

MESTRADO EM ESTUDOS LITERÁRIOS, CULTURAIS E INTERARTES
ESTUDOS COMPARATISTAS

The Haunted Power of Suffering
Contemporary Reinvention of *Yūrei* in Junji Ito's *Tomie*
(1987-2000)

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Julho

2024



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Dissertação realizada no âmbito do Mestrado em Estudos Literários, Culturais e Interartes, orientada pelo Professor Doutor David Pinho Barros.

Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto

2024

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[Lordelo, 31 de Julho de 2024] / [Lordelo, July 31st 2024]

[Rita Barroso]

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor David Pinho Barros, for accepting my proposal so promptly and for allowing me to develop my research with freedom. I would also like to thank Miguel Patrício for his patience in answering my questions and for suggesting important references which proved immensely useful.

I could never forget to thank my parents, Cristina and Filipe, for believing in my academic decisions and trusting my unusual tastes and instincts.

I extend these feelings of gratitude towards my colleague and friend Vitor and towards Pedro, who have always helped me to make the most of my free time and to get the rest I needed to complete this academic research.

Above everyone else, I thank Joel for always choosing to walk by my side with strength, determination, honesty and affection, whether I choose to fly up or am forced to plunge down.

Resumo

A obra *Tomie* (1987-2000) de Junji Ito é uma das mais reconhecidas series de manga de terror. A sua protagonista é hoje reconhecida internacionalmente, estando associada a uma beleza incomparável e a uma monstruosidade ciclicamente inquebrável. Neste estudo, procurar-se-á analisar de que forma a primeira personagem feminina criada por Ito funciona como o veículo através do qual se reinventa contemporaneamente as mitológicas *yūrei* – criaturas do folclore japonês que se pautam pela aparência espectral, pela sua existência dolorosa e pela sua necessidade de alcançar um estado de purificação que lhes permita deixar o plano terreno.

Esta investigação partirá do estudo do conceito de *yūrei* para mostrar a antiguidade das manifestações culturais, como lendas, narrativas escritas ou representações teatrais e pictóricas, relacionadas com estas entidades. Através da análise de estampas de *ukiyo-e*, tornar-se-á possível encontrar um conjunto de características arquetípicas que ligam as *yūrei* ao sexo feminino, bem como à condição de ser mulher. Posteriormente, enverdar-se-á pelo estudo de obras cinematográficas, literárias, de videojogo e em manga pertencentes ao período da *Ushinawareta Nijūnen* (1990-2010) para explanar de que forma as características tradicionalmente estabelecidas para as *yūrei* foram recuperadas e reinventadas para tornar os seus pares contemporâneos, protagonistas destas novas histórias, em monstros modernos ligados ao passado. Por fim, esta dissertação concentrar-se-á no estudo de caso da coletânea das histórias de Tomie pela editora Viz Media (Ito, 2023) para compreender a construção da protagonista enquanto um processo que permite identificá-la com estas figuras mitológicas, das quais é herdeira, sem que possa ser objetivamente apontada como pertencente a essa categoria de seres sobrenaturais. Esta dissertação pretende avançar o argumento de que o caráter inovador da protagonista de Ito reside, sobretudo, na sua capacidade de convocar concomitantemente aspetos tradicionais passados e atributos modernos que, em vez de a fragilizar, a solidificam como *yūrei* contemporânea pluridimensional.

Palavras-chave: [*yūrei*, Japão, mitologia, terror]

Abstract

Junji Ito's *Tomie* (1987-2000) is one of the most recognisable horror manga series. Its internationally recognised protagonist is always associated with incomparable beauty and with cyclically unbreakable monstrosity. This study will analyse how Ito's first female main character functions as a vehicle for the contemporary reinvention of the mythological *yūrei* – creatures from Japanese folklore characterised by their spectral appearance, their painful existence and their need to reach a state of purification that allows them to disappear from the earthly plane.

This research will start by studying the concept of *yūrei* in order to explain the antiquity of cultural manifestations, such as legends, written narratives, theatrical performances and pictorial representations, related with these entities. By analysing *ukiyo-e* prints, it will be possible to find a set of archetypal characteristics that link *yūrei* to the female sex, as well as to womanhood. This will be followed by the analysis of cinematographic, literary, video game and manga works from the *Ushinawareta Nijūnen* (1990-2010) in order to explain how the traditionally established characteristics of *yūrei* have been recovered and reinvented to turn their contemporary counterparts, the protagonists of these new stories, into modern monsters linked to the past. Finally, this research will focus on the case study of the collection of Tomie's stories published by Viz Media (Ito, 2023) to understand the construction of the protagonist as a process that allows her to be identified with these mythological figures, to which she is heir, without being objectively identified as belonging to this category of supernatural beings. The innovative character of Ito's protagonist substantially lies in her ability to concurrently summon past traditional aspects and modern attributes which, instead of weakening her, solidify her as a multidimensional contemporary *yūrei*.

