



# Tomie and the Resistance of *Shoujo* (Young Girl) Myths in Japanese Culture

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**Abstract.** This study aims to examine the resistance to *shoujo* myths exhibited by the character Tomie in the *anime Junji Ito Collection* (2018). Tomie is a physically attractive young woman who engages in flirtatious interactions with men and enjoys destroying their careers. She possesses the mysterious ability to super-regenerate and create clones of every part of her body, enabling her to return to life after being killed. This paper attempts to explore how Tomie's character as a seductress can undermine the *shoujo* myth of the *kawaii* (passive, innocent, and dependent) female figure that is often sexualized in Japanese culture. Data taken from episodes 9 and 1-2 of the OVA were analyzed using the textual analysis method, drawing on Barthes' conception of myth. The results indicate that Tomie resists the *shoujo* myth through her seductive nature, thereby becoming an active subject and shedding her innocent image. She also demonstrates her dominant position over men through the destruction of their careers. However, this resistance also appears paradoxical, as Tomie is presented as an object at the end of the story, as she is always the murder victim of the men. Tomie's resistance to the *shoujo* myth also preserves Kristeva's "abjection" and Creed's monstrous-feminine view of horror cinema, which represents Japanese society's misogynistic views and fear of female sexuality.

**Keywords:** Japanese Culture, Myth, *Shoujo*, Tomie.

## 1 Introduction

The term *shoujo* in Japanese culture refers to girls aged 7 to 17, and sometimes young women aged 17 to 20 [1]. It encompasses not only age categorization but also stereotypical ideals of femininity influenced by Western culture during the Meiji era. The concept of *shoujo* is linked to the idealized femininity of motherhood and wifely duties (*ryousaikenbo* norm) Ogi (2001:171) [2]. In *anime-manga*, *shoujo* is a genre targeted towards girls and is considered a counterpart to boys' *manga* (Prough, 2011:3) [3]. Tomie's story, part of the horror anthology *Junji Ito Collection* (2018), is an example of *shoujo manga* adapted into *anime*. Despite being a horror genre, Tomie's character embodies *shoujo* qualities associated with young girls (*shoujo*).

Tomie, a beautiful young woman, attracts men to the point of obsession. The story ends with her being murdered and mutilated by her male admirers, with unclear mo-

tives. Despite this, Tomie can regenerate herself through cloning and super regeneration. She has a history of seducing men, leading to their downfall in both professional and romantic aspects.

Drawing from Barthes' (1991:107) notion that "...everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse" [4], *shoujo* is constructed as a myth that shapes the image of a young Japanese girl through the *kawaii* discourse. Choo's (2008:284) argues that "being a *shoujo* in Japan not only requires behaving according to one's physical age, but also requires behavioral traits associated with *kawaii*" [5]. *Kawaii* is "childlike social behavior and physical appearance; it refers to something sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, sincere, gentle, vulnerable, weak and inexperienced" (Kinsella, 1995:220) [6]. However, Tomie deviates from the typical "*kawaii*" image associated with *shoujo* characters by embodying a seductive persona. This study aims to explore how Tomie challenges the traditional *shoujo* myth in the *anime* series *Junji Ito Collection* (2018).

## 2 Method

This research employs a feminist approach and used textual analysis method following McKee (2003) which aims to provide interpretation of the text based on Barthes' conception of myth [7]. The text used as data in this research is in the form of dialog pieces and scene images from episode 9 and episode 1-2 OVA (Original Video Animation)<sup>1</sup> in the *anime Junji Ito Collection* (2018). The data were collected in the form of dialogic quotations, transcribed in both Japanese and English. Meanwhile, data in the form of cut scenes were documented through the screen capture feature on the laptop.

## 3 Result and Discussion

### 3.1 *Shoujo* Myth Resistance by Tomie

In the perspective of Barthes (1991:142), the existence of myths is consistently "depoliticized" [4]. In other words, myths function by simplifying and reducing the complexity of reality, thereby imparting a political dimension to the reality conveyed through myths. This is in line with the dual function of myth, "it points out and is notified, it makes us understand something and it impress it on us" (Barthes, 1991:115) [4]. Barthes' argument about myth can be used to explain how the myth of *shoujo* as a young girl with dependent and passive (*kawaii*) characteristics is widely accepted and becomes the standard for depicting idealized young girl femininity in the *anime-manga* world. The acceptance of these portrayals is predicated on the assumption that such qualities symbolize the purity and innocence associated with the femininity of a Japanese young woman. The *shoujo* myth subsequently became associated with sexual

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<sup>1</sup> One form of anime publication is created without the intermediary of television or cinematic media, and is therefore released directly in video format, such as Blu-ray or DVD. Moreover, this term will be referenced using its acronym, OVA.

themes as it evolved. Prough (2011:128-130) posits that sexual themes have proliferated in *shoujo manga* since the 1990s, concomitant with the advent of the *enjo kousai* phenomenon in the wake of Japan's economic crisis between 1986 and 1991 [3].

