

The Empowered Woman Image in The Japanese Yamauba Myth:

“Yamauba The Devouring Witch”¹

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Abstract

Yamauba, also known as yamamba, is a witch-like hag in Japanese mythology, who lives in the mountain. She is an empowered woman who threatens men. Such powerful evil woman images and figures are similarly represented in Western culture as the counterpart of yamauba. In Greek mythology, it is possible to see the same empowered but horrifying women archetype that shares the similar yamauba-topos especially in the depiction of witches such as Medusa and Medea. In this regard, what makes yamauba popular is the very fact that she is fearful and avenging, which causes terror and horror. Therefore, yamauba and her ravenous mythological existence will be analysed in this study in terms of deconstructing the authority of patriarchy. The purpose of this study is, hence, to discuss the terrifying place of yamauba as an empowered, and yet an evil woman, who is depicted rather dreadful and alarmingly dark.

Keywords: yamauba, witch, fearful woman, evil woman, empowered woman.

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1. Introduction to Yamauba “The Mountain-Witch”

In Japanese culture, yamauba or yamamba is considered to be a mountain witch who eats humans especially men. Yamauba is usually defined as, “tall, with long hair, piercing eyes, and a large mouth that opens from ear to ear” (Komatsu 2000, p. 428). According to modern Japanese texts, yamauba is depicted as an old woman having evil characteristics. As Monica Bethe and Karen Brazell state, yamauba becomes evident in many Japanese texts as “a god, a demon, an entertainer, a mother; enlightened, tormented, and harmful” (1978, p. 8). It is considered that she is an enigmatic witch who lives in mountains.

What makes yamauba popular especially in recent years in women’s literature is the very fact that she rejects normative patriarchal codes. Based on that, in Japanese culture, yamauba is considered to be a mountain-woman who is an alarmingly empowered but causing horror and terror. According to Japanese folkloric tradition, yamauba has two different characteristics. As it is stated by the folklorist Konno Ensuke, “yōkai-like creatures that are believed to live in the mountains are usually considered the yamahime type; and if they are old, they are called yamauba or *yamahaha*” (qtd. in Reider, 2021, p. 6). In Japanese culture, it is believed that “*hime* refers to young women and *uba* to old women, they came to be thought of as two distinct types: young and old, yama-hime and yamauba” (Reider, 2021, p. 6). However, the only type that keeps its originality is the type depicting “strange women in the mountains”. Therefore, yamauba’s identity is constructed based on the *topos* she is associated with. As Mizuta Noriko puts it, “Yamauba’s identity is the *topos* of mountains” (2002, p. 13). Mountains, as the special location for Yamauba, are regarded as sacred and divine places for many cultures and traditions. Furthermore, for Japanese culture, mountains are also considered to be authentic and religious places. Miyake Hitoshi explains the rationale behind the mountains as follows: “[m]ountains are viewed as the dwelling place of spirits of the dead and ancestor spirits. Tombs are built on mountains, which are regarded as liminal space between this world and the otherworld. The mountain is an avenue to heaven; a mountain cave is an entrance to the otherworld” (2001, 78–79). Also, mountains are believed to be significant places for both earthly-beings and spiritual-beings. It is also believed that mountains are in a form of a bridge connecting the earth to heaven. Similarly, Yanagita Kunio, who is considered to be the founder of Japanese folklore studies, explains the folkloric

base behind the existence of the image of mountain-woman and he states that “yamauba were believed to exist in the deep mountains both in the past and in the present and there were women who went into the mountains of their own volition” (qtd. in Reider, 2021, p. 10). Based on her depiction as a mountain divinity in Japanese folk-culture, yamauba can also be depicted as the representation of fertility. According to Yamaguchi Motoko, yamauba “is an archetype that is deeply rooted in the collective unconsciousness of the Japanese; it could be considered a distinctive Japanese manifestation of the “Great Goddess”—an archetype that exists widely in the human imagination” (2009, p. 44). Therefore, Yamauba is not only considered a witch as the symbol of fear, horror and terror, but also the symbol of fertility and abundance as represented by the great mother. To put it briefly, Noriko T. Reider writes that “as mysterious and contradictory as yamauba can be, her overarching qualities are connected to mountains and her female sex” (2021, p. 17). Hence, as an enigmatic woman who lives in the mountains, yamauba has some nomadic qualities because she “moves about as she wishes” (Reider, 2021, p. 19). Last but not least, yamauba, as a mountain witch, is free to move and ready to cause dreadful calamities against men.

