

Unravelling Neo-colonial Japan: Mythic Metamorphosis and Urban Picturesque in Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*

Riya Agarwal

Department of English, University of Delhi, New Delhi, Delhi, India

Abstract

This research investigates the postcolonial impact on Eastern identity, through a child's experience in neo-colonialized Japan, focusing on environmental and religious/cultural disruptions. Through an analysis of Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, the study investigates how the film's portrayal of spaces blurs cultural boundaries, creating a sense of identity unease among those affected by neo-colonialism. It further explores the influence of cultural shifts on contemporary Japan's religious and environmental landscapes, emphasizing identity following the Meiji Restoration. Employing eco-critical and critical myth lenses, the research scrutinizes the clash between anthropocentric Americanized and traditional Japanese values within urban and natural spaces, highlighting how characters in *Spirited Away* encounter and navigate unfamiliar religions. This study provides a nuanced understanding of the collision between traditional and neo-colonialized Japan, emphasizing the challenges of identity dislocation and the quest for belonging in a changing cultural landscape.

ARTICLE INFO

DOI:

10.61081/vjr/14v1i111

*Correspondence:

Riya Agarwal
riyaa1710@english.du.ac.
in

Department of English,
University of Delhi, New
Delhi, Delhi, India

Keywords:

Eco-criticism, Eternal
return, Myth, Neo-
colonialism, Urban
Picturesque

How to Cite:

Agarwal, R. (2024).
Unravelling Neo-
colonial Japan: Mythic
Metamorphosis and
Urban Picturesque in
Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*.
*Vivekananda Journal of
Research*, 14(1), 90-94

After the neo-colonial era, significant changes have unfolded within the traditional fabric of textual expression, initiating a decanonization that resonates across the literary landscapes of Eastern nations. The infusion of American ideals, particularly related to religion and urbanization, has created literature intertwined with geo-political narratives, disrupting Eastern identity. This paper explores the neo-colonial theoretical framework by examining cultural changes and their impact on modern natives in Hayao Miyazaki's (2001) anime film *Spirited Away* from the perspective of a child familiar only with modern Japan and possessing minimal knowledge of traditional Japanese culture. By employing modern eco-critical and critical myth lenses, the study positions itself within the broader context of non-Western nations' experiences, particularly focusing on neo-colonial Japan which serves as a captivating case study due to the country's history of significant cultural and political changes since the Meiji Restoration, often attributed to the displacement of traditional values and practices, resulting in cultural dislocation and a quest for identity (Yoshino, 1992). The film embodies a central theme of loss of belonging and identity due to the collision between traditional Japan and globalized/neo-colonized Japan. The study commences with an exploration of the "Urban Picturesque" theory presented by Carrie Tirado Bramen in "The Urban Picturesque

© Authors 2024. **Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) License, which allows users to download and share the article for non-commercial purposes, so long as the article is reproduced in the whole without changes, and the original authorship is acknowledged. If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. If your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

and the Spectacle of Americanization.” Bramen’s theory imposes anthropocentric American ideals on the environment. The section meticulously scrutinizes the socio-cultural implications arising from the clash between these ideals in urban spaces and the representation of nature within Miyazaki’s *Spirited Away*. The objective is to comprehend their influence on characters’ sense of place. Shifting its focus, the subsequent section delves into Mircea Eliade’s “Eternal Return” framework. The analysis of *Spirited Away* through the perspective of a child in an Americanized Japan challenges Eliade’s theory, striving to offer a nuanced understanding pertinent to the global neo-colonial era. The inquiry unravels the profound impact of these cultural shifts on young natives, reflecting in *Spirited Away*’s protagonist and spirits grappling with an unfamiliar yet intrinsically connected religion.

MOVING FROM THE GREYS (URBAN) TO THE GREENS (RURAL)

Hayao Miyazaki’s Academy Award winning film *Spirited Away*, commences with the introduction of the ten-year-old protagonist, Chihiro Ogino, embarking on a journey to her new home. A visually striking establishing shot captures Chihiro’s car navigating a monochromatic cemented grey urban landscape symbolizing the mundane nature of city life. This grey highway gradually guides the audience toward a verdant green haven dominated by nature. The film’s title card emerges at the juncture between the grey urban expanse and the lush rural setting, underscoring the central dichotomy. This urban-rural thematic interplay is further illuminated in the subsequent scene, where the car descends out of the paved highway into the unpaved road of the rural town, presenting a distinct boundary between the two spaces signifying their severed nature.