*Enjo kousai* is a practice where teenage school-age girls sell intimacy to older men, ranging from dinner to sex, through telephone or dating club services. This phenomenon is driven by the desire for luxury objects and lifestyles, stemming from the economic depression post-Japanese economic bubble burst (Prough, 2011:118-119) [3]. *Enjo kousai* continues in Japan through *JK* or *Joshi Kousai* (high school girl) businesses, where high school girls provide services to adult men, including chatting and sexual favors [8], [9]. The vulnerability to sexualization in *shoujo* narratives, both in *anime* and *manga* and real life, is evident in the *JK* phenomenon. The *enjo kousai* phenomenon is reflected in Tomie's story through her relationships with mature, financially stable men like Takagi, Mori, and Iwata. These men experience career setbacks, relationship issues, and even death due to their involvement with Tomie. Tomie herself is portrayed as a young woman who desires luxury items, similar to the *enjo kousai* phenomenon. Her preference for expensive foods and jewelry also mirrors the behavior associated with the *enjo kousai* phenomenon.

In consideration of the socio-cultural background presented earlier, it becomes evident that within the *shoujo* mythos, there exists a dichotomy pertaining to the characteristics of *kawaii*. On the one hand, *kawaii* is perceived positively as a representation of innocence and purity. However, it is also viewed negatively as a sexual object and as a representation of immaturity. Barthes (1991) posits that the coexistence of disparate meanings within a single myth is a common phenomenon [4]. The presence of two seemingly paradoxical meanings in the myth is well described by Boer (2011:225) as "a mutually dependent couple who can only be together by squabbling, the oppressive and subversive elements of myth cannot escape one another" [10].

Conversely, the concept of *shoujo* with cute characteristics in the *anime-manga* world is not universally accepted. For instance, the *anime* series *Chibimaruko-chan* (1990) challenges this myth by portraying the everyday life of Maruko. In contrast, *Sailor Moon* (1992) takes a rebellious stance against the *shoujo* myth by incorporating themes of female heroism in a magical setting. Dollase (2015) argues that the character of Maruko demonstrates opposition to the *shoujo* myth [11]. She argues that "although this little girl heroine is visually cute, she is also lazy and sloppy, deviating from the image of a conventional cute character. Chibimaruko's cuteness is far from weakness that needs protection" (Dollase, 2015:45) [11].

In contrast to Maruko, the *Sailor moon anime-manga* series presents a resistance to the *shoujo* myth through the use of girl power narratives that incorporate magical elements. In her analysis, Fujimoto (2015) investigates the global popularity of *Sailor moon* and her efforts to challenge the *shoujo* myth [12]. As Fujimoto notes, the series' popularity can be attributed to its portrayal of Usagi Tsukino, the main character of *Sailor moon*, and the other Sailor characters as strong and tough young women while still maintaining a portrayal of femininity. Fujimoto (2015:38) additionally posits that *Sailor moon's* narrative transcends the boundaries of its temporal context, as it not only addresses the theme of feminism but also that of sexual freedom with exemplified by the same-sex romance [12]. However, as Fujimoto (2015) observes, *Sailor moon* has

been the subject of criticism from some scholars for its paradoxical presentation of feminism [12]. This is evidenced by the fact that while the series features women as heroes, it also sexualizes them through the use of sexy looks and nudity.

Tomie's narrative challenges the traditional *shoujo* myth by depicting her as a young woman who defies the passive and dependent *kawaii* norm. She is assertive, flirtatious, and manipulative towards men, ending relationships when her expectations are not met. In various instances, she initiates and terminates relationships based on her satisfaction. Tomie's behavior, reminiscent of the Japanese *dokufu* (poison woman) archetype, suggests control over her sexuality and independence from men. This resistance to the *shoujo* myth counters the sexualization of young girls as submissive and reliant individuals, aligning with Dumas's (2018) argument that Ito, through Tomie, sought to critique critique of the societal portrayal of school-aged girls as sexual objects due to the *enjo kousai* phenomenon [13].

