Women's Empowerment Representation in Japanese Anime: A Case Study of Makoto Shinkai's *Suzume*

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Abstract. As a part of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Goal 5, which addresses "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls", women's empowerment has become widely called for worldwide, both in the real world and the literary world, as literary works reflect life. As a reflection of life, portraying women in films who challenge societal preconceptions can promote self-confidence and motivate women in real life, allowing them to be practically empowered. Therefore, this study seeks to uncover three central themes of women's empowerment proposed by Laurene Sheilds, as reflected in the main female character of Makoto Shinkai's anime *Suzume*. This qualitative literary research used the sociology of literature design. Data was collected through speeches, acts, and events from the anime. The analysis found all three central themes of the empowerment process, which are: 1) the emergence of an internal sense of self; 2) the movement to action, choice, and control; and 3) a salient theme of connectedness in Suzume Iwato, the female main character of this anime. Three elements are also found in her: power, autonomy, and self-reliance. Therefore, it can be concluded that women will most likely develop these three elements in their empowering process, changing them from merely being to doing. This development shows that women's empowerment is rooted in how they see themselves or their self-worth, which is critically bound up with how those around them and their society see them.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Empowerment Process, Japan, Anime, *Suzume*.

1   Introduction

Empowerment refers to the level of independence and autonomy of individuals and societies. However, as an act, empowerment refers to self-empowerment in which people overcome their feelings of helplessness and lack of authority by identifying and utilizing their resources [1]. As for women, empowerment is the determination to use their physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual resources to gain autonomy and control over their lives, including economic, social, legal, and political [2,3]. In other words, women's empowerment is a process of women enhancing their ability to make strategic life choices [4], their self-worth, decision-making abilities, and capacity to influence change [1].

Women's empowerment is a part of Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which addresses "achieving gender equality and empowering all women and

girls" [5]. As part of Goal 5, women's empowerment has become widely called for worldwide. Not only in the real world, it has also emerged in the literary world, mainly popular ones, as literary works reflect life.

As is typical of popular literary works, Japanese anime represents current societal events and values. Female characters are sometimes depicted as people who conform to patriarchal societal norms, yet they are also portrayed as strong and independent individuals capable of overcoming obstacles. This kind of women's portrayal can promote self-confidence and motivate women in real life, allowing women to be empowered in practical ways. Therefore, to enhance public awareness of its importance, this study seeks to uncover three central themes of women's empowerment proposed by Sheilds [6], as reflected in the female main character of Makoto Shinkai's *Suzume*. This anime follows the narrative of Suzume Iwato, a high school girl who lives with her aunt in a small town in Kyushu after her parents died in a massive earthquake. She embarks on an adventure with Souta Munakata, a young man she met on her way to school. Together, they do rituals of closing doors, which serve as portals that connect their world with another realm. They close those portals to calm Japan's natural spirits in that realm, which are responsible for causing earthquakes [7]. Suzume's adventure reminds the audience of Chihiro's adventure in Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* with her Hero's Journey, for they both have to face obstacles in other realms to save the ones they deeply care about and love, which develops their character [8].

As a relatively new anime released in 2022, *Suzume* has been used less as a research object; only four previous research used this anime as their corpus. The first one is about the interaction between cinema and its audience, which represents a significant area of inquiry in contemporary film theory, for there has been a shift from a "creator-centered" to an "audience-centered" approach to film narrative in recent years, including *Suzume* [9]. The second is *Suzume* marketing in China, which found that cross-cultural sensitivity was fully utilized, and the local culture was actively integrated with publicity marketing [10]. The third is a thesis about the *wabi-sabi* concept and its aesthetic representation in *Suzume*'s visual content [11]. The last one is research on how Japanese society perceives the idea of Kizuna or bond, which they see as something that makes people aware of trust and shows a different way of dealing with disaster, as reflected in *Suzume* [12]. Therefore, this study that seeks to uncover three central themes of women's empowerment in the female main character of the anime *Suzume* can be held accountable for its novelty.

2   Methods

This research design uses qualitative methods. Data was collected through speeches, acts, and events related to women's empowerment in the research corpus from the

female main character. Data collection uses observation and record techniques, while the data analysis uses Sheilds' three central themes of women's empowerment.

Sheilds' first central theme of the empowerment process is the emergence of an internal sense of self that involves four basic components. Those components are claiming their identity, developing self-value, developing self-acceptance, and developing trust in self-knowledge. The second theme is the movement to action, choice, and control, which also involves four basic components. Those components are the ability to have a voice, the ability to take positive risks based on the internal sense of self, the development of a sense of competence, including specific skills and abilities, and the emergence of refined thinking and learning patterns. The third one is the salient theme of connectedness, which includes intrapersonal and interpersonal connectedness [6].

