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## Examining the Female Immigrant and Minority Representation in Shunji Iwai's "Swallowtail Butterfly"

### *Shunji İwai'ın "Swallowtail Butterfly" Filmi Üzerinden Kadın Mülteci ve Azınlık Temsilinin İncelenmesi*

#### Abstract

This article explores the representation of female immigrants and minorities in the film *Swallowtail Butterfly* (Shunji Iwai, 1996) from a multidisciplinary perspective. Starting with the topics related to being a foreigner/local, such as language nuances or the concept of furusato, the article then offers a new lens to look at the film and its female stories with the help of feminist theory. Therefore, this article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the film from current multiple-perspectives, as such a comprehensive analysis is highly needed in this contemporary age of rapid globalization.

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#### Öz

Bu makale, *Swallowtail Butterfly* (Shunji Iwai, 1996) filmi bağlamında kadın mülteci ve azınlık temsilini çok-disiplinli bir açıdan incelemektedir. Filmin furusato veya dil bariyerleri gibi yerli/yabancı temasını ilgilendiren konularıyla başlayan makale, ardından filmin kadın hikayelerini feminist teori ile incelemektedir. Dolayısıyla bu makale, küreselleşmenin hızla yaşandığı günümüzde, çoklu açılardan filmin güncel bir perspektifle kapsamlı bir analizini sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

#### Keywords

Japanese studies, female immigrant and minority representation, furusato, the mother-whore dichotomy, women in urban spaces

#### Anahtar Kelimeler

Japon çalışmaları, kadın mülteci ve azınlık temsili, furusato, anne-fahişe ikilemi, kentsel mekânda kadınlar

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## Introduction

Almost 30 years after its debut, *Swallowtail Butterfly* (Iwai, 1996), can still be considered a film much ahead of its time which handled sensitive yet important topics, such as xenophobia and prostitution with great respect. Furthermore, the film suggests creating feminine and inclusive spaces to provide everyone with opportunities to realize their identities in order to weaken the modern capitalist and oppressive atmospheres of urban spaces. This highly idealistic suggestion motivated me to carry out a multidisciplinary analysis of the film in order to spark a conversation about intersectional and feminist thinking on urban spaces.

Having previously worked on music videos and TV dramas, the film's director Shunji Iwai was still an emerging feature director in the mid-1990s, and his latest feature film at the time, *Love Letter* (Iwai, 1995), followed the heartfelt story of a recently widowed woman trying to process her grief. This film was critically acclaimed both in and out of Japan, bringing home awards from the 1995 Toronto International Film Festival and the 1996 Japanese Academy Awards, to name a few. However, Iwai did not follow the aesthetics and themes of *Love Letter* for his next film, *Swallowtail Butterfly*, and took a huge risk by choosing immigrants as his new protagonists. This decision was an immense shock for many critics as it was unprecedented for a Japanese film to explore non-mainstream stories and yet achieve mainstream success, as evidenced by its box office earnings totaling more than 5 million USD and placing at sixth place in domestic box office rankings (Laird, 2010).

To date, there have been a few studies that directly discussed *Swallowtail Butterfly* within the English-speaking academia. These studies either focused mainly on the film's aesthetics and form or only mentioned the film as part of a much broader research where it was compared to other films. The existing literature on the film in Japanese and Chinese introduce areas to analyze the film's context through disciplines such as sociology, however, these important studies often lack international scholarship behind them.

This article aims to offer one of the first investigations into the film from a multidisciplinary perspective, focusing on a feminist reading. Another aim of the article is to contribute to bridging the cultural gap between academic worlds due to the lack of a common language. Highlighting a Japanese film that has been widely overlooked in film studies of the English-speaking academia may trigger a mutual interest to further investigate similar examples.

## The Plot of the Film

*Swallowtail Butterfly* takes place in an alternate-universe, in a near-futuristic Tokyo, named Yentown. In this universe, Japan is still enjoying the bubble economy of the late 1980s and going through a rapid globalization via the massive influx of foreign immigrants who look for job opportunities. The film follows the story of a select group of immigrants in Yentown, mainly focusing on the teenager Ageha (portrayed by actor Ayumi Ito) and prostitute-cum-singer Glico (portrayed by singer and actor Chara), who are both ethnic Chinese women.

The film begins with the death of Ageha's mother. After a makeshift funeral, Ageha is seen as a burden within her community without anyone to protect her. She is, then, "gifted" to another Chinese prostitute, Glico. Although Glico also wants to sell Ageha to other people at first, she eventually takes pity on Ageha after seeing how many young immigrant girls engage in prostitution and drugs to survive. Glico decides to not force a destiny like that on Ageha, thus taking her under her wing and starting to treat her as a newly found sister. In time, Ageha befriends other members of the immigrant community in Yentown who are mainly of Chinese descent like her.