Marran (2005) explains that excessive female sexuality (hypersexuality and sadism) is seen as the root of the *dokufu* figure. According to her "journalistic writings linked Sada to a genealogy in which the women who committed crimes was lascivious, sexual, and only occasionally an object of sympathy" (Marran, 2005:82) [14]. Consequently, in the context of *shoujo* myths, the archetypal young girl is portrayed with characteristics that are perceived as *kawaii*, which are typically passive, pure, and sexually innocent. This is done to avoid her being identified as a bad woman in Japanese culture. This is consistent with Treat's, (1996) assertion that *kawaii* girls are esteemed, yet lack independent libidinal agency [15]. McVeigh (2000:147) posits that the absence of libidinal agency in *kawaii* girls serves to perpetuate patriarchal control over female sexuality. The ideal female character is thus depicted as childlike, effectively distancing her from sexual matters and preventing any potential threat to men [16].

Tomie challenges the *shoujo* myth by actively flirting with men and asserting her adulthood. She confidently admits to having sexual relations with Takagi, displaying her assertiveness and sexual agency. Her behavior, similar to Sada's, positions her as an antagonist, with men becoming victims. However, the narrative shifts focus to Takagi's malevolent actions, prompting a re-evaluation of the true antagonist. While it is not explicitly confirmed in the *anime-manga*, according to Fandom: Villains Wiki (n.d.), fans have speculated that Tomie truly had a sexual relationship with Takagi [17]. Takagi is portrayed as the driving force behind Tomie's murder, possibly due to his reluctance to assume accountability.

Marran (2005:83) suggests that the motivation behind the development of the concept of *dokufu* within Sada was rooted in the frustration of a woman who was unable to maintain exclusive romantic attachment due to the prevailing social structure of the time, which normalized the practice of men having concubines [14]. This illustrates a woman's aspiration to establish a monogamous bond with her heterosexual partner. Despite her status as a prostitute, Sada aspired to establish a romantic relationship characterized by loyalty with her partner, Kichi. Tomie, unlike Sada, is unfavorable to monogamy, displaying frequent partner changes and rejecting the ideal Japanese femininity of *ryousaikenbo*, a good wife and wise mother, thereby challenging the virtuous standards of a wife and mother.

Furthermore, Tomie's resistance to the *shoujo* myth indicates that she did not attempt to establish a counter-myth to the prevailing dominant myth. In the view of Barthes (1991), the creation of oppositional or counter-myths represents a form of resistance to established myths [4]. This is in contrast to Tomie, who is neither situated within the parameters of the dominant *shoujo* myth as a paragon of purity and innocence, nor within the oppositional myth as a mere sexual object.

### 3.2 The Limitations of *Shoujo* Myth Resistance by Tomie

Tomie's resistance to the *shoujo* myth faces constraints related to the representation of young girls' bodies and the reinforcement of *shoujo* values. The discourse on the female body is crucial in challenging the *shoujo* myth, as it embeds patriarchal control in young Japanese girls. The submissive body of a young Japanese girl is seen as the standard of femininity, restricting her agency over her sexuality and labeling sexually active women as deviant.

Yoshiya Nobuko's popular *shoujo* work, *Two Virgins in the Attic* (1920), depicts same-sex relationships between women as a rejection of the subservience of heterosexual men in the *shoujo* mythos. For her, this representation exemplifies the "purity" of *shoujo* love (Frederick, 2005:75) [18]. In comparison, the Magnificent 25, a collective of female *manga* creators (*mangaka*), has also engaged in more radical forms of resistance. Hagio Moto and Takemiya Keiko are female *manga* creators who are members of this collective. Both authors rejected the objectification of women by removing the female body from *shoujo manga*. In response, they presented homosexual love stories, or "boys' love" (BL), with the aim of reversing the voyeuristic gaze that had been focused on male characters or male readers towards female characters in *manga*. For example, the works of Hagio Moto, such as *Touma no Shinzou* (1974), and Takemiya Keiko, including *Kaze to Ki no Uta* (1976), illustrate this point (Ogi, 2001:180-181) [2].

By using men, those texts allow girls to emancipate themselves as women without enduring the sexual suffering of the patriarchal discourse. Additionally, they represent the impossibility of active sexual participation by the figures of women which have been accepted within the category of *shōjo*.

(Ogi, 2001:183) [2]

Feminist readings of *shoujo anime-manga* often center on the female body as a focal point. The *shoujo* protagonist, typically with *kawaii* traits, lacks libidinal agency but becomes the object of patriarchal sexual pleasure for male characters and audiences. Critiques of the *shoujo* genre go beyond portraying dependent young girls to examining how this representation of weakness and dependency serves to control the *shoujo* body. Some female *mangaka* (*manga* creators) address this by eliminating the *shoujo* body in BL works to challenge patriarchal control. In contrast, Ito's portrayal of Tomie emphasizes the female body in heterosexual romance, where Tomie's presence captivates male protagonists without evoking a voyeuristic response, as seen in her interactions with Mori and Kitayama. Ito challenges the *shoujo* myth by subverting the objectification of women through the character of Tomie. Initially admired for her beauty, Tomie later becomes a victim of murder and mutilation by male admirers. Her body is depicted in

a mutilated state, with stab wounds, dismemberment, and the removal of internal organs, transforming her from a symbol of beauty to one of disgust and horror. This resistance, aimed at countering voyeurism, paradoxically reinforces the concept of "abjection" as described from Kristeva (1982) by situating women as objects of both admiration and horror [19].



