Kumo ni notta tsuki no hito ga "Saa, Kaguyabime. Tsuki ni kaerimashou." to, koe wo kakeruto, yashiki no ton ga aki, Kaguyabime wa suiyozerareruyouni soto ni dete shimaimashita.*

Once the moon people who came riding the clouds said, "Well, Kaguya. Let us go back to the moon." Then, the house door opened, and Princess Kaguya was forced to leave the house.

These two quotes show that there is condemnation and trivialization of Princess Kaguya. There is no explanation for "giving" her to Grandfather and Grandmother to be brought up and nurtured, then forcibly taken back to the moon when she became an adult. Princess Kaguya's helplessness against both events shows that she lacks autonomy over herself. Likewise, Grandmother just sat there crying when Kaguya delivered the news. Grandmother gets "punished" by being separated from Kaguya, just like Princess Kaguya, who got "punished" by being "given" to the Earthlings to be brought up and nurtured. Both of them got punished just because they were women who had to be obedient and could only be in the domestic sphere. As female representatives in this folktale, Grandmother and Princess Kaguya have no autonomy over themselves; they are required to obey whatever others decide for their fate. These scenes are in line with what Tuchman and Udasmoro stated, women tend to bear the burden as the party to blame, so they deserve to be punished (Tuchman, 2000; Udasmoro, 2017).

The third is the limitation of ability and self-development of women. Women are considered weak beings. A woman's existence is defined based on her relationship with men: women are always dependent on men. They will not be able to be independent without direction from men (Tuchman, 2000). In addition, Nana Meily Nurdiansyah emphasized that women are physically weak but have tenderness and patience. Most people think that women are considered more suitable to work at home, prepare for all the needs of their husbands and take care of children at home. However, not nowadays. Everyone has equal opportunity and access to justice (Tuchman, 2000; Udasmoro, 2017).

This statement is confirmed in the folktale “Kaguyahime” when the Emperor and his army try to protect Princess Kaguya from being forced picked up by the moon people at Grandfather’s plea. The Emperor granted Grandfather’s plea because the Emperor fell in love with Princess Kaguya because of her beautifulness and wanted to marry her.

おじいさんは、帝に大勢の兵士でかぐや姫を守ってくれるようお願いし、  
屋敷の奥にかぐや姫を隠しました。  
いよいよ満月の夜が来ました。大勢の兵士が屋敷を守っています。(Tanimoto,  
2014)  
*Ojiiisan wa, Mikado ni oozei no heishi de Kaguyahime wo mamottekureruyouni onegaishi, yashiki no  
oku ni Kaguyahime wo kakushimashita.*  
*Iyoioyo mangetsu no yoru ga kimashita. Oozei no heishi ga yashiki wo mamotte imasu.*  
Grandfather pleaded with the Emperor to protect Kaguya by using a large number of his  
army and hid Kaguya in the back of the house.  
Finally, the night of the full moon arrived. Many of the Emperor’s army was guarding the  
vicinity of Grandfather’s house.

This folktale told us that, as a woman, Princess Kaguya is a weak being; she does not have the power to protect herself, so she has to get it from men. The initiative to gain protection arose from Grandfather and was carried out by the Emperor and his army; all were male. In other words, men are protectors of women. This ability as a protector is only attributed to men, which shows a symbolic annihilation in the form of omission to women.

The fourth is the exploitation of women. In a world ruled by sexual imbalance, viewing satisfaction has been divided among the active, which are men, and the passive, which are women. The male gaze concept, which Laura Mulvey proposed, projects men’s fantasies onto women’s figures according to what men desire. Women’s appearance is codified to produce visual solid and erotic effects so that women can be said to be “objects to watch”. Women are simultaneously looked at and displayed in their traditional exhibitionist role, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey, 1989). Women presented as sexual objects are the primary motive for erotic spectacle; they have looks, play some roles, and signify something men desired from women (Durham & Kellner, 2006).

Princess Kaguya, as a woman, also experienced being an object of the male gaze. When she became a gorgeous woman, men came flocking to Grandfather's house to marry her; or see her beauty with their own eyes.

かぐや姫は、誰も見たことがないほど美しく、その名前は、すぐに都にも知れ渡りました。お金持ちや身分の高い貴族など大勢の男達が、かぐや姫を妻にしたいと、やってくるようになったのです。

結婚を申し込もうと、屋敷の周りには男達が列をなし、かぐや姫に会おうとします。中には垣根や門の隙間から、一目でもかぐや姫を見ようとして、覗き込む男もいるほどでした。(Tanimoto, 2014)

*Kaguyahime wa, daremo mita koto ga nai hodo utsukushiku, sono namae wa, sugu ni miyako nimo shirewatarimashita. Okanemochi ya mibun no takai kizoku nado oozei no otokotachi ga, Kaguyahime wo tsuma ni shitai to, yattekuruyouni natta nodesu.*

*Kekkon wo moushikomou to, yashiki no mawari ni wa otokotachi ga retsu wo nashi, Kaguyahime ni aouto shimasu. Naka ni wa kakine ya mon no sukima kara, hitome demo Kaguyahime wo miyouto shite, nozokikomu otoko mo iru hodo deshita.*

Princess Kaguya was so beautiful that no one had ever seen such beauty, and her name quickly became well known in the capital. Many men, including wealthy and high-ranking aristocrats, came in a flock to have Princess Kaguya as their wife.

Those men gathered around the house to propose marriage and tried to see her. Some men even peeked through gaps between fences and the main gate to look inside the house to see Princess Kaguya, even just for a glance.

According to Mulvey (1989), those men who came to marry or take a look at the beautiful Princess Kaguya can be included in the act of the male gaze. The male gaze upon Princess Kaguya shows that women are exploited and degraded as mere men's sexual objects. This exploitation indicates that women are positioned no more than objects that do not have any significant role other than to satisfy men sexually. Based on the concept of symbolic annihilation, this is what Tuchman (2000) called trivialization.

## CONCLUSION

The existence of symbolic annihilation of women in folktales means that women are not considered to be independent but only surrender to their dependence on men. This dependency further plunges women into the trap of sex/gender stereotypes that devalue them so that women seem to have no potential whatsoever and no choice.

From what Tuchman said about the symbolic annihilation and analysis of the "Kaguyahime" folktale, as well as Sawai's explanation of folklore, it can be said that "Kaguyahime" as a classic Japanese folktale represents the views and thoughts of the Japanese nation, as a nation that adheres to a patriarchal ideology, towards women. Japanese women experience symbolic annihilation in various manifestations, especially

trivialization. They are constructed as weak beings who are not autonomous and are in the domestic sphere, which serves as satisfaction for men's views.

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