The film follows their daily lives and what they do to earn an income. One day, one of Glico's Japanese customers threatens Glico and Ageha with rape after he discovers Ageha's existence in the place. The immigrants help and protect each other against the customer; however, this results in an aggressive fight and the murder of the customer. While the protagonists try to bury the corpse in a forest, they discover a hidden cassette tape within the corpse's abdomen. After inspecting the cassette tape, they find a way to make a large amount of money quickly by using the data hidden in the cassette to make counterfeit money, which attracts the attention of both the Chinese and Japanese mafia in the city. Simultaneously, Glico attempts to realize her dream of becoming a singer by singing at a bar established with this newly acquired money and eventually auditioning for a Japanese record company. However, this also comes with its own set of problems, such as sexism and racism coming from the local Japanese.

The film criticizes modern Japanese society in its violently capitalistic and competitive mindset and its attitude towards foreigners and minorities within Japan. The film also sheds light on these issues from a feminist perspective as all the main protagonists are female and we follow issues where women are reduced to being victims and fetishized objects throughout the film, such as in the case of prostitution. The main characters, Glico and Ageha, can also be interpreted as symbolic ideas in terms of their relationship to each other and to other characters from a feminist perspective as will be explored in a later section of this article.

## Foreignness and the Counter Perspective

The film opens with a narration by Ageha over a montage of heavily edited drone footage of the city. The narration is written on the screen and also spoken by Ageha in English:

Once upon a time, when the yen was the most powerful force in the world, the city overflowed with immigrants like a gold rush boomtown. They came in search of yen. Snatching up yen. And the immigrants called the city Yentown (*Ento*). But the Japanese hated that name. So, they referred to those Yen Thieves as Yentowns (*Entou*). It's a bit puzzling, but Yentown meant both the city and the outcasts. If they worked hard, earned a pocketful of yen, and they returned home, they'd be rich men. It sounds like a fairy tale. But it was a paradise of yen. Yentown. And this is the story of Yentowns in Yentown. (Iwai, 1996)

Starting right from the first sentence, the viewer is immediately reminded of the famous opening crawl of *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977). Both the opening lines of ‘Long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...’ in *Star Wars* and those of *Swallowtail Butterfly* serve the same purpose: timelessness. Yentown is a place in the future, yet the events of the film are narrated as past events. The story being narrated is the never-ending story of immigrants moving abroad to earn money and trying to prove their existence to both the local people and to themselves.

During this narration, two Japanese words flash on the screen over their English counterparts. The first is Ento as the Japanese word for the city of Yentown. It is immediately followed by entou, which is used to depict the immigrants in Yentown. Ageha’s narration points out the linguistic confusion here, too. Although the words used are the same in English, Japanese differentiates them in pronunciation and writing. Ento means Yentown, whereas entou means yen snatchers. The linguistic difference portrayed here is another case where immigrants and foreigners, in general, are alienated from the local society by being tagged with labels that they are unable to distinguish fully. They are expected to accept it as is and follow along, even though the prejudice against them has already begun within the language.

Another linguistic nuance follows with the ensuing sequence where a vehicle drops off a corpse outside the city. The vehicle has a huge bold Japanese text written over it. The text, *entou ryuubou*, means homeless Yentowns (yen snatchers), however the word chosen for the term homeless calls for a second look. Written quite similarly, the words *ryuubou* and *ryuum-in* in Japanese can both mean homeless. The only difference between these words, apart from their pronunciation, is that the word *ryuubou* contains a specific Japanese kanji writing component that bears the meaning of deceased or perished. The word *ryuum-in* does not have that specific component in its written form, while the rest is completely the same as *ryuubou*. The word *ryuum-in* can also be translated and interpreted as “displaced people,” thus conveying a much milder meaning than *ryuubou*. The deliberate word choice here strongly suggests that, from the perspective of the locals, immigrants and foreigners are deemed suitable not for existing but for perishing instead; therefore, the alienation and segregation of these people, once again, is portrayed within the language itself.

During the subsequent sequence, the viewer finally meets with the main characters, Ageha, and other immigrants from her community. The story begins with the death of Ageha’s mother, a Chinese prostitute. The corpse lies in the morgue while police officers interrogate Ageha and the people of her community to learn about the identity of the corpse. No one gives any relevant information to the police officers, despite knowing who the dead woman was. In the key part of this sequence, a police officer comes up to Ageha to ask if she knew the dead woman’s identity. During the entirety of this morgue sequence, Ageha holds a lily tenderly and declares she does not know the dead woman. The lily is given to mothers in Chinese culture (Laird, 2010), and the police officers, who apparently deal with Yentowns regularly, do not know this significant cultural information. This portrays the local Japanese citizens’ lack of interest in the immigrants and their way of life, despite being with them continuously.