3   Result and Discussion

Following the three central themes of the empowerment process proposed by Sheilds, the mentioned process was fulfilled by the female main character, Suzume Iwato. The discussion below also describes elements not included in these three central themes found in this anime.

3.1   The Emergence of an Internal Sense of Self

Suzume claimed her new identity by accepting her "new job" to close the portals all over Japan to calm nature's spirit and avoid earthquakes. By doing that, she developed her self-value as a woman/girl who can use her physical, intellectual, and spiritual resources to protect her life and others. Suzume also developed self-acceptance by accepting her fate as an orphan since she was a kid and fate as the one who has to close the portals after she realizes the meaning of the nightmares that haunted her. She also developed trust in self-knowledge in many scenes. For example, she can free Souta, trapped in another realm to replace Daijin, a powerful spirit that keeps one of the two main portals closed, which she accidentally unleashed.

3.2   The Movement to Action, Choice, and Control

In this second theme, Suzume reflects a woman/girl who has developed her agency or the ability to make and act upon those choices. For example, when Souta gives himself up to replace Daijin, Suzume promises to save him, and she keeps her promise. Suzume risks her life to save Souta from another realm because she believes that she could save him from becoming the replacement of Daijin and change him back to his human form after Daijin changed him into a kid's chair. In the end, she managed to help Souta get back to his human form (1:42:00-1:45:58), which proves that Suzume can voice her wants and take positive risks. She has developed her competency by finding the opened

portals and closing them by herself. The emergence of refined thinking and learning patterns was also found in Suzume when she observed the signs before a portal widely opened so she could predict when and where the new one would open. She also learned about Daijin and discussed possible ways to save Souta with Souta's grandfather (1:16:05-1:19:25), who is being treated in the hospital for the wounds he got from keeping those portals closed.

3.3   The Salient Theme of Connectedness

The intrapersonal connectedness can be seen when Suzume realizes the meaning of her nightmares about her being a kid who is lost in the city ruins and foggy meadows. In her dreams, she met a woman and a man that she thought were her parents because the woman's face resembled her mother, and she gave her a yellow kid's chair that her mother made. It turns out that the woman is herself in the future, and her future self comes with Souta to comfort and save her (1:50:05-1:53:20). In other words, Suzume's roles confirm the intrapersonal connectedness within her, as shown in the figure below.
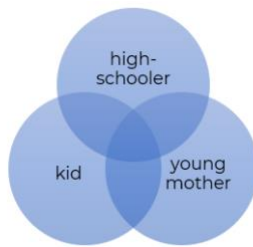
Fig. 1. Intrapersonal connectedness in Suzume.

Meanwhile, interpersonal connectedness can be seen in Suzume's relations with the people around her, especially her aunt, Souta, and Daijin. For these three, it is Kizuna, not just an ordinary relationship. They are bound to be bonded forever in any timeline and any world. They all share the pain connected to the massive earthquake that destroyed everything and try to cope with the pain together and be a rock for each other to hold on to. This relationship is in line with the fact that *Suzume* was released 12 years after the Great East Japan Earthquake in a society where Kizuna has come to be treated as something that elicits "responsibility-as-accountability" [12].

3.4   Other Elements

The element of power reflected in Suzume does not relate to magic or superpowers but to the power constituted in social relationships. Based on Foucault's concept, power is relational and exists only in its exercise. Power is constituted in a network of social relationships; without power, those relationships cannot exist [13]. In the anime, Suzume exercised her power through her strong will to help Souta close the portals (0:12:14) and save him from the dark realm (1:42:00-1:45:58), even though Souta

refused her help. Suzume also exercised it to her aunt by explicitly showing her that she is no longer a child who has to obey anything her aunt tells her (1:30:57-1:31:01).

The elements of autonomy and self-reliance reflected in Suzume were found through her initiative to help Souta close the portals and save him from the dark realm. At times, Suzume has no one to support and help her when she tries to close the portals and help Souta, making her self-reliant (0:48:30-1:01:57).

4　Conclusion

The three central themes of the empowerment process proposed by Sheilds were fulfilled in this anime by its female main character, Suzume Iwato. Three elements outside these three central themes are also found in her: power, autonomy, and self-reliance. Suzume shows that she enhanced and used her physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual resources to gain autonomy and control over her life. Therefore, based on these findings, women will most likely develop power, autonomy, and self-reliance in their empowering process, changing them from merely being to doing. This development shows that women's empowerment is rooted in how they see themselves or their self-worth, which is critically bound up with how those around them and their society see them.

5　Acknowledgment

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