Introduced by the Japanese folk-culture, yamauba the devouring witch has been in use in many mythological stories. It is also possible to see the counterpart of yamauba in European myths and stories. The major characteristics of yamauba have been in use in mythological stories. The first one of these characteristics is, through yamauba, ‘the mountain topos’ is portrayed in which her evil nature is represented. The second seminal characteristic of yamauba is that she has anthropophagous quality through which her man-eating trait (cannibalistic nature) is reflected which also shows her savage side. Lastly, yamauba is such an empowered woman that she causes fear, horror, and terror both in humans and in men. Yamauba, thus, is depicted as having an empowered female body that resists and rejects all the patriarchal norms. In this regard, this paper examines the mythic representations of one of the seminal witches in Japanese folk-culture: ‘yamauba’. It also proposes that even if the ravenous mythological existence of yamauba, as a witch-like hag, cannot be denied; what is significant is the representation of the empowered female body of yamauba within her authentic characteristics which make men feel fear, horror, and terror because for men (patriarchy), yamauba’s empowered female body is considered the source of defilement. Yamauba, hence, challenges the ideological force of the conventional norms of patriarchy

imposed upon women by providing a variety of dreadful and dark reflections to demonstrate how mythological existence of a monster-woman can be such alarmingly empowered.

2. “Cannibalism” As The Savage Side of Yamauba’s Dual Existence

Yamauba’s anthropophagous feature makes her popular both in oral and literary tradition. However, it is not only anthropophagy that makes yamauba a devouring witch, who lives in the mountains; but also, her power of metamorphosis that makes her dual characteristics utterly significant. As Reider puts it, yamauba, “possesses the duality of good and evil, and she has the transformational power to manifest herself as an ugly crone or a young beauty. Invisible yamauba also exist. Some yamauba are mothers of divine children. Lesser-known attributes of yamauba include flying and bloodsucking” (2021, 19-20). Therefore, yamauba’s man-eating habit causes death and destruction. As Rebecca Copeland asserts, “perhaps no image signifies the danger of the uncontainable, ravenous female as readily as the *yamamba*” (2005, p. 21). This shows that yamauba’s inexhaustible ravening greed for her anthropophagous quality makes her a cannibal. In other words, what makes Yamauba well-known and most famous is her “most conspicuous and notorious trait: anthropophagy” (Reider, 2019, p. 404) [my emphasis added].

Furthermore, according to Reider, Yamauba’s cannibalistic origin is the one side of her dual existence³. “Cannibalism, a major representative image of the *yamauba*, is the demonic side of their dual nature. Cannibalism is probably the strongest element connecting the *yamauba* to evil” (2019, p. 407). As it is depicted, yamauba⁴ resembles evil especially when her cannibalistic trait is considered. However, as Reider puts it, another major reason which also lies in yamauba’s destructive quality is, “the influence of patriarchy” (2019, p. 413). This is basically about patriarchy’s household system which is based upon the domestication politics over women. In other words, in the dual nature of yamauba, she is depicted as nurturing and benevolent, having great-mother characteristics especially when she stays in her house; however, when she is out, her cannibalistic quality appears, and she thus becomes a devouring witch. This could also be interpreted as that the outside world that is dominated by

³ According to Reider, yamauba’s dichotomy is, “she is on the one hand viciously cannibalistic while on the other a nurturing mother, seems virtually irreconcilable” (2005, p. 12).

⁴ As Reider writes in her book, *Japanese Demon Lore Oni from Ancient Times to the Present* (2010), yamauba, “was widely accepted as a frightening-looking old woman with an affinity for human flesh” (2010, p. 69).

the patriarchy generates her inner powers to demolish the presiding influence of patriarchy. According to Marc Sebastian-Jones, the depiction of yamauba's dual nature "raises the question of whether beautiful and alluring young women (like Medea and Medusa) become monster-women (like the mountain witch or the queen)" (2013, p. 175), simply because they are considered witches [my emphasis added].