Key-words: [*yūrei*, Japan, mythology, horror]

Introduction

Yūrei are mythological creatures recognisable in contemporary Japan but whose history dates to the country's Classic Era (538-1185). The concept suffered developments and mutations throughout the following centuries, with emphasis placed on the cultural changes of the Edo Period (1603-1868) and the surfacing art forms, such as Kabuki and *ukiyo-e*. During contemporary times, especially after the burst of the economic bubble and the beginning of an economic recession unprecedented since the end of World War II, *yūrei* resurfaced in many artistic works as embodiments of new and renewed anxieties. The *Ushinawareta Nijūnen* (1990-2010) – the “lost decades” of Japanese economic development – became fruitful grounds for the emergence of horror works where these spectral figures not only occupied the place of the prominent protagonists, but also evoked an unparalleled sense of dread in those closely familiar with Japan's need to reconcile with the past while mending the present and preparing the future. Films like Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (*Ring*, 1998), literary works such as *Honogurai Mizu No Soko Kara* (*Dark Water*, Suzuki, 1996) or video game franchises like *Zero* (*Project Zero*, Nagasaki; Osawa; Shibata & Suda, 2001-2014) recovered, reconstructed and created different *yūrei* characters serving as the main gear of their plots' development and possessing the ability to become nationally and internationally recognised in mainstream platforms as archetypical examples of the “Japanese ghost”.

Of the artistic works developed in Japan during the late 1980s and the early 2000s, one distinguishes itself both for the longevity of its serialisation as well as for its seemingly unending popularity among the horror manga aficionados: Junji Ito's *Tomie* (1987-2000). Its acclamation in and out of Japan, as well as the adaptations to film of some of the narratives during the dawn of the twenty-first century, contributed to propel and solidify Ito as one of most renowned contemporary horror *mangaka*, and his protagonist as one of the most notable and renowned female villains of the genre. It is precisely on the compilation of Tomie's story in the American Viz Media edition of 2023 that this academic study will focus, in order to understand how the traditional, mythological figure of *yūrei* was evoked, mutated and redesigned to create a contemporary monster able to channel her setting's fears and concerns while drawing

strength from her inseverable traditional inheritance and working as a victim-turned-aggressor marked by specific phenomena, cyclical death and unstoppable return.

It is necessary to start this analysis by looking at the birth of the concept of *yūrei*, since it is one of complex definition. It is possible to simply translate it as “ghost” or “ghosts”¹ and move on to a consciously Westernised treatment of these figures. That is not the aim of the present dissertation. On the contrary, one of its crucial points is to study, as rigorously as possible, how such elusive creatures came to be and to develop as important elements of Japanese mythology. It is crucial to define and understand the term by which they are known throughout Japan’s history and evolving culture. The first chapter of this dissertation, titled “Giving Form to the Spectres: *Yūrei* in Japanese Mythology”, will be dedicated to clarifying those questions. I will analyse the historical roots and evolution of the concept, as well as of the oral and written narratives concerned with it. This will be intertwined with explanations regarding essential ideas, principles and doctrines concerning *Shintō* and Buddhism. The analysis will go no further than the Edo Period (1603-1868), since, as it will be addressed, it was then that folk legends, theatrical performances and recorded stories regarding *yūrei* attained greatest popularity². Likewise, it was during the Edo Period that *ukiyo-e* depiction of these spectral entities, as well as of Kabuki plays concerning them, peaked both in quantity and quality. The most relevant visual representations of this kind will be studied to ascertain the most common physical characteristics attributed to *yūrei* and how they are linked to spiritual and mental attributes assigned to them, most of which are related to corporeal and behavioural pollution and with untimely, wrongful death.

¹ In Japanese, the plural form of nouns is rarely used. Therefore, *yūrei* can both be translated to English as “ghost” or “ghosts”. In this dissertation, the term *yūrei* will never be replaced by any translation. It will be used written in *rōmaji* throughout the work.

² A comprehensive analysis regarding *yūrei* figures during the Meiji, Taishō and Shōwa Periods (1868-1989) can be a great contribution to the overall study of these creatures and their cultural and artistic significance as the one I aimed to develop. Nevertheless, due to the inherent practical constraints regarding this dissertation’s dimension, I will not address those topics. It is also worth mentioning that, historically, the era of Modern Japan begins in the Meiji Period (1868-1912), thus making it inappropriate to stretch the first chapter’s analysis beyond 1868.

The chapter “Burst Bubble, Released Spectres: *Yūrei* in Contemporary Japan” will turn to artistic works developed after the dawn of contemporaneity. Those created around the 1990s and until the end of the 2000s are paramount, since that is both the period of the beginning of Japan’s latest economic crisis and of the creation and development of this dissertation’s case study: *Tomie* (Ito, 1987-2000)³. My approach will be one especially dedicated to the narrative component of these works, scrutinising *yūrei*’s role, functions, symbolism and power within them. Firstly, the analysis will be dedicated to cinematographic, literary and videogame works and only then will I shift my attention exclusively to manga series. By doing so, I aim to prove how stories concerning *yūrei* surfaced in several media around the same time, thematically and symbolically relating to each other while trying to use a collective mythological inheritance to reconstruct a figure capable of becoming modern and innovative, and of adapting and personifying newly found anxieties of Japan regarding its present economic and social situation, as well as its frighteningly uncertain future. For its part, the study of manga works is essential to show how Ito’s series is neither the first nor the only creation of this type to recover the figure of *yūrei* and the traditional framework around it to develop an engaging character capable of starring a story enthralling to the contemporary public. This section is also crucial to examine some of the choices regarding the visual representation of characters established as *yūrei*, analysing how they recover the features consecrated by *ukiyo-e* engravings or not and how they may have tried to either reconcile or detach themselves from it, creating new, non-obvious ways to represent otherwise invisible characters.