## The Notion of Furusato

*Swallowtail Butterfly* gives significant importance to the depiction of the sociocultural lives of the immigrants in Yentown. One way this is effectively portrayed is through the notion of home, city, and *furusato*. Furusato is an ideology of Japanese origin and even though it is generally translated simply as “hometown”, it implies mourning and feeling nostalgic for one’s hometown. As suggested by Gerow (2016, p. 90), since furusato historically has rural and traditional Japanese origins, it implies that only local Japanese people can have hometowns of their own and the notion must come only from a Japanese context. Because immigrants come from other countries and do not possess any connection to Japan, this results in their lack of a hometown, i.e., a furusato in Japan. Within the film’s story, this concept is weaponized by the Japanese characters who are authority figures, such as police officers, against the immigrants to emphasize their foreignness as a means of further segregating them from Japanese society living in Yentown.

Hyland attributed this hostile and alienated attitude toward the immigrants to a lack of a strong national identity rooted in Japan. After the end of World War II, Japan was occupied by the USA. This was followed by the censorship of traditional Japanese iconography, such as those seen in period films, in addition to the enforcement of a Western-based identity on Japanese people. During this period, Japanese media and arts usually depicted Japanese people struggling to adapt to these new values of living while trying to keep their traditional values (2002, p. 109), resulting in not fully adapting to a Western lifestyle, but not fully experiencing their own culture neither. The lack of proper portrayal of traditional iconography resulted in a weaker state of collective cultural consciousness, eventually turning into a weaker national identity.

Caused by this halt in the cultivation of a national identity which lasted until Japan’s independence from the USA in 1951, Japan’s identity stayed at a stage of infancy- up until the present. Not having a solid foundation in her identity was the key reason for Japan to adopt a survival mentality at first and then eventually a hostile one. Under the guise of an ideal country prioritizing peace, this peaceful attitude has been gradually interpreted as a hindrance in terms of forming a strong national identity by being too passive. As a way to survive this, Japan chose to simply deny the existence of “the Other,” with this specific concept referring to the denial of the existence of immigrants and minorities in the case of the film *Swallowtail Butterfly*. However, the Other cannot be simply ignored as their actions, such as the actions of the Chinese mafia featured in the film, actually disrupt Japanese society in the end, thus making it impossible to disregard. Hence, this mentality caused by this historical progress is, therefore, not enough to keep up the notion that Japan is a completely homogeneous and unified country (Gerow, 2016, pp. 79, 81, 85-86). Hitchcock commented that this situation is portrayed to an extreme degree in the film with its reinforcement of this traditional mentality

of a Japanese identity versus a foreign one and thus preventing the chance of a naturally heterogeneous country (2004, p. 7).

At this point, the immigrants and minorities who have been disregarded by the locals come together and inevitably form their communities. Code-switching, as suggested by Silverberg (2006, p. 32), becomes an effective method to contextualize the idea. Immigrants and minorities possess different and unique backgrounds, however, when they all come together, they can effectively become one and create a new, shared culture. The Aozora residents come from various countries from the USA to China, they speak different languages as their mother tongue. Yet, in Aozora, they borrow from each other's cultures and even languages to live and survive together.

Another example of the borrowing aspect would be Ageha being named by Glico and eventually adopting her butterfly tattoo. An equivalent of this in the dominant patriarchy would be the traditional naming system where the male's surname is treated as the norm. Here, Glico takes the role of a matriarch and names Ageha. Ageha inheriting Glico's symbol like this could be a reference to the Japanese *iemoto* system, where non-mainstream personalities, such as geishas, can form communities, become leaders, and pass their names down to their successors almost like the way a traditional patriarchal family does with its surname.

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After seeing the illusion of homogeneity broken to pieces, Japan enters a state of panic and fear. She cultivates the idea of *furusato* further and clings to it to save the foundations of her national identity while becoming radicalized by it and thus harboring a gradually hostile mentality toward foreigners. *Furusato*, from now on, not only conveys the meaning of a hometown but also a nostalgic feeling toward the virgin state of the country without immigrants and foreigners; one's childhood, family, and even mother.