Based on the Western counterparts of yamauba, 'Medea and Medusa' myths have the same tendencies in which the images of empowered, yet destructive and evil women are depicted. In Greek mythology, the fear of women whose powers are mostly associated with the evil sources can be considered to be one of the leading themes. Medea is very beautiful and powerful, but she is avenging and evil. Therefore, she becomes one of the most evil and destructive witches. The excessive passion and the sense of revenge changes Medea dramatically and makes her an empowered, but a monstrous woman. On the other hand, the story of Medusa is also considered to be perniciously savage woman, who reflects the image of fear, horror, and terror against men just like yamauba. The story of 'Medusa' "is one of the most frightening of the transformation stories, for not only is the punishment of this woman unjust, but her metamorphosis makes her a terrible monster who brings suffering to others" (Hamilton, 1999, p. 162). Having the similar yamauba topos, especially on the fear and terror only against men, Medusa is as empowered and evil as yamauba because "Medusa was one of the Gorgons" and "for the reason that whoever looked at them was turned instantly into stone" (Hamilton, 1999, p. 200).

3. The Empowered Female Body in The Japanese Myth: "Yamauba"

As it is seen, in addition to Ancient Greek mythological reference as for empowered women depicted above, in the Japanese myth of yamauba, it is also possible to observe such powerful but fearful women. S. Yumiko Hulvey in her work titled: "Myths and Monsters: The Female Body As The Site For Political Agendas" analyzes the existence of the empowered female bodies especially in the Japanese myths. Thusly, she scrutinizes yamauba the devouring witch. According to Hulvey, Japanese women writers, "prefer to be feared as agents of death, as decreed by myth, rather than bow down meekly as the oppressed Other" (qtd. in King, 2000, pp. xiii). This can be considered to be the concrete reaction against the domestication politics of patriarchy. Hulvey asserts that yamauba topos, as an authentic origin, is placed to have a counter space against men to be able challenge and solve "problematic issues such as

identity, sexuality and the traditional role of women in modern society [...] among others, reflect images of women who “drain” the life force from the men with whom they have had sex and suggest men as victims of supernatural, empowered women in the yamauba tradition” (2000, p. 71). Hulvey explains that the main reason behind yamauba myth’s being fearful and it’s being used in narratives for showing female empowerment in traditional Japanese folk tales is because the yamauba: “harkens back to female prototypes in ancient creation myths that impart a sense of empowerment to women. Maybe by choosing to write about the challenge of living as women in patriarchal society, women writers are able to exorcise or alleviate their feelings of frustration” (2000, p. 72). For Hulvey, the reflection of the female empowerment in the gynocentric texts is the major source and reason for women writers in choosing yamauba the devouring witch as a female monster in their literary productions. In other words, through yamauba myth, women start to believe that they are empowered and they have empowered female bodies through which they are able to demolish patriarchal taboos. However, Hulvey also states that the yamauba topos has a political purpose which is created to put women into a negative situation in which they are deprived of their legal rights so that men are able to control women and usurp their rights. As Hulvey writes, “the Japanese creation myth, which posits the female body as the site of defilement and pollution, was a play adopted by patriarchy to associate females with negative attributes in order to gain control of property and inheritance rights that were originally under the jurisdiction of females” (2000, p. 72). The striking images in this Japanese myth put women into defilement which is intentionally organized and planned by patriarchy. However, it is stated that these images, which will be discussed below, have not only been used for the Japanese myths, but also for Greek and other European myths in which women are seen as sources of defilement and represented either as monstrous devils or bloody witches.

For patriarchal ideology, the biggest problem for women who are represented in myths is the lack of power and the phallic symbol. Hence, patriarchy sees that phallic images or symbols in the Japanese myths, are the evidence of women’s achievements of this so-called power. Based on that, for patriarchy, this is the defilement for women. But in fact, “the phallic symbols in the Japanese myth may actually refer to rituals honoring the great mother [...] integral part of rituals honoring the mother goddess (qtd. in Hulvey, 2000, p. 85). Another major image of defilement is menstrual blood which is seen as a symbol of inferiority for patriarchy, but the Japanese myths remind that menstrual blood can be considered to be one

of the eternal elements which shapes the balance of the universe in the creation myth like fire and water. The reason behind that hatred is: “menstrual blood is thought to be the worst kind of defilement because it emanates from vagina” (Hulvey, 2000, p. 86). For patriarchy, menstruation and other defilements are for women because “putrefaction is associated with the female body while purity is associated with the male body” (Hulvey, 2000, 86-87). As it is seen, dualities are constituted by patriarchy and the positive side is always attributed to men, whereas the negative side is left for women. And, to put briefly, the female body has always been a source of defilement for men and the results have been observed through the yamauba myth.