The last chapter is entirely dedicated to Junji Ito’s *Tomie* (1987-2000). The analysis will be framed by this dissertation’s key question: the contemporary reinvention of the mythological figure of *yūrei* and the association of its re-emergence with troubled periods of Japanese history. I will focus on the homonymous protagonist, supporting her

³ Some *kaiki eiga* films and manga titles from the 1950s and 1960s will occasionally be mentioned, as will other narrative works produced after 2010. However, I will not extensively analyse them for the reasons explained previously.

characterisation as a monstrous-feminine (Creed, 1993) entity inherently connected with the spectral creatures. This study's aim is not to syllogistically prove that Tomie is a *yūrei*, since her ambiguous definition as a being, as well as her ability to resist categorisation, are cornerstones of the work in question, which should be taken into consideration when analysing her attachment to folkloric narratives and figures. For these reasons, I titled the chapter "The Monster Creeping Within: The Revention of *Yūrei* in Junji Ito's *Tomie* (1987-2000)". To make this section of the study as clear as possible, I divided it in two parts, one concerning the analysis of Tomie's characteristics in line with *yūrei*'s mythological and pictorial representations, and another regarding those which, while not denying the first nor removing the protagonist from her folkloric inheritance, contribute to render her a present-day bogeywoman. Additionally, I will pay attention to the creation of the protagonist as much as a victim as an aggressor, a status shared by the great majority of *yūrei* characters and sustained by some of Japan's distinctive social, cultural and economic factors and concepts, solidified during the period in which both Ito's series was created and Tomie herself diegetically belongs to.

Before moving to the first chapter, I would like to clarify a last aspect. Despite *Tomie* (Ito, 1987-2000) being a manga work and even though a significant portion of this study is dedicated to the analysis of this and other manga series, this dissertation does not aim to specifically delve upon manga pictorial representations of *yūrei*. Naturally, I do not ignore the visual component of the works presented. Especially in the case of Tomie's stories, I endeavour to integrate the analysis of the protagonist's narrative, actions, symbolism and roles with the study of their corresponding pictorial representations. Nevertheless, this dissertation places itself within the framework of cultural and spirituality studies and not within that of comic book or manga studies. The attention given to picture is far less than that given to the written component, and this disproportionality is explained by the fact that I directed this academic research towards the examination, interpretation and explanation of verbal narratives concerning the mythological creatures in question, for which other components serve as means and examples to strengthen my hypothesis. This does not mean that I consider the visual component of the manga (or of the other works) studied a lesser part of these creations'

construction, but rather that I have chosen to concentrate my efforts and my investigation on topics not necessarily related to it in order to construct an analysis as thorough as attainable of the cultural significance of the reinterpretation of the mythological figure of *yūrei* in the narrative of one of the most famous manga works of the *Ushinawareta Jūnen* (1990-2000).

1. Giving Form to the Spectres: *Yūrei* in Japanese Mythology

To effectively conduct the case-study of Junji Ito's *Tomie* (1987-2000), as a manga work which reinterprets and reconstructs *yūrei* through contemporary lenses, it is first necessary to look at the ancient roots of these spectral entities. Understanding how the concept originated and the reconfigurations it suffered until the end of feudalism in Japan enables a thorough analysis of *yūrei* as distinctive elements of Japanese folkloric culture and the conscience of their religious, popular and pictorial framework, conceived at least since the Nara Period (710-794).

To accomplish this, I will divide the chapter in two parts. The first will focus on the study of the mythological figure *per se*, thus being concerned with the meaning of the term by which these creatures are referred to, as well as with explaining *Shintō* and Buddhist concepts essential to their birth and evolution. Moreover, I will also analyse popular legends and written narratives regarding several entities which can be considered as belonging within the spectrum of *yūrei*. In the second subchapter, I will turn my attention to their visual representations during the period of Old Japan, ascertaining a set of common characteristics and of archetypical representations based on consecrated oral tradition, but also on divergent forms of painting, engraving and performing them. Questions regarding the visual identification of different kinds of *yūrei* by their proper assortment of attributes will also be discussed.

1.1. Dissecting the Hauntings: How Old Japan Conceived *Yūrei*

Firstly, it is essential to ascertain that *yūrei* are not merely ghosts, despite resembling them in various aspects. Refusing to abandon Western vocabulary as reference is harmful to the correct understanding of the concept, since many ideas and tropes associated with phantoms do not apply to these creatures. For instance, it is not necessary for someone to be dead to become a *yūrei*. This example, which I will explore later, is solely one of the many enabling the construction of these entities as fantastical beings unable to be conveyed by any other word than the Japanese term.

Scholars agree that the image of an ethereal spirit wandering a world to which it is not supposed to belong was already part of the collective imaginary of the inhabitants of the archipelago as far back as the Nara Period (710-794) (Sumpter, 2006, p.6; Hidalgo, 2009, p. 2; Ambros, 2015, pp. 43-44). During this time, the first written testaments of Japan's history, the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*, were being produced. As a result, so were the first institutionalised myths of the territory. Local legends meddled with the latter, creating either different versions of the same stories and particular narratives regarding similar characters, developing a framework where the foundational myths were intertwined with regional folklore (Hidalgo, 2009, p. 2). Thus, it is considerably difficult to comprehend what exactly were these spiritual creatures and even more complicated to precisely categorise them as *yūrei* or not. It was during this period that the immiscibility between Shintoism and Buddhism (modified and adapted to the Japanese reality) acquired a stronger written dimension. At this point, it is important to clarify some key concepts of each religion to understand their symbiotic influence on the creation and development of *yūrei*.