Therefore, it can be argued that *furusato*'s roots in patriarchy and the sense of stillness and protection it conveys, much like a mother in a traditional sense, against the unsettling chaos of the present (Robertson, 1998) which was brought along by the influx of immigrants, constituted a haven for the Japanese. Gerow improved Robertson's study by adding the perspective of the Yentown immigrants as well. He argued that, especially because the film begins with the death of Ageha's mother, immigrants also yearned for a *furusato* of their own despite not being Japanese themselves and thus being gatekept from that concept by the local Japanese. As seen in the case of Glico's audition, immigrants and foreigners are only allowed to acquire a pass into *furusato* only after denouncing their past identities and becoming assimilated as Japanese (2016, pp. 90–92).

A specific sequence from the film comes to mind to further explore this notion. In the last arc of the film, Feihong, who is one of the Chinese immigrants in Ageha's community, is arrested after being caught red-handed while using counterfeit bills. He is questioned and tortured by Japanese police officers. As he cannot speak Japanese, a Japanese interpreter is also in the interrogation room. Throughout the sequence, police officers verbally abuse Feihong by

calling him a Yentowner. Feihong eventually gathers his strength to reply to them and shouts “Yentown is your furusato too, isn’t that so?”

Gerow argues here that Feihong attempts to blur the distinction between the two terms and especially the concept that only Japanese people can truly have furusato (2016, p. 90). Continuing the sequence, the camera turns to the interpreter. Feihong’s Chinese reply is awaiting a translation for the Japanese police officers. The interpreter shockingly yells the translated reply bursting with anger as if he is Feihong. The police officers are momentarily taken aback. The interpreter, then, quickly adds, ‘... is what he just said’, in a much calmer voice. For this latter half of the sequence specifically, Oba asserts that this shows the interpreter on the side of the immigrant while completely disregarding the binary of Japanese and immigrant identities. He also adds that this sequence depicts the existence of Japanese people and their identity as completely dependant on the existence of immigrants in the first place (2022, p. 187) as the Japanese identity lacks its foundations and needs to have a direct counterpart to keep the balance, to keep existing.

### **The Film Form and the Female Representation**

The film’s main location designs are other key examples to depict the clash between the Japanese and the foreigners. Yentown represents Tokyo. It also represents the local Japanese people, the power of money, fierce capitalism, and a masculine atmosphere. The scenes taking place in Yentown are always shown with barely any diversity or color. The pale color grading is accompanied by faraway and static camera angles to further emphasize the remoteness of the urban space. However, this unwelcoming area only promotes the natural creation of paralleling urban living space for and by the immigrants, right beside Yentown itself. Immigrants form their territory *Aozora*, translated as “Blue Sky,” where immigrants from all over the world live together, and therefore create a truly multicultural urban space against Yentown’s purely Japanese establishment.

This multinational atmosphere is portrayed successfully within the film’s production design as well. The film’s art direction team studied several metropolitan cities around the world, from Los Angeles to Hong Kong to create the final concept of *Aozora* (Matsuda, 2010, p. 144) and eventually settled on a set design heavily modeled after Hong Kong’s Kowloon Walled City (Lo, 2005, p. 136). *Aozora* is filmed with fuzzy visuals and warm colors, together with close-up shots with shaky camera movements, creating a more intimate feeling. However, this seemingly happy area also makes it clear by its *mise-en-scène* and lighting that its inhabitants are not living the paradise life and instead trying to survive in poverty.

Continuing the motif of the economic desperation of immigrants, Oba (2022, p. 179) argued that the film criticizes the aftermath of Japan’s capitalist expansion from the point of immigrants and diaspora. This is significant in the fact that money and economic power become crucial motifs to separate immigrants and citizens within the film. The characters’ ac-

tions revolve around becoming rich by doing anything possible to prove their existence, which is already largely halted and even suppressed by the local government and citizens.

As pointed out by Laird, the interior lighting of Aozora residential is provided by outdoor light sources coming in through windows. This portrays the immigrants hiding in the shadows of Yentown inside their cluttered homes with overly dominant shadows. The chaotic editing style and shaky close-ups are additional symbols of an anxious perspective from these corners of the city (2010). However, immigrants are not allowed to escape these shadows. This is especially evident in the sequence where Ageha recalls the first time she saw a butterfly.

At that time, Ageha was a young child living with her mother. Her mother would receive her clients in the bedroom and while working, she would lock Ageha in the bathroom to prevent any possible interruptions from her. The film, then, shows how Ageha would normally spend her time in the bathroom. She would play with her old and dirty toys, showing how she is used to going through this. Except this time, there is a difference – Ageha spots a swallowtail butterfly flying around in the bathroom frantically. The editing becomes hectic from this point on and the point of view changes rapidly. Ageha tries to catch the butterfly while her mother and the client have sex. The perspective quickly shifts from Ageha to the butterfly, and then to an overseeing eye above Ageha's mother.