**Fig. 1** Tomie's scarred and mutilated body caused by her male admirers [20]

Khilnani (2024:60) argues that Ito's depiction of Tomie's grotesque and abnormal body challenges *shoujo* conventions, highlighting both her hypersexuality and society's fetishization of the *shoujo* body [21]. This abnormality is paralleled in the real-life case of Takahashi Oden, a hypersexual Japanese woman whose autopsy revealed excessive fatty tissue in the pubic area, seen as the cause of her hypersexuality, though without scientific basis. This bodily features, associated with male sexuality, are deemed deviant (Rigby, 2023:34) [22]. Marran (2007:11) adds that scientific discourse is manipulated to portray such bodies as unfeminine, ill, and barbaric [23].

Tomie's macabre super-regeneration ability reinforces the monstrous-feminine myth in Japanese popular culture. Creed (2007) argues that the depiction of women as malevolent figures in horror reflects patriarchal fears of women's bodies and sexuality, perpetuating misogynistic values [24]. This is evident in Tomie's narrative, which aligns with Napier's (2005:99) view that powerful female monsters in Japanese culture mirror the low status of women in reality [25].

Tomie's defiance of societal norms is portrayed in Ito's work, where she is punished by men for her unconventional sexuality. When Tomie's kidney is transplanted into Yukiko, she becomes more confident, resembling Tomie, but is rejected by Sato, who prefers her former passive self, reinforcing the *shoujo* myth of submissive girls. The chapter ends with Sato surviving a fire, tied to his admiration for Yukiko's innocence, contrasting with Tomie's fate. Ito's portrayal of *shoujo* values can be seen as misogynistic, depicting women as intruders in male-dominated spaces, particularly careers, which are traditionally linked to masculinity and male identity in Japan (Kumagai, 2013:158) [26].

Tomie's threat to the traditional masculine space is evident in episode 9 when she disrupts the work of male artists Mori and Iwata. She takes control of the situation at Mori's studio, leading to the deterioration of Mori's career. Similarly, Iwata faces a similar fate when his attempt to confine Tomie results in his demise, highlighting how women with dominant traits can be perceived as a threat to men's professional success.

The misogynistic view of Tomie as a source of threat to masculine space is in line with Taylor's (2023:78) argument that "Tomie simultaneously embodies patriarchal fears of the domineering woman and feminine-coded fears of assault" [27].

In the context of *shoujo manga*, the resistance against objectification inherent in the *shoujo* myth leads to a paradoxical situation. Winters (2010) argues that this is due to the fact that not all female *mangaka* in the *shoujo* genre have knowledge of feminism, which implies that the image of idealized masculinity remains strong [28]. Ogi's (2001) suggests that *shoujo manga*, being created by women for women, can reflect women's desires through alternative interpretations of *shoujo* myths [2]. "Women could enjoy such gender images only if they agreed with their supposed position as an object of male desire" (Ogi, 2001:178) [2]. However, despite the limitations of her resistance to the *shoujo* myth, Tomie at least echoed her fight even though ". . . at the cost of her own body and life" (Taylor, 2023:82) [27].

## 4 Conclusion

The *shoujo* discourse, as a norm of Japanese femininity, perpetuates the myth of young women's purity while simultaneously sexualizing it. This narrative is often reinforced by *shoujo anime* and *manga*. The representation of the lazy and careless girl in *Chibim-aruko-chan*, the powerful girl in *Sailor Moon*, the lesbian romance narrative in *Two Virgins in the Attic*, and the elimination of the *shoujo* body through the BL story in the works of the mangaka Magnificent 25 are examples of attempts to challenge this myth. Despite these efforts to challenge the myth, the concept of *shoujo* reemerges, positioning the female body as a sexual object and portraying the dominant woman as dangerous. *Tomie* (1987-2000), a work by a male author, appears to engage in this endeavor through a distinctive representation involving narrative dualism. This can be observed in Ito's portrayal of Tomie as an active and dominant woman, yet ultimately, she is compelled to sacrifice her body as an object of patriarchal violence.

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