In *Shintō* practices, the question of *harae* (purification) is essential. It is required of the individual performing a ritual or engaging in worship to assure his or her own purity, not because it is necessary to conduct the action but because it is part of the religious act itself. After childbirth or during funeral rites, it is particularly significant to guarantee that the bodies of the subjects – in these cases, the mother and the child or the deceased, respectively – are properly cleaned and arranged. According to *Shintō* cosmology, the definition and separation of body and spirit is not as pronounced as in Western religions possessing a Judeo-Christian matrix, being greatly associated with an animist perception of reality, in which each complete element is soaked with a greater or lesser degree of *kami*. The concept of *konpaku* is important for this topic. It can be translated as “soul-dual”, regarding the Chinese philosophical concepts of the existence of two souls – one that leaves the body after death and another which stays within it (Marks, 2023). This means that even after passing away, there is still something non-material left; the body is not just itself. Within this framework, since virtually anything

may possess a certain level of *kami*⁴, it is fundamental for any given individual to preserve it and to live harmoniously with every other component of the universe. In this sense, *Shintō* beliefs sustain that this precept should be followed during life to assure balance and order and not exclusively as a way to prepare for death – in fact, as there are no dogmatically defined concepts of “good” and “evil”, but rather an utter preoccupation with *wa* (harmony), there is also no idea of “salvation”. The concept of *wa* works as the touchstone of *Shintō* belief and morality, since it ties back to the idea of disregarding individual interest in favour of the whole, which includes all other human beings, but also every element of Nature, if not Nature itself. It sets the moral compass in opposition to it, since “(...) *wa* (‘benign harmony’) is inherent in Nature and human relationships, and that anything that disrupts this state is bad.” (Littleton, 2002, p. 58). Nonetheless, according to the religion’s practices, this does not mean that, after perishing, the person’s *tama* (spirit) simply disappears. It is believed it persists long after the passing of the body, interfering with the deceased and living member of the clan’s journeys. Therefore, if the purity of the defunct was maintained – if the rites were properly conducted and the way in which he or she lived and, especially, died did not disrupt *wa* – it will continue its path until becoming the family’s ancestral *kami*. If that is not the case, the *tama* may wander until it has been purified, negatively interfering with human life. The entity then becomes an *obake* (monster). According with *Shintō*, despite *obake* having a connection with *Yomi*, conceived as the primordial land of the impure dead, they also reside within the realm of life and *kami*, not being neither banished, nor inflexibly contained within a netherworld antagonistic to the earthly plan.

Most Buddhist sects proliferating in Japan regard the question of morality in a different light. Buddhist cosmology establishes a direct connection between a person’s actions and intentions to a certain outcome, which, by its turn, relates to the impact, either positive or negative, it has on that person’s life and surrounding entities, affecting

⁴ This term can be both interpreted as a noun or an adjective. As the first, it refers to entities with enough power to interfere with human life, be it in a positive or negative manner. As an adjective – as used in this paragraph – it is “(...) a mysterious and elevating quality that various living beings, including animals and humans, possess to varying degrees.” (Ashkenazi, 2003, p. 29).

his or her reincarnation. Moreover, it is not necessary for the individual to remember its spirit's past deeds in order to be affected by actions carried out during other reincarnations. Accordingly, even though direct correspondents of Judeo-Christian "punishment" and "hell"⁵ do not exist, the belief that there is the necessity to lead a morally correct life to ensure the best possible reincarnation occupies a prominent place in Buddhism. Simultaneously, this religious idea implies a subliminal powerlessness at universal scale, since a living being does not attain a certain reincarnation solely according to its spirit's last journey, but rather by the confluence of all its countless material and immaterial existences. Additionally, according to this doctrine, within the designated Realm of Desire there is only one destiny preceding *Naraka* to which the spirits responsible for greatly disturbing the karmic balance may travel. If a living being is not able to attain, by this order, the destiny of the Gods, the Humans, the *Shuras* (spirits) or the Animals, it will possibly reincarnate as a *preta*, defined as "hungry ghosts" unable to satisfy their hunger at least until their next reincarnation. Despite being associated with evil, obsessive and selfish conduct, these spirits also come to be the result of "(...) those who have died untimely death, or who have no one to care for them in the afterlife (...)" (Ashkenazi, 2003, p. 38).

As previously discussed, by the Nara Period (710-794), these religions had been unquestionably established in Japan, drawing strength from one another and complementing each other. This is essential to understand the ancient historic and religious roots of the construction of *yūrei*, solidified by the confluence of *Shintō* and Buddhism, along with popular legends and local superstitions, parallel to others from different regions of the archipelago. Despite some periods of tension, Japan embraced both faiths from an early stage, following the precepts of each and trying to harmonise them in the best possible way, applying it to the daily lives of the population as well as important official and ceremonial moments. Therefore, mythical figures unquestionably

⁵ The concept of *Naraka* is usually translated as "hell" or "purgatory", which consists in a simplification of the concept, using a Western idea as reference to understand a non-occidental idea. The souls (re)born in *Naraka* do not appear there due to a higher, divine entity's judgment and their stay is only temporary. Thus, they will reincarnate again after the karmic balance is restored.

linked to both *Shintō* and Buddhism, as is the case of *yūrei*, would not have developed without such conflux of religious practices and conceptions, exclusive to the country's particular culture. As such, the concepts of *harae* and the Buddhist reincarnation realms and destinies, as well as their relationship and bilateral interaction, will be considered to understand the creation and evolution of the fantastical entities in analysis.