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The butterfly attempts to escape from the bathroom through the window and flies towards the outdoor lighting. Just as Ageha's mother reaches orgasm, Ageha manages to capture the butterfly by slamming the window shut and trapping it between the window frame and the window tiles. Oba observed that the butterfly symbolizes the immigrants within Japan in this sequence and therefore the viewer gazes at Japan through the eyes of immigrants (2022, p. 185). This, while indeed true for the scenes with Ageha, is not true for the scenes featuring Ageha's mother. The hectic butterfly perspective looking down from above portrays the chauvinist and voyeuristic gaze of Yentown citizens toward the immigrants, especially the immigrant prostitutes who are pushed to prostitution to earn money and yet still ridiculed for it by the locals.

This specific butterfly perspective is seen earlier in the film as well. When the corpse of Ageha's mother is seen at the morgue the camera momentarily deploys the overseeing butterfly gaze and the corpse is shown as if it were a random object. This shot is to dehumanize Ageha's mother as she was a prostitute and thus "not worthy of respect" by the standards of the local overseeing perspective. A similar example would be the young girls engaging in drugs at the brothel Glico went to sell Ageha. This perspective is used to fetishize the girls and start their transition into mere objects for the male gaze with shaky close-ups and fast editing. The following sequence where Ageha is harassed by the Japanese ex-teacher follows the same route. It can be said that this perspective symbolizes the locals' gaze and how it follows the vulnerable immigrant women. Young characters are gazed at with anticipation that they will also give themselves into prostitution. When they eventually do, though, they are shamed for it by the locals for becoming prostitutes, and the butterfly perspective shifts from voyeuristic to chau-

vinist. From that point on, they are seen as disposable toys and the butterfly perspective starts to go higher on top of the characters to reflect that notion.

## The Mother-Whore Dichotomy in the Context of Immigrant Women

The butterfly perspective leads the discussion to the roles of the female immigrant characters depicted within the film. These characters follow the Freudian archetypes quite clearly, in which they are either virgins like Ageha, prostitutes like Glico, or, much more rarely, mothers like Ageha's mother.

Ageha's mother is special in that she bears both the mother and prostitute identities simultaneously. Much like the fluctuating national identity of Japan and how she struggles to perform both traditional and modern values simultaneously, it is implied that Ageha's mother also struggle with juggling both of her feminine identities. Ageha is the only one who does not show any sign of sadness at the makeshift funeral, implying that they did not have a close relationship. Yet, her mother saves up money for Ageha.

Ageha's mother, in this case, transcends the mother-whore dichotomy with her all-inclusive immigrant identity. The immigrant identity nullifies the different aspects of the feminine identities and, from a local's perspective, she would be visible to others only as an immigrant prostitute. In the minds of locals who are shown to be uninterested to learn more about the immigrants, this reinforces the dangerous idea that immigrant women are all prostitutes with no one to protect them, and thus these women are regarded as freely available "commodity-objects (Irigaray, 1985)", especially by local men. A recent example of such danger could be the experiences of Ukrainian female immigrants fleeing their country during the still-ongoing Russia-Ukraine War. Many recorded interviews with these women make note of the fact that local men attempted to exploit them and force them to engage in sexual activities (Adler, 2022). Therefore, it can be said that the xenophobic local men would tag the immigrant women who do not belong to the local community as whores, while they would think of local women as those who belong and further "honor" them by giving them the respected mother identity.

Returning to the mother identity and expanding on the nuance of a mother within *furusato*, the term also bears the comparison of a mother versus a prostitute from the male gaze (Çiçekoğlu, 2015, p. 330) as motherly women are always nostalgic or sought-for in the patriarchy, while women depicting the city and the freedom it brings are avoided at all costs. Morrison further restates the connection between the mother and *furusato* by reminding us of the Japanese idiom "*haha naru furusato*," translated as "the home(town) that is mother," and thus suggesting that both symbols are one. *Furusato* refers to the devoted and unconditionally loving mother through a male gaze and depicts the tenderness of *furusato*. (2015, pp. 61–62).

What should be noted here is that this imagined mother figure is completely domestic and controlled, she is not a matriarch with power. She simply serves her children and partner. By doing so, the mother is admired by the males around her. The women who do not portray

these characteristics are urban and foreign compared to the mother-furusato, clearly portraying the whore and mother archetypes. The oppressing nature of furusato for women should also be noted as the notion is heavily male-centric. Since traditional mothers had the duty of maintaining the household, they had to regard it as their job and thus it was not likely for them to idealize their exhausting reality (Morrison, 2015, p. 81), therefore resulting mostly in a depiction of sentiments from male children to their mothers.

