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Family: Blood-Bound and Non, a *Shoplifters* and *Out* Comparison

The Japanese view on family is not strictly Japanese. There are some aspects that remain distinctive only to them, but there seems to be a consensus view on what defines family life and certain relationships. Closeness, love, care, touch. However, what is most interesting about Japanese media is its tendency to often provide interesting takes on these family dynamics and twist them in some way. Take, for example, the novel *Out* written by Kirino Natsuo. *Out* is a 1997 crime novel following Masako Katori and her co-worker friends Yoshie Azuma, Yayoi Yamamoto, and Kuniko Jonouchi. The women work at a packaged meal factory, a job that is less than ideal for women in a post-bubble Japan, where poverty is rampant and any help from anyone is non-existent. In their plight, Yayoi is led to murder her abusive husband, and she calls upon her friends to help her cover up her heinous crime. Masako, who has given up all hope on life, does not hesitate to help, and this act of chopping up and disposing of the body leads her and her friends down a dark path that none of them can come back from. One takeaway worth noting is the family dynamics presented by Natsuo in this story, as they, like the women's jobs, are less than ideal.

On the other side of the spectrum, *Shoplifters* is a 2018 film directed by Hirokazu Koreeda. The story follows the Shibatas; a group of unrelated misfits that form an unofficial "family". The lovers Osamu and Nobuyo take on the mantle of the parents, who are not always the best influences to their "children" Shota, Aki, and the recently adopted Yuri. Among them is Hatsue, the eldest, which makes her the grandmother to them all. The family does their best to get by in the world, as well as make it their mission to show Yuri, whom

they saved from an abusive home, what a loving family is really like. In the end, the image of their family is subjected to the harsh light of the law. But a lot can be said about if their family is more true than one formed by blood-relations in the lawful world. *Out* depicts husband and wife relationships, mother and child relationships, and family unity negatively in blood-related families, whereas the movie *Shoplifters* depicts this positively in a family formed by strangers; which argues that true family is not always defined by blood relations, and the failure of a blood-related family like that in *Out* is a contributor to a declining state of being.

To begin, the husband and wife dynamics in both stories greatly juxtapose each other. While the husband and wife are not related by blood, they are united in matrimony and become part of each other's family, as well as come together to begin their own. That is a close enough connection within the law of society. Of the two married couples seen in *Out*, that of Kenji Yamamoto and Yayoi Yamamoto is worth looking at, as they appear to be a model family that is out of tune. According to Cultural Atlas on the Japanese family, "Both the husband and wife are usually engaged in the paid workforce, though this changes once a couple starts having children... the husband tends to commute to their full-time employment and return home late or only on weekends... The wife usually assumes the responsibility of tending to the children, domestic labor, managing the family budget, and maintaining social relations" (Evason). One could say this is a model family, and is mostly true for the Yamamoto family, with the only twist being that Yayoi also works, but she works nights at the packaged meal factory. While they fulfill their duties, this husband and wife duo is far from loving and supportive, however. Kirino writes, "Hate: that's what you call this feeling. The thought occurred to Yayoi Yamamoto as she looked at her naked, thirty-four-year-old body in the full-length mirror... Her husband had punched her there last night, and with the blow a new feeling had risen inside her" (46). Kenji was an unfaithful gambler who wasted

all their savings doing just that, while simultaneously pursuing one of the girls at the club he visited. Yayoi, having known this, called him out on it once and for all, in hopes of snapping him out of it. This led to a fight that would reveal the true nature of their relationship. He hit her without remorse, and Yayoi realized how much she hated him. The sum of her hatred welled up inside until “her patience snapped. With lightning speed she slipped off her belt and wrapped it around his neck” (Kirino 50), and Kenji was strangled to death. It is clear that this couple united in the eyes of the law was not very ideal after all.

Osamu and Nobuyo are very different. In *Shoplifters*, the two are always seen relatively happy with each other. They truly act like a husband and wife taking care of their children, and they so naturally ease into the roles when they need to, like when they try to take Yuri home after giving her a meal, only to overhear her parents fighting and decide it is better off to keep her for a while (*Shoplifters*). Not only that, but the two rarely fight, and rather they act like adults and discuss their problems in union in order to solve them. An example of this is when Hatsue passes on. In that scene, the two have a surprisingly relaxed discussion about what their next course of action should be, and when they have opposing ideas, like when Osamu wants to call an ambulance and Nobuyo disagrees, rather than arguing they work out what is the best option, and work together in disposing of her body (*Shoplifters*). Apart from the fact that these two characters do not get into a hateful fight the entire movie, they also technically fit the criteria for what Cultural Atlas defines as a Japanese husband and wife. Osamu works as a construction worker and Nobuyo, twisting the norm like Yayoi, works for a laundry service. They are both let go from their jobs later in the film, but the fact remains that they were in the workforce. While not being an official family in the eyes of society, they are a model Japanese family.