In the Edo Period (1603-1868), *yūrei* attained popularity in oral legends and written sources. It is suggested that, until the establishment of the Tokugawa regime, the country had been lacking a strong central government and was consequently engulfed in perpetual war, especially during what became known as the Sengoku Jidai (Warring States Period), making the permanent and continuous cultural development, especially of popular, folkloric narratives, impossible: "The effects of political stability on the development of the ghost story genre can be seen in the sudden appearance in the seventeenth century of numerous collections of supernatural stories" (Sumpter, 2006, p. 7).

Notwithstanding, I shall analyse this matter from a complementary perspective, moving away from interpretations that explain the phenomenon through a single factor to focus on the variables that contributed to it. Firstly, during the Muromachi Period (1333-1568), amongst full-fledge feudal ruling, when the peasant and servant social groups corresponded to the majority of the population and their obedience and service was more heavily directed to each community's *daimyō* (regional lord), than it was to the unseen *shogun*, the emperor's pragmatic importance and political power of agency was outshone by the several lords' bellicose endeavours. This greatly diminished courtly aesthetic values and contributed to emphasise war-linked virtues, as well as popular folklore, propelled by the introduction of a new current of Buddhism, which stressed the merit of effort and physical cultivation (Mason & Caiger, 1997; Hall, 2009). In this context, the concept of *yūgen*, related with the idea of mystery (Hidalgo, 2009, pp. 4-5), became part of the main triad (*wabi*, *sabi* and *yūgen*) of feudal aesthetic values. It is associated with the ability to find elegance in something that is not clearly or intently visible, valuing the experience of the subject while sustaining that it is only understood by those "(...) spiritually capable of seeing beyond symbols to the eternal things

adumbrated (...)” (Ueda, 1995, pp. 54-55). *Yūgen* is mainly related to art and to the aesthetical value of certain pieces, such as paintings or poems, but the word itself holds a similar meaning to the applied concept, turning it into an important cultural element contributing to the solidification of *yūrei* as mysterious human-shaped spirits who only appear in certain circumstances and to certain individuals. It should be added that the depiction of these supernatural entities in *ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints) recall the aesthetic concept and the term itself, since these are pictorial artistic representations of an ethereal element which, according to mythological conceptions, cannot be perceived by everyone.

As such, while *yūrei*'s establishment in mythical, popular, written, dramatical, and visual culture occurred, in fact, during the Edo Period, its foundations were laid and reinforced long before. The question regarding what exactly propelled the popularity of *yūrei* narratives during this period still sustains. Several factors contributed to it, with the most obvious one being the aforementioned peaceful conjuncture after the unification of Japan and the institution of a powerful central government capable of successfully repressing regional uprisings and assuring the subservient lords' loyalty to the shogunate. Those times of political stability, which the country had not experienced for two hundred years, impelled the flourishing of several cultural and artistic works. It also gave the populace the possibility of enjoying their scarce leisure times by searching for new dynamic forms of entertainment. Moreover, the economic prosperity felt during the Edo Period enabled the rise of a new social group known as *chōnin*, whose members were characterised by their professional activity as merchants, thus living from what they sold and not from what they produced. Their affirmation works as a testimony of the country's development, which allowed for professions unrelated to agriculture and livestock to evolve, actively and positively affecting its economic growth and showing the decreased need for workforce entirely tasked with food production. The *chōnin* were one of the main parties responsible for encouraging and sponsoring artistic and entertainment activities among the lower social strata, such as new theatrical forms and pictorial prints, giving pleasure and leisure greater importance as beneficial components of culture and society (Hidalgo, 2009).

Additionally, it was during this period that courtly games emerged and popularised. To this study, the most relevant one was known as the *Hyaku Monogatari Kadankai*, based on a Buddhist ritual concerned with making contact and possibly summoning the spirits of the deceased. The game was played by telling one hundred stories concerning supernatural events, especially those portraying spiritual entities, thus becoming one of the main factors for the popularisation of *kaidan*, narratives which specifically dealt with ethereal creatures, some of which could already be defined as *yūrei*. What marked the distinction between these and other spirits was their power to frighten through their condition as beings deprived of *harae*: “(...) the construct of *yūrei* owes its power to frighten to Shinto beliefs regarding death and defilement” (Sumpter, 2006, p. 7). This serves as one of the most outstanding examples of the immiscibility of both religions (*Shintō* and Buddhism) and its role in the construction of the mythological figure in analysis. It was precisely during the Edo Period (1603-1868) that dramatical performances destined to be attended by the lower and intermediate social groups surfaced and evolved. Shortly after its beginning, Kabuki became the peasant-oriented alternative to the ceremonious and elitist *Nō*, whose plays had been performed since the Muromachi Period (1333-1568) and already displayed *yūrei* as central figures⁶. The latter was mainly a courtly and aristocratic event: “(...) the audience for such works was so limited as to prevent them from reaching the popular culture as anything more than prototypes for later stories and characters.” (Sumpter, 2006, p. 7). Those “later stories” were the ones developed by *Kabuki* plays and previously crystalised in oral tradition and written legends, telling the tale of malignant, vengeful, wronged and pitiful *yūrei* who sought to restore *wa* and to attain *harae*. The performers interacted with the large audience, drawing the otherwise passive receivers into the plot and solidifying its impact in the collective imagery. The sumptuous clothing and make-up worn by the actors and the dynamic, loud and impressive scenes largely influenced the engraving of *ukiyo-e* portraying the plays and the *yūrei* featured in them (Sumpter, 2006). From this period onwards, *yūrei*'s set of attributes and characteristics was commonly accepted

⁶ For more updated information regarding this topic, read *Spettri teatrali: la figura dello yūrei dalle opere del nō a 'Tokaidō Yotsuya Kaidan'* (Annibaldis, 2022).

and recognised, despite still being difficult to easily define them solely based on such. To answer the question “What are *yūrei*?” it is preferable to look at this concept as a circular spectrum rather than as an impregnable, self-contained category, since *yūrei* establish several connections with other mythological creatures, with whom they share different aspects, behaviours and traits. Within this spectrum, there is space for various kinds of *yūrei*, some of which apparently collide with others if the problem is perceived as needing an inflexible, categoric solution, capable of unquestionably ascertaining a unique group of indispensable and hierarchised characteristics which the creatures must simultaneously possess to tightly fit the concept.