From this point on and also considering the relationship between furusato and mothers/women, it can also be proposed that reclaiming the female identity despite the oppressing culture will be a crucial way to bridge the gap between all the cultures involved within the city and eventually lead to the utopian, peaceful, and heterogeneous society. The active involvement of women, as in the case of Ageha and Glico, will be critical in deepening the foundations of the identities, both for the minority groups and the majority. This includes reclaiming the female/immigrant/minority identity as a whole.

Similarly, as was mentioned early in this article, segregation and alienation started from language, and thus it is also possible to reverse the situation starting from language. It can start immediately by attaching fondly cherished nuances to previously derogatory words. A contemporary example would be the LGBT community reclaiming the term “queer” to refer to themselves, even though it was used as a harmful slur up until the Stonewall Riots in 1969, which marks the moment the term started to be reclaimed by its community. In *Swallowtail Butterfly*, Ageha provides an example of this with the term Yentown during the sequence in the last arc where a police officer asks her about the identity of the recently killed Feihong in the morgue, and thus having the notion of hometown, furusato, evolve into a more welcoming one:

Police officer: Name of the deceased?

Ageha: Feihong. Hio Feihong.

Police officer: A Chinese? From Fujian or Shanghai?

Ageha: Yentown. (Iwai, 1996)

## **Romanticized Female Victims of the Capitalist Male City**

Some of the male characters, the men from the mafia, for example, use their identity as a weapon specifically against women as is the case when Glico and Ageha are assaulted by a Japanese mafia member whose lines specifically revolve around him being a male, them being female, and thus him having “every right to own them.” Such a mindset confirms the concept of capitalist wealth, where the goal is to simply accumulate objects, in this case, the “commodity-objects” women (Irigaray, 1985).

Another example where women become a “mirror of the value of and for a man (Irigaray, 1985)” would be the sequence where Glico sings for the upcoming band of the Yentown

club. Here, Glico is seen by Feihong simultaneously as a tool for creating the music and as an object of value for luring male visitors in. Feihong, just like many other male characters in the film, does not recognize Glico as a human being, instead, they all attempt to own her as if she were a commodity without any power at all.

However, it should be stated that even the female characters with the utmost power, such as the female Japanese news reporter, are powerless against the male characters with the lowest social status depicted in the film. All of these examples successfully portray the misogyny against women in the city, whether they are local citizens like that Japanese female news reporter going after Glico or immigrants like Ageha and Glico. Yet, some of these examples that involve the news reporter against Glico and the thief prostitutes against Ageha, also depict a deeper layer of misogyny, this time internalized misogyny.

The internalized misogyny is caused by the greed for money from a capitalist viewpoint in the case of the prostitutes and also by the fierce competitiveness from an urban viewpoint in the case of the news reporter. In both cases, the antagonists portray a more traditionally masculine and thus oppressing side toward the protagonists.

As an example, Glico experiences a crucial moment like this when she auditions for a Japanese record company. The male manager tells her that her Chinese and Yentowner past would make it too difficult to sell her brand and records and adds that the only way for her to succeed is to entirely give up both of those unique identities and instead adopt a Japanese name and a fabricated backstory. The male characters on that board are shown to visibly agree with that statement. What is surprising is that even the female member of the board approves and further reinforces this situation. Had she disapproved and convinced the board to let Glico keep her identity, Glico's success would not be short-run and would not fall apart shortly after the attack from the news reporter. In a way, the female board member's actions make the vicious cycle only more perpetual.

Contrasting this situation with Glico to that of Ageha, it is implied that women need to support each other to realize their natural identities as a way to claim their space within the city to make their progress last and eventually mentor the younglings. Throughout the film, none of the male immigrant characters or even local Japanese male characters go through a similar scenario and they can advance toward their goals without having to sacrifice their identities. This further reinforces the extreme hardships for women in the city compared to their male companions.