In yamauba myth, through the female body, the image of death is symbolically represented because yamauba devours men. This panoramic view is the same in the Japanese creation myth in which the females are associated with death rather than the birth; however, “in actuality females are the ones capable of creating life, the compliers of the creation myth denied biological fact by making females the reviled gender that threatened humanity with death” (Hulvey, 2000, p. 87). Hence, it is expressed that these myths have partially been shaped by patriarchy and it shows that these dichotomies (dualities) have not been illuminated properly. Through these myths, it is explicitly seen that patriarchy blindly depicts women empowered but terrifying and relentless beings causing ‘the end’ for men. However, even in ‘the creation’ it is depicted that through women the earthly life begins since they give birth. In other words, women simply symbolize fertility. Thus, negative concerns have intentionally been distorted and formed for women by patriarchy. As a matter of fact, patriarchal ideology’s on purpose attitude over women indicates that the overall concerns including both positive and negative ones make women thoroughly who they are. Women, hence, are considered to be the champions of creation and fertility. However, it should not be unnoticed that they can also cause the end, known as ‘the fall,’ since they are not only considered evil doers but also empowered women having empowered female bodies which can be associated with the birth, the life, and the fertility.

Having depicted inconsistently formed political and manipulative attitudes of patriarchy against women, it is understandable for men to defame on myths in which women are portrayed as monstrous but empowered ones. Based on that, yamauba myth is depicted as a monster-woman who attacks men. As Hulvey asserts, “in the Shinto belief system, which values purity, the female body cannot ever be ritually cleansed because it is the site of

defilement through its association with blood, illness, and putrefaction. By extension, the bloody image of the yamauba, a man-eating female monster, can be nothing but negative” (Hulvey, 2000, p. 88). These expressions can be considered to be the main reasons behind women in challenging these distorted dualities created by androcentric myths of patriarchy. In this regard, women not only focus upon good representations of the females in patriarchal myths, but also evil ones which make them feel grateful since they are portrayed as the female monsters through which the empowerment of women is represented. In other words, the power of female myths converts the patriarchal defilements over women into positive reflections and achievements. Therefore, through the depiction of the empowered female body of yamauba, the image of monstrous and fearful woman is expressed. Based upon these consequences, it should not be surprising why yamauba myth has been one of the greatest empowered women in Japanese mythological narratives.

4. Conclusion

All in all, yamauba is described as an old and terrifying witch living in the mountain and she deadly chases after men and punishes them. Moreover, she can transform herself from beautiful woman to witch-like hag so, it can be said that this old woman has superhuman qualities. Last but not least, she has man-eating trait therefore, she is considered to be a cannibal. Consequently, as a part of Japanese folk-culture, ‘yamauba’ is an empowered woman. She knows the politics of her female body. She also knows that she is fertile and nurturing. She is able to cope with any difficulties she faces thus she knows how to eliminate patriarchy in general, patriarchal codes in particular. Therefore, men should see the existence of yamauba. Androcentric myths want to reflect that such monstrous women as yamauba, are either evil-doers or devouring witches. This is the normative and wicked policy of patriarchal ideology in which such women are represented negatively because they are considered to be the sources of death. However what matters for women is not about how they are represented but the way patriarchy forms its normative sexist ideology by presenting women in dualities within distorted facts. Based on that, women re-shape their bodies, they don’t want to be controlled and formed by patriarchy. Therefore, women re-write their own bodies and myths. They change men-made panorama in which women are depicted as the oppressed other. This shows men’s anxiety and fear of women because they already know that women are empowered. What men do not know is the very fact that women prefer to be shown as monstrous witches and evil doers rather than being subjugated and submissive.

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