In most cases, *yūrei* directly result from a painful and wrongful death. The individual’s (which can be a human, as in most cases, but also an animal or other sentient creature) conditions of demise are, in this sense, deprived of *harae*. This condition is then transmitted to the *tama* or *rei* (spirit), there residing until purification. The latter can be attained by complex ritualistic practices, conducted by *Shintō* priests/priestesses or by Buddhist monks, but also by restoring the *wa* previously defiled by the actions of those around the deceased, directly or indirectly affecting it in a negative way. Consequently, the *shiryō* – the spirit of a dead individual possessing attachments to the earthly world, thus being unable to occupy its place as an ancestral *kami* – are usually the victims of wrongful acts, unable to stay silent after the unrightful end of their lives. This is but one of the main characteristics shared by all *yūrei*, with greater or lesser intensity: the unquenchable quest for the restoration of balance and order by interfering, either positively or negatively, with the path of those responsible for putting them in that situation. It conjures the idea, based on the previously explained *Shintō* concept of belonging to a whole that must be attended at the expense of individual gains, of the inescapable connection with others. No *shiryō* is ever able to surpass the motive behind its painful demise until *harae* is reached. It cannot rest without fulfilling its role of searching, either consciously or unconsciously, the solution for its condition, even if unable to carry it out alone. Despite usually wishing to conduct their evildoers to misery and, ultimately, death, *shiryō* are caught within the Buddhist wheel of karma and are assigned with rectifying the misdeeds done to the physical forms they recently left

or to any other their spirit ever inhabited within. Nonetheless, some *shiryō* do not purposefully desire the offenders' torment, hurting them without intention and without being propelled by feelings of rage, fury or revenge. That is the case of O-Tsuyu's *shiryō*, presented to the English-reading public by Lafcadio Hearn in the turn of the twentieth century. In this story, it is not a negative emotion hastening Shinzaburō's – the male protagonist and O-Tsuyu's beloved – demise, but another equally strong feeling:

Shinzaburō was dead- hideously dead; - and his face was the face of a man who had died in the uttermost agony of fear; - and lying beside him in the bed were the bones of a woman! And the bones of the arms, and the bones of the hands, clung fast about his neck. (Hearn, 1899, pp. 106-107).

What establishes the “karma-relation” (Hearn, 1899, p. 109) between the two characters is love. In this sense, the way the skeleton's arms are positioned implies a tight hug, a display of affection occurred in other moments of the tale, and not the violent gripping of Shinzaburō's neck. It is not the action that truly impacts the damnation of the *yūrei*'s target but rather the subliminal, powerful emotions that dictate the outcome. This idea is especially important in stories where the spectral figure manifests while the body is still alive. Those *yūrei* are called *ikiryō* and they result from an utter desire to see someone gone or dead. In another tale, initially presented to the Western public by the same author, a woman wishes for one of her husband's employees to fall dead due to his competence and dedication to the family business. She fears the young subordinate is plotting to take her son's place as future owner of the profitable porcelain store:

And with this certainty in my mind, I cannot help fearing and hating the man. I have often and often wished that he were dead; I have even wished that it were in my own power to kill him... Yes, I know that it is wrong to hate any one in such a way; but I could not check the feeling. Night and day I have been wishing evil to that clerk. (Hearn, 1903, p. 17).

The consequences of this unfair hatred are felt by its target in the form of a rampant disease, to which the doctors can neither find a pathological cause, nor administer any effective treatment against. The wife knows that her feelings are excessive and misguided, since they disregard the Buddhist moral teachings and the *Shintō* concept of harmony among every element of Nature. She shows an unworthy

and impure inner conduct towards her husband's employee, which leads to the creation of the *ikiryō*, tormenting the unsuspecting man. In this case, the couple finds a simple solution by opening a branch establishment in another town and relocating the employee there. This is enough to appease the wife's hatred and to ensure the *harae* of the spectral entity, vanishing at the same time the ailment does. This example helps demonstrate a common attribute shared by *shiryō* and *ikiryō*: the ability of arousing fear in those capable of perceiving their presence, usually leading to emotional turmoil, feverish conditions and even death. In the first case, Shinzaburō deeply fears the *yūrei* of his previously beloved O-Tsuyu, hinting that he perished precisely because of the fear itself and not due to the female protagonist's abject appearance or actions. In this sense, the *shiryō* was purified through the couple's reunion and the overwhelming emotion it implied, dragging the living character with it and leaving O-Tsuyu's bony cadaver behind. The promise of seeing her again, which Shinzaburō was not able to abide by in life, was fulfilled in death, restoring the *wa* and allowing *harae* to occur. In the second narrative, the main reason for the wife's hatred is fearing for her son's future, which she desperately wanted to protect. When she stops fearing for it, her malevolent and impure wishes come to an end, restoring the *wa* and enabling her target to be cured and freed from the entity pestering him.