However, the hardships these women and immigrants suffer and the dismal conditions they live in, in general, are highly romanticized by Iwai. This is confirmed by Iwai himself in an interview with the Japanese film magazine *Kinema Jumbo*, dating back to October 1996:

When I look around [in Tokyo], I always get the feeling that everyone here, including myself, suffer from an eternal moodiness for a long time. At one point, this whole feeling made me think Tokyo was a hospital with all sorts of amenities and somehow it still kept on living on its survival

instincts. This made me sick and I started to look for ways out of it. Then, I learned about the people who abandoned their countries for Japan in search of yen to be able to provide more for their families. I simply admired their energy and wanted to turn it into a story. [...] As long as you have just a few coins in your pocket, you can easily find happiness. So, I wanted to show how happiness would get distorted by running after money and eventually becoming Japanese in that way. (Matsuda, 2010, p. 145; Wang, 2007, p. 1)

As seen in this quote, Iwai actively composed the narrative of a badly ending rags-to-riches story. The immigrant characters of the film, despite each achieving various levels of success financially and socially, end up back in Aozora with no savings as if none of the events happened at all. However, Iwai still praises the characters and shows deep affection for them. For instance, both the Japanese characters and the Yentown immigrants are shown to commit crimes of various sorts. The Japanese ex-teacher attempts to rape Ageha at the brothel. The Japanese news reporter blackmails Glico and threatens to leak her past as a prostitute to acquire the information need for a sensational article she plans to write. All these Japanese characters are portrayed as pure evil and Iwai offers no excuses for their behavior. On the other hand, the Yentown immigrants also commit crimes. Some of them scam Japanese people in their “car repair” shops. Glico and many others are prostitutes. Arrow, an immigrant with a boxing past, kills a Japanese man. Many living in Aozora engage in producing counterfeit bills. Ageha and some of her friends are seen to be involved in drug abuse. Yet, Iwai’s depiction of these crimes is the complete opposite. They are visualized with warm colors and intimate close-ups, even accompanied by cheerful background music. These immigrants are portrayed as poor yet pure humans who are committing these crimes only to acquire money not as a final goal but as a stepping stone. They do so as their only option, since they all have been excluded from Japanese society and left with no other option but to survive in the world and attempt to realize their aspirations. Thus, Iwai’s portrayal of these acts is almost poetic and romantic, with many key emotional scenes stemming from related crime scenes.

The immigrants are shown as hardworking people brimming with humanity while Japanese people are depicted as evil, unimaginative, and cunning. The ending sequence where all the immigrants are back in Aozora is also visualized with warm lighting, colors, and happy dialogues between characters. In other words, immigrants reject becoming corporate and capitalist “producer-subjects” like the Japanese and instead return to their segregated community to live happily together.

While this twist nullifies all the character development possibilities from a dramaturgical aspect, it confirms Iwai’s goal and his intended message for the film in which he critiques many aspects of contemporary Japanese society. The alienation of immigrants, minorities, and foreign cultures and a lack of interest to understand them would be such an aspect, as seen in the sequence where the Japanese character cannot convey any proper sentence in English at the “car repair” shop at Aozora (Hitchcock, 2004, p. 8). Another would be the heavy reliance

on capitalism and consumerist culture, as seen by the film's Japanese characters who are never satisfied with what they have, while the Aozora residents commit crimes to barely survive and do not see hoarding as their end goal since they already have actual goals, for example returning to their home countries to reunite with their families (Du, 2007, pp. 1–2; Matsuda, 2010, p. 146, Pei, 2020, p. 1).

From another standpoint, this also suggests that the answer, especially for the film's female immigrant protagonists, is to simply reject engaging in the masculine mainstream urban space and instead cultivate a more feminine and caring counter-urban space where everyone can realize their own identity and aspirations simply by being, as suggested by the existence of Aozora and all the characters returning there in the end.

The immigrants who have been excluded from the community are left with the only option to commit illegal acts and jobs, as Ageha tells during the opening narration sequence, to earn a pocketful of yen. Yet, the Japanese still scorn them. This plotline also allows an anticapitalist reading of the film. On that note, Laird suggests that the film's ending sequence with Ageha burning the sought-after money signifies a victory against capitalism and Japanese nationalism (2010). That sequence featuring Ageha, other immigrants from all over the world, and even a Japanese character further suggests the possibility of a peaceful and multicultural existence away from any segregation. A possible way to achieve this, as suggested by Xu and a previous happy party sequence in the film, is to perform understanding and empathy toward each other via arts, such as music and dance (2021, p. 85) and thus placing less importance on the economic status of people. This way, the capitalist trait of accumulating, be it money or other people, can recede gradually and give place to the nurturing and embracing traits of femininity.

### **Transcending the Identity from a Woman to Another**

During the sequence where Glico talks about the early days of her life in Japan, she mentions the source of her nickname: "Because Japanese businessmen grow up sucking on Glico (Iwai, 1996)." Here, the name Glico comes from the Japanese confectionary company Glico. Although Oba proposes that this was merely an implication of how Japanese multinational companies exploit other East Asian countries (2022, p. 187), such as China symbolized here with the character Glico, it can also be read as the exploitation of women by men to climb their career ladders or achieve other goals. While doing so, the identities of such women become erased, often by force.