Mother and child relationships are a cornerstone of the contemporary Japanese family. In her book, *The Japanese Family: Touch, Intimacy and Feeling*, Tahhan quotes the work of

Lebra, which states, “the basic intimacy bond ... for urban middle-class families of contemporary Japan is between mother and child, such that ‘parenting’ means mothering” (qtd. in Tahhan 29). The bond between parent and child, specifically mother and child, is seen as a necessity; it is “basic” in that it is something that should be included from the very beginning. A fundamental criteria. Mother and child relationships differ greatly in both pieces of media. In *Out*, Masako’s relationship with her son Nobuki could not be further from what can be defined as a mother and child bond. There is absolutely no intimacy between the two throughout the entire book. Kirino writes, “she thought again how like a total stranger her own son seemed - a stranger she didn't like much at that. On an impulse, she reached out and slapped him” (71). There are very few instances in which the two interact, and this is one of them. Nobuki feigns ignorance to push past his mother and drink from a water bottle instead of pouring it into a glass, which he knows irritates her. She tells him to stop, and after he elbows her out of the way, she hits him impulsively.

The fact that she dislikes him to the point of feeling an urge to hurt him speaks for itself. Even more so, Nobuki’s silence toward her in this instance is one of many, and Kirino describes that Nobuki never talks to Masako at all. Masako and Nobuki have absolutely no intimate relationship and are more like strangers than family members. His withdrawal from her contributes to her sense of hopelessness, as Kirino writes “what depressed Masako more was remembering the way Nobuki had betrayed her. The first time he'd opened his mouth in over a year - and it was to the police ... !... In her own mind at least, she'd been doing all she could, both at work and at home; and how did her son repay her? By stabbing her in the back” (204). Masako fully believes Nobuki is finished with her until the one moment he finally speaks arises, only for it to be an attempted betrayal. Nobuki had been present when Masako was on the phone with Yayoi the night of her crime, and Masako knows the boy was spitefully intending to get back at her. Knowing that Nobuki has no intentions of interacting

with her other than to trifle with her hurts her even more than his silence. She is not exempted from blame either, however; because while she believes she is doing everything she can, she is not making many efforts to actually speak with him or get more involved in his life. They both fail each other as a mother and son.

The key mother and child relationship in *Shoplifters* is the relationship between Nobuyo and the newly adopted child, Yuri. Yuri came from an abusive and neglectful family. The chain of hatred begins with her father, who passes it to her mother, who passes it to Yuri herself. It is believed that Nobuyo, too, had a painful home life as well. The two seamlessly ease into what a mother and child bond should be. They intimately touch each other as a parent and child should, they bathe together, Nobuyo runs errands with her and picks out things she likes. However, what is most noteworthy is Nobuyo's attitude towards Yuri as a person, as it juxtaposes Yuri's birth mother. She says, "The reason they hit you isn't because you are bad. If they say they hit you because they love you, that is a lie. If they loved you, if they really loved you, this is what you do" (*Shoplifters*). When going on a shopping trip, Yuri asks instinctively if Nobuyo is going to hit her if she makes her unhappy, and Nobuyo is visibly taken aback by this question. It does not sit right with her, and while burning Yuri's old clothes together, she laments to her adopted daughter about how a mother is supposed to treat their child. It is clear that Nobuyo is speaking from a place of great pain because she begins to cry. She, too, did not have a mother who loved her, and is taking it upon herself to give Yuri everything her mother did not. Yuri is receptive to Nobuyo's pain and wipes away her tears. The two define how a mother and her child are supposed to interact. At the end of the movie, there is a scene where Nobuyo is speaking with a detective who says that children need to be with their mothers. Nobuyo retorts by asking if giving birth is what makes someone a mother (*Shoplifters*). Here, she exhibits her true understanding of what being a mother is. Giving birth is not what defines someone as a mother, because anyone can have a

child only to abuse it. What makes someone a mother is the work they put in to act as one after the fact. While Nobuyo was not able to have any children of her own she is still the only true mother Yuri ever had, despite not being recognized as mother in the eyes of the law, which defines motherhood by the act of bearing children oneself.

Finally, overall family unity is presented in a much different light when reading *Out* and watching *Shoplifters*. Once again, Masako's family is a prime example of a blood-family that has lost its way, forgotten its duties to itself, and has become a desolate husk of what it should be. On the outside they appear as a model family, but within they could not be anything less. Masako has no connection with either of her family members. Her husband Yoshiki is distant and barely speaks with her. He even sleeps in a separate room, and the two do not share a single intimate moment that would indicate that they are husband and wife. His disregard goes as far as cruel when Masako asks if he would look for her had she gone missing, in which Kirino writes, "Yoshiki thought for a moment. 'Probably not,' he said, putting the headphones back over his ears to show that the conversation was over" (291). She was testing him because at this point in the story, she was planning to take the money she had earned from cutting up bodies and run away to live a new life, and in the end she got the answer she wanted, but it is beyond sad that their relationship has fallen to such a low point that neither of them could bring themselves to care enough if the other suddenly disappeared. To them, they already so much as do not exist, so one disappearing would make no difference to their life other than a decrease in income. Yoshiki does not inquire further about her intentions, either. Instead he shuts her out again by putting on his headphones, almost like he wants her to follow through with running away. Meanwhile, Masako's connection with her son has previously been discussed, and that contributes to this idea that none of the family members are unified in any way.