Fear plays a major role in unleashing other emotions which, by their turn, propel certain damaging intentions and harmful actions, capable of leading to extremely tragic events. Moreover, different kinds of *yūrei* embody different anxieties felt throughout Japanese history, culture and tradition (Ashkenazi, 2003). Accordingly, the *shiryō* and *ikiryō* are not the only types of *yūrei*. Others can be identified by their intentions, actions, conditions of *harae* and visual appearance. The *onryō* are resentful and hateful. They may also be referred to as *goryō*, if the *yūrei* results from the death of an aristocrat deprived of political power or slain in battle – "(...) los *goryō* más recordados son los aristócratas del clan Taira, que fueron vencidos por el clan Minamoto en la batalla de

Dan no ura (...)”⁷ (Hidalgo, 2009, p. 17). The *onryō* always intentionally seek to harm the humans with whom they establish contact. They sow chaos indiscriminately, since their main objective is to attain vengeance using any necessary means and taking the lives of as many, sometimes innocent, beings as required. Consequently, the *onryō* are associated with natural cataclysms, such as earthquakes and tsunami, representing the most aggressive type of *yūrei*.

There is also a type solely related to motherhood. The *ubume* are the *yūrei* of someone who died during childbirth, traditionally perceived as one of the most impure forms of demise. It combines two of the most important events during which *harae* should be maintained and increased (death and labour). Recalling the contemporary concept of *amae* – related to the idea that Japanese society functions around a system of dependence rooted in a parent-child relationship model, where the child always seeks to be protected and taken care of by placing itself under the authority of the parental figure (Doi, 1971/1973) – and to the notion of transcendental maternal duty, *ubume* wait for a passer-by at crossroads, holding a bundle resembling a baby in their arms. It is believed that if a man tries to hold the bundle and succeeds (for it is incommensurably heavy and most fail) it will transform into a cluster of rocks and the *ubume* will disappear. The passer-by will then gain supernatural strength by appeasing the entity, worried with her child’s safety and appeased by knowing that someone has the qualities to care for the infant she was forced to leave behind.

One last type of *yūrei*, encircling a single entity known as *Yuki Onna*, remains controversial due to the possibility of it being rather classified as a *yōkai*. The ethereal entity possesses a physical form, which it can abandon at will, suggestive of visual characteristics shared by most female *yūrei*, a topic to which I shall return shortly after. This argument is supported by other studies: “The *yuki-onna* appears in the form of a ghost which looks like a beautiful woman with long black hair.” (Marks, 2023, p. 134) and “She is a tall white spirit in the form of an elderly woman.” (Ashkenazi, 2003, p. 293).

⁷“(…) the most memorable *goryō* are those of the Taira clan, defeated by the Minamoto clan during the Battle of Dan o ura (...)” (Hidalgo, 2009, p. 17). My translation.

The *Yuki Onna* is a female spectral entity that appears only during extremely cold and snowy weather. In some versions of the myth, she is aggressive and ruthless, attacking and killing every man that has the misfortune of crossing her path. In others, she spares one of those she encounters, forcing him to promise to never tell anyone what had happened. If he does not abide by it, she will return to kill him. After several years, he breaks the promise, revealing to a disguised *Yuki Onna* – who he had married without knowing her identity – the secret. She spared him due to the children they had together but transformed into a “(...) white mist, and, shrieking and shuddering, passed through the smoke-hole, never to return again.” (Taylor, 2009, p. 118).

The origin and development of the mythological figure of *yūrei* has a long history, intimately connected with Japan’s two main religions, as well as with constant cultural development and mutations, combined with various expression and versions of folk legends, as well as artistic practices, several of which gained a greater impulse after the economic rise of the merchant class. After analysing these questions, it became clear that to understand the concept of *yūrei* it is necessary to perceive it as a circular spectrum encompassing their main characteristics: living or dead spirits, with different degrees of resentfulness and aggressiveness, wronged by some evildoer or overflowing with strong emotions, seeking to restore their honour and rest, usually by means of revenge or by reuniting with what they desire the most. These events commonly lead to the death of the humans involved in it. *Yūrei* do not have an intransigently assigned gender, but a vast number of narratives place a woman in its role. This is but one of the main topics to be treated in the following subchapter, focusing on the pictorial representation of these figures before the advent of the country’s modernisation and Westernisation.

1.2. Picturing the Ethereal: *Yūrei* in Old Japan’s Visual Representations

In this subchapter, I will turn my attention to visual representations of *yūrei* produced before the Meiji Era (1868-1912). To conduct this study, it is necessary to ascertain and explain the reasons behind the common characteristics and peculiarities shared by several of these entities, previously referred to and developed by oral tales

and written narratives. Simultaneously, it is also necessary to understand how those are represented in different media. During Old Japan's time, the most common were the theatrical performances of *Nō* and Kabuki, scroll paintings and *ukiyo-e*.

A substantial part of mythical tales has as characters and protagonists a woman's *yūrei*, directly connecting its appearance with the one possessed by the body it physically inhabited and being deeply associated with the female sex but also with womanhood. This calls into question some of the most important *Shintō* and Buddhist practices and precepts explored before, especially those concerned with the concept of *harae* and moral and religious righteousness. Throughout the Edo Period (1603-1868)⁸, when the art pieces figuratively representing *yūrei* were at their quantitative and qualitative peak, the conception of women as inherently and almost irreversibly polluted was profoundly entrenched in society and culture. The *Shintō* concept of *kegare* (pollution) was felt in religious contexts, as well as in daily activities, regardless of social stratum and of the respective and insurmountable differences between them. Among other bodily fluids, blood and the events where its presence was unavoidable, such as death, menstruation and childbirth, were seen as utterly polluted. It is not entirely clear where the connection between pollution and blood comes from, since neither the foundational myths, nor the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* construct such parallel (Ambros, 2015). Some hypotheses have been put forward, but the one which seems most solid is that of the anthropologist Namihara Emiko, explained in *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Japanese Culture* as follows:

(...) *kegare* emerges from a liminal stage of ambivalence and invokes a feeling of disgust. For example, bodily fluids, such as blood and excrement (...) are *kegare*, because life used to circulate in them while attached to the body, but they have now separated from it (...) (Baffelli; Murayama, 2020, p. 148).