Chihiro’s family navigates an unpaved path, riddled with numerous Shinto symbols, only to encounter an impediment in the form of a traditionally styled building. This building serves as the portal to the spirit world, taking the shape of an abandoned theme park and becomes the focal point

of the film. Up until this juncture in the new rural town, Chihiro had only observed untamed natural landscapes adorned with Shinto symbols such as Torii gates and shrines. However, the deliberately constructed *dōsojin* idol at the abandoned theme park entrance, symbolically meant to protect travellers and residents, paradoxically elicits fear and an unwelcoming atmosphere in Chihiro. Top of Form

As the audience acquaints itself with the amusement park, its artificial nature gradually unfolds. Chihiro’s father observes, “They built them everywhere in the early ‘90s. Then the economy went bad, and they all went bankrupt. This must be one of them” (Miyazaki, 2001).

This abandoned theme park serves as a visual representation of Japan’s post-Meiji Restoration (1868 to 1912), the economic miracle (1950s-1970s), and the bubble boom (late 1980s) periods. These historical phases marked Japan’s rapid industrialization influenced by the West, notably the United States. However, this economic boom proved unsustainable, leading to a significant economic downturn known as the “Lost Decade” in the 1990s. This era prompted a “national soul-searching” marked by a renewed interest in pastoral imagery and Shinto as Japanese citizens sought to reconnect with their culture (Robertson, 1998).

Significantly, this deserted theme park adheres to the traditional Japanese architectural style of bygone eras, thereby introducing a paradox in its existence. The designation “fake,” employed by Chihiro’s father in characterizing the structure, holds particular significance. The composition of the theme park building, utilizing plaster rather than stone, deviates from the foundational principles of Japanese architectural norms. In parallel, the traditional Japanese artifacts within the theme park are artificial and deceptive. The partially constructed river coursing through the park further exemplifies this artificiality, underscoring the irony of industrialists dismantling “real” rivers while fabricating “fake” ones. This irony finds resonance in the portrayal of Haku, the spirit embodying the deceased Kohaku river. Such endeavours echo colonial nuances, reminiscent of the British practice of extracting cultural artifacts from indigenous

territories for exhibition in their museums.

Susan J. Napier, in her work titled “Matter out of Place” identifies the impact of globalization on the concept of “authenticity,” resulting in the possibility of “nostalgia without memory,” which Arjun Appadurai, a social-cultural anthropologist, describes as the past becoming a “synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios” (2006). Therefore, such fake Japanese structures can’t provide the new generation with proper memories of their past, distancing them from their roots.

Napier’s apprehensions and Miyazaki’s reservations take on added significance when examined through the framework of Bramen’s notion of the “Urban Picturesque,” deeply rooted in American ideals that cast a substantial influence over the global cultural milieu. Carrie Tirado Bramen’s investigation into the 19th-century American phenomenon of the “Urban Picturesque” explored in her paper “The Urban Picturesque and the Spectacle of Americanization,” reveals itself to signify something “superficial” and lacking “moral depth and earnestness,” as perceived by her and other regionalists (2000). This characterization finds a striking parallel in the narrative of *Spirited Away*, particularly in the construction of the Japanese-themed amusement park. Despite its outward adherence to traditional Shinto aesthetics, the park remains a mere imitation, devoid of any authentic cultural or historical grounding. Its structures, fashioned from superficial plaster rather than genuine Japanese materials, epitomize a commercial and overused representation, aligning with Bramen’s critique of the “picturesque.” The park serves as a symbol of commodification, wherein cultural elements are reduced to mere spectacle, detached from their intrinsic depth.

Peter Barry’s examination of the aesthetic picturesque also further resonates within the film’s context, paralleling the destruction of authentic natural landscapes. In *Spirited Away*, this destruction is embodied in the replacement of pure, natural spaces with the “domestic picturesque” — the amusement park itself. The manicured lawns and gardens within the park, culturally idealized yet artificial, echo the degradation of authentic environments by human-induced pollution

(Batra & Malik, 2002). This pursuit of an idealized environment, reflective of anthropocentric Western ideals, aligns with the overarching theme of the film. The notion that every facet of nature exists for human dominance leads to environmental degradation, a consequence that resonates with Miyazaki’s critique of confining traditional elements to limited spaces. This perspective stands in stark contrast to the animistic beliefs of Eastern religions such as Shintoism, highlighted in the film. Shintoism attributes divinity to nature, promoting the sacred duty of safeguarding it—a duty neglected in the pursuit of the “Urban Picturesque.”