Furthermore, the family is, in the most literal sense of the phrase, a house divided against itself. They neither eat together, nor interact with each other unless they are forced to, and they provide no support for one another. What exemplifies this best is this quote, “They were quite a trio: a son who had given up both education and conversation, a husband in the grips of a depression, and Masako who had opted for the night shift after being downsized from her own company. Just as they had decided to sleep in separate bedrooms, they seemed to have chosen to shoulder their own separate burdens and inhabit their own isolated reality” (Kirino 53). Their home can better be described as a large tree with far stretching branches, and each one of them has chosen a branch furthest from one another. Nobuki has given up on life entirely and only now looks out for himself, Yoshiki acts as if he has no son or wife and goes through the motions of work and sleep, and Masako leaves meals behind for them but has no other involvement as a wife or mother other than that, and has given up all hope to the degree of committing crimes under their noses.

In *Shoplifters*, the Shibata family members all act as one, coordinated unit. They eat the majority of their meals together, which is incredibly important in all cultures. There is nothing more intimate than sharing a meal with those one loves. Like the scene where the family is eating together after only having Yuri for a few days, and they offer her some gluten cake, which is her favourite food (*Shoplifters*). What makes this scene so important is that until that point Yuri had been an outlier. While they would eat, she would sit at a distance and watch them until they gave her some of their meal to munch on. However, when she brightens up at the mention of her favourite food, they welcome her into the dinner circle, and furthermore, officially welcome her into the family. The family also goes shoplifting together. While this is not necessarily something to be proud of, and sets a bad example for Shota and Yuri, it is still a unified act that can be considered a family bonding activity. They all have their own separate activities, they always come back home by the end to eat or play

together, and they actually hold full conversations with each other, which is a lot more than what can be said for Masako's family in *Out*. The Shibata's live in a very small home that only has a few even smaller rooms, which makes them feel very "huddled" together. If Masako's home is like a gigantic tree and each room that the family members hide away in is one of the many far stretching branches, then the Shibata home is like a beehive. The Shibata's all bustle around to make their money so they can go on supporting themselves, and their hive is a small one which forces them all to huddle very close together, symbolizing their closeness despite none of them being blood-related. One scene that truly depicts their unity as a family is the iconic trip to the beach they all go on together. This trip is an incredibly important one because it crosses many boundaries for each of the characters. Shota has a "man talk" with Osamu while they play in the water that vaguely hints towards the birds and the bees that brings them closer as father and son, Nobuyo and Hatsue have a heart-to-heart about the importance of choosing your own family, and the trip overall shapes Yuri's happiness and solidifies her bond with the rest of the Shibata's (*Shoplifters*). It is known that this trip was so important because it is a key moment Yuri chooses to immortalize in one of her drawings. In that moment, they were away from their crimes, their crowded home and the cruel unforgiving world, and were just a family having fun at the beach together. Nothing better distinguishes their genuine connection.

*Out* depicts husband and wife relationships, mother and child relationships, and family unity negatively in blood-related families, whereas the movie *Shoplifters* depicts this positively in a family formed by strangers; which argues that true family is not always defined by blood relations, and the failure of a blood-related family like that in *Out* is a contributor to a declining state of being. Indeed, the lives of the characters in *Out* are forever changed by the relationships between them and their families. Yayoi, after killing her husband, is only granted temporary solace before her life ultimately makes a decline. She



feels guilt not for the loss of Kenji, but for taking her children's father away, and she becomes awash with depression due to the distance from her friends the act caused as well. Masako, on the other hand, completely loses all hope. Her family dynamic has her own well-being, as well as her mental state, on a constant decline. They are separated, isolated, and ignorant of each other. The dullness at her job and the struggles of her past are only made worse and harder to grapple with by her husband and son's lack of sympathy for her. It is these feelings that cloud her moral compass and drive her to commit her heinous crimes, because Masako feels as if she has nothing else to lose, and in becoming part of the body disposal business, she is driven to the very edge. In the end, the only thing left to lose is her life, and even then she barely manages to keep her grasp on that, too. On the other hand, the Shibata family shows no decline because they are a true family, and any struggle they face, they face together. Of course, by the end of the movie they are torn apart by the law, and there is some conflict that results from Shota finding out they almost abandoned him to avoid police detainment. However, this only occurred when Shota began having his doubts about the life they were living as thieves, and was not related to their family dynamic. In the end, these two stories show a juxtaposition; the worst of a blood-related family, and the best of a non-blood-related family. Blood-related families are viewed as more "true" in the eyes of society, but this is not always the case, and the Shibata family are a perfect example of non-blood-related families being just as "true" as blood-related families, if not even more so.

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