Examples of such cases come directly from Ageha and Glico in the film. At the beginning of the story, Ageha does not have a name of her own despite already being a teenager, much like the case of Glico's early days in Japan. Ageha is given that name by Glico at about the end of the film's first arc and thus finally having an identity of her own. This implies that it requires a woman's help and effort to have a woman's identity in the city, be it another wom-

an's or even her own. In Glico's case, it was Glico's own effort that led her into the immigrant community of Yentown and established her place in Aozora. Glico, only then, is seen as a living being with her consciousness, identity, and somewhere to belong to, and thus claims her right to exist within the city. However, this is not the case for Ageha.

As seen throughout the film, Ageha is not acknowledged by the people around her until she meets Glico. Her mother's not even giving Ageha a name is an extreme example of such a background. Ageha is not seen as a person even in the place that is supposed to be her family home and community. Her lack of identity continues after her mother's death when other prostitutes living in the community along with Ageha steal the inheritance money left by Ageha's mother. This money is supposed to go only to Ageha as she is the sole successor. The prostitutes who steal the money try to normalize their actions by claiming that Ageha's mother will not need the money anymore since she already passed away, thus completely ignoring the existence of Ageha, right to her face.

What is important to note here is Ageha's response or lack thereof. Ageha does not try to defend herself or claim her right. She simply accepts it as is without ever reflecting on that particular exchange. This is caused by her acceptance of a lack of identity up until that point in her life. However, she only starts to think about this after settling in Aozora and befriending Glico. Especially during the sequence where Glico combs Ageha's hair and talks about her own life, Glico becomes the catalyst for Ageha to question her position actively. The cathartic end to this sequence is, again, created by Glico as she names Ageha and gives her that particular name. Ageha, then, becomes visibly engaged with her surroundings and events developing around her. She finally becomes an active protagonist of her own story. All of this happens with the help of another woman, Glico.

This name-giving sequence is important not only for Ageha but Glico as well. From a Marxist lens, Irigaray argues that men are the "producer-subjects" in the capitalist society where they possess the power, determine the value of women, and exchange them. In this society, women are the "commodity-objects" where they are controlled by men and their natural feminine traits are suppressed (1985). Glico transcends this capitalist society's limits by successfully performing her natural reproductivity by giving Ageha a name and symbol, thus becoming an active figure. Here, it can also be noted that Glico exists in the film as two characters: the woman Glico and the subconsciousness of Ageha, symbolizing her internal wish to have a reproductive role in the community as well.

This subtext also suggests that women need to help each other out in the city to thrive and become a part of the space as they are not given the right to exist in the city on their own, despite men are given this right by birth. Male characters in the film never have a problem with identity as they already have their own, given by birth as the "producer-subjects." On a similar note, Glico explains why she has a tattoo of a swallowtail butterfly on her chest. She admits that it is to be used as her ID card so that when she dies she will not be a nameless immigrant

corpse, and instead she will keep her dignity while also proving that she once existed in this world, unlike the male immigrants.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to re-examine *Swallowtail Butterfly* from a feminist and immigrant/minority perspective. As a film dealing with multiculturalism, it was crucial to consult multilingual literature and modestly attempt to bridge the gap between academia around the world. Therefore, this article first explored different perspectives and then added a previously less-studied feminist reading to the film's analyses. Showing that, despite being made almost 30 years ago, *Swallowtail Butterfly* still deserves the critical eyes of academia and can offer new insights. This is especially worthy of attention in this current age of rapid globalization in many countries all around the world where the concept of multicultural living might still be novel.

As Hyland suggested, Ageha symbolizes hope for the future as she learns Chinese, the language of her ethnic background, and reaches out to other communities for connection. Ageha's character arc alone proves the necessity of education and empathy to connect with others regardless of barriers (2002, p. 113). Moreover, the film also suggests that we all should aim for a feminine urban space, clear from the capitalist and masculine traits, for a peaceful and sustainable way of life in the cities.

What must be asserted here is that the road to that goal begins with letting these women exercise a visible presence within the city first, and then this must pave the way to permanent intersectional practices in decision-making where they can have their now-recognized needs met while also providing them opportunities to realize their identities. Only then will it be possible to go toward that ideal urban space as that will encourage them to actively engage in the city (Yon & Nadimpalli, 2017, p. 39).

As a final word, the analysis of the film *Swallowtail Butterfly* in this article may be seen as a stepping-stone for practicing intersectional and feminist thinking in an urban living context. Exploring highly specific yet global films like this can help us empathize with others, become aware of internalized capitalistic tendencies, and eventually pave the way to creating a more welcoming space for and by all.

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