Miyazaki’s personal stance, evident in his resistance to the “fake” existence embodied by theme parks, enhances the analysis with a poignant layer. His disapproval of these structures is grounded in the conviction that they foster the disconnection of children from their cultural roots, especially in an era overshadowed by the relentless progress of modern technology (Hartman, 2017). The film serves as a compelling commentary on the risk of alienation from cultural authenticity in the presence of superficial representations and technological advancements, encapsulating the broader implications of the urban picturesque within the context of *Spirited Away*.

The bathhouse in *Spirited Away* serves as another central setting symbolizing the superficial intermingling of cultural elements. Historically rooted in Shinto tradition, the sentō or bathhouse was once integral to Japanese communities but has waned in popularity with urbanization (Boyd & Nishimura, 2016). In the film, this space becomes a nexus where spirits from Japanese folklore intersect with the human world, embodying cultural hybridity in its architectural design and traditional Shinto purification motifs. However, the bathhouse also reflects modern and Western capitalist influences, revealing a corrupted version of its traditional essence (Quirk, 2021). The hierarchical structure of the bathhouse, with luxurious top floors for high-ranking spirits and minimal accommodations for workers, mirrors not only traditional Japanese class hierarchy but also aligns with European-derived capitalist ideals. The perception of lower spirits and the human Chihiro as dirty or dangerous

(Boyd & Nishimura, 2016) reflects the “Urban Picturesque,” contributing to a hierarchy of values that marginalizes certain urban populations.

SEARCHING FOR A MYTHICAL BELONGINGNESS

Religious historian Mircea Eliade (1957) contends in his book *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* that modern man's anxieties arise from a rejection of myths and the sacred. Myths provide a sense of order and meaning to human existence, assigning people a place in the world. Losing touch with these myths erases their connection to the past and culture. Chihiro's anxiety in the new environment, surrounded by Japanese mythical figures almost paralyzes her as depicted in the following scene as well the scene where she was continuously shaking and whimpering on her first night in the bathhouse—

“[Chihiro] Ah! My legs! I can't stand up. Help! What do I do?
[Haku] Calm down. Take a deep breath.”
(Miyazaki, 2001)

Babitha Justin argues that myths are a fundamental aspect of every culture, representing a special bond that connects members of society to their traditions and history. Mythical frameworks allow individuals to strengthen their theories about their origins, unite their communities and affirm their identities (2017). However, Western scholars, such as Max Muller and anthropologists, such as James Frazer, have disregarded myths in favour of scientific or logical explanations. Miyazaki reinforces this theory by stating:

“In this borderless age . . . a man without history or people who forget their past will have no choice but to disappear like a shimmer of light.” (Miyazaki qtd. in Hartman, 2017)

The metaphorical concept articulated by Miyazaki finds a literal manifestation in the film, where Chihiro undergoes a fading akin to a

shimmer of light. Her salvation comes through the intervention of the spirit of the Kohaku River, who provides her with a fruit from the spirit world and restores her real name—stripped away by the witch Yubaba. However, this newfound safety is transient. To escape being trapped in the spirit world indefinitely and prevent the slaughter of her parents, transformed into pigs, Chihiro must find an exit from the amusement park. Consequently, the spirit world does not embody a paradisiacal realm sought after by natives; instead, Chihiro continually attempts to evade it, challenging Eliade's theory of the myth of the eternal return. However, Eliade's theory remains pertinent in elucidating Chihiro's perspective as a Westerner, unfamiliar with Japanese and Shinto traditions, horrified by her own oriental heritage.

Eliade's foundational concept posits that individuals, implicitly or explicitly, harbour a belief in the potentiality of returning to or coexisting with a “Mythical Age” (1957). This age represents a time when the events recounted in their myths unfolded—an aspect Chihiro seemingly approaches, but it does not align with her sense of home. This extends to no-face, the film's popular spirit, whose origin lies outside Shinto or Japanese traditions, emblematic of the modern capitalist and consumerist era. No-face exhibits gluttony, initially overindulging in edibles provided by workers and other spirits in exchange for gold, which is later revealed to be made of mud. Unsated, he begins engulfing both workers and humans. Interestingly, he expresses a connection solely with Chihiro, indicating a shared sense of not belonging to the traditional spirit world, as underscored by his lament, “I'm lonely... I want Sen [Chihiro]...” (Miyazaki, 2001)

The no-face spirit, devoid of any inclination towards an “Eternal return” due to the absence of a primordial ideal world, ultimately seeks solace with Yubaba's benevolent sister, Zeniba. Simultaneously, Chihiro experiences a transformative episode as she cleanses the stink spirit, an embodiment of a river spirit heavily polluted by human activities. Chihiro's immersion in the bathhouse's purifying waters during this Shinto ritual aligns with cultural traditions (Boyd & Nishimura, 2016), establishing

a connection between her modern secular identity and the traditional Shinto self, fostering a culturally hybrid disposition. This pivotal scene also draws a poignant parallel to Chihiro's infancy when bathed in the Kohaku River, potentially triggering her recollection of shared history with Haku, representative of the Kohaku River spirit. Such recollection aids both Chihiro and Haku in reconciling with their pasts and consolidating their identities, particularly given their shared nature as river spirits.

The presence of the dead river, once Haku's abode, and the artificial half-constructed river within the theme park symbolize the encroachment of animistic Shinto beliefs by Western ideals. The failure of this fabricated construction to become Haku's true home underscores the notion that home transcends a physical space, existing empathetically in one's mental landscape rather than a specific geographical location (Justin, 2017). As the Kohaku River has already succumbed to ecological destruction, Haku must accept his new reality and navigate a global, neo-colonized, and hybrid world where non-American, non-white humans and spirits cannot wholly belong to either the modern or traditional realms.

CONCLUSION

In essence, *Spirited Away* provides a poignant exploration of Japan's cultural identity amidst neo-colonial influences. Through the film's intricate portrayal of urban-rural dynamics, thematic interplay, and the symbolism embedded in the abandoned theme park, Miyazaki critiques the erosion of traditional values. The juxtaposition of Eastern and Western ideals, examined through the lenses of Bramen's "Urban Picturesque" and Eliade's "Eternal Return," underscores the

challenges of cultural displacement and the quest for identity. As Chihiro navigates this complex landscape, the film prompts reflection on how globalization and modernization affect cultural heritage. *Spirited Away* stands as a profound commentary on the balance between tradition and progress, resonating with broader discussions on the influence of Western ideals on non-Western societies.

REFERENCES

1. Bramen, C. T. (2000). "The Urban Picturesque and the Spectacle of Americanization." *American Quarterly*, 52(3), 444–477.
2. Boyd, J. W., & Nishimura, T. (2016). "Shinto Perspectives in Miyazaki's Anime Film 'Spirited Away'." *Journal of Religion & Film*, 8(3), 4.
3. Eliade, M. (1957). *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities* (P. Mairet, Trans.).
4. Hartman, E. (2017). "Tradition Vs. Innovation and the Creatures in Spirited Away." *Digital Literature Review*, 4, 104–117. doi:10.33043/DLR.4.0.104-117.
5. Justin, B. (2017). "Home as Metaphor." In *From Canons to Trauma*. Bodhi Tree Books. 137–144.
6. Justin, B. (2017). "Myth and Literature." In *From Canons to Trauma*. Bodhi Tree Books. 25–40.
7. Batra, J., & Malik, R. S. (2022). *A New Approach to Literary Theory and Criticism*. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (P) Ltd.
8. Miyazaki, H. (Director). (2001). *Spirited Away*. Studio Ghibli.
9. Napier, S. J. (2006). "Matter out of Place: Carnival, Containment and Cultural Recovery in Miyazaki's Spirited Away." *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 32(2), 287–310.
10. Quirk, M. A. (2021). "Stepping Into the Bathhouse: Physical Space and Shinto Revival in Miyazaki's Spirited Away." *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies*, 11(1), 19.
11. Robertson, J. (1998). "It Takes a Village: Internationalization and Nostalgia in Post-War Japan." In *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*. University of California Press.
12. Yoshino, K. (1992). *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary Japan: A Sociological Enquiry*. Bowker. doi:10.1604/9780415071192.