Moreover, it is not only in *Shintō* that this fluid represents something negative related with the female sex. In Buddhism, there is the idea of blood as part of a

⁸ The ideas explained in this and further paragraphs were still felt, though in smaller degrees, during the Meiji, Taishō and Shōwa Eras. Moreover, they are still present in post-war, contemporary Japanese society and culture.

punishment for women who infuriate the earth gods due to their pollution, present in the *Blood Pool Sutra*: “Buddha’s disciple Maudgalyāyana journeys into hell to save his mother. He discovers her in a pool of menstrual and parturitive blood, which she and the other women in the pond are forced by the guardians of hell to imbibe.” (Ambros, 2015, p. 111). Consequently, these biologically exclusive and inevitable phenomena translated into a view of all women as inherent holders of *kegare*, who could not be permanently cleaned and purified. Additionally, due to the high rates of female mortality during pregnancy, childbirth or related complications, they were seen as one of the only groups recurrently capable of being simultaneously afflicted by two forms of pollution: “Maternal death was seen as being doubly unclean – combining the uncleanliness of childbirth and the uncleanliness of death.” (Yasui, 2020, p. 141).

This was not the only harmful prejudice developed during the feudal period and established as irrefutable throughout pre-modern Japan. During the Heian Period (794-1185), with the solidification of Buddhist doctrine, practices and influence, accompanied by the slowly shifting system of male-dominated polygynous households, women started being considered the main or, even, the sole bearers of specific moral flaws, the most significant being jealousy. According with the religious doctrine, they should never allow such emotion to set in, but were condemned by their gender’s condition to experience it in extreme. During pre- and early modern periods, the idea of women as utterly emotional and as the most susceptible elements of society to succumb to their whims – feeling, thinking and acting against the consecrated religious and moral principles of purity, chastity, obedience and filial piety, reinforced by neo-Confucianist texts (Ambros, 2015, p. 133) – was unquestionably accepted. Not only does this reinforce their conception as almost unable to reach salvation and enlightenment⁹, but it also demonstrates their potential to become *obake* (monsters): “In didactic tales and

⁹ Several Buddhist tales contain the idea of women – not as equivalent to the female sex but as a “performative script” (Pandey, 2020, p. 25) – as unable to attain salvation before mutating or reincarnating into a man: “(...) women were inherently more sinful and it was more difficult for them to reach enlightenment. This idea of karmic inferiority of women to men regarding enlightenment combined with the notion of *kegare* exacerbated the exclusion of women (...)” (Baffelli; Murayama, 2020, pp. 147-148).

Noh plays, jealous women were described as transforming into vicious, sometimes cannibalistic demons.” (Ambros, 2015, p. 118).

In accordance with what I have been explaining, in most theatrical performances, scroll art and, especially, *ukiyo-e*, *yūrei* are portrayed as young women. Since a woman's fertile period is ephemeral, young adult women were seen as potentially more polluted than older women, especially those unable to bear children. Additionally, the uncontrollable amorous and jealous emotions were usually seen as manifestations of a marriageable woman's inner conduct. This argument is also sustained by the fact that, narratively, one of the most common ways for a woman to be wronged, allowing for the manifestation of a *yūrei*, is if a love promise or a vow is either broken or not entirely fulfilled, events which tendentially occur still within the woman's youth. That is the case of *Tōkaidō Yotsuya*



Figure 1 – *Ukiyo-e*, ink and colour on paper, representing Otsuya's *yūrei* as a lantern (1832). From the book *Japanese Yokai and Other Supernatural Beings – Authentic Paintings and Prints of 100 Ghosts, Monsters, Demons and Magicians* (Marks, 2023)

*Kaidan*¹⁰, one of the most known and ancient stories featuring a *yūrei* as a central character. Imprinted on Japan's cultural memory largely due to the *Ukiyo-e* depicting scenes from it, Oiwa is always portrayed as having long, loose and dark hair. Even in her

¹⁰ In most *kabuki* versions, Oiwa is married to Tamiya Iemon, a *rōnin* who loses interest in his wife after she gives birth to their first child. She is then poisoned due to a scheme planned by her rival's family. She does not perish, but her face becomes irretrievably disfigured, which causes her such great distress that she (mistakenly or purposefully, depending on the version) pierces her own throat with a sword, leading to her death (Marks, 2023). The fact that her husband forgot – or, better, consciously ignored – his marital duties, being unable to protect her in life and taking Oume as his spouse after her death, plausibly represents a relaxation of his moral conduct but also the breaking of a promise from a husband who should have shielded and loved Oiwa.

most famous representation as a ghostly lantern, made by Katsushika Hokusai for the series *Hyaku Monogatari* and deeming her almost unrecognisable as a human, she preserves such characteristic. Every single female *yūrei* maintaining, even if only partially, her corporeal dimension shares this feature, objectively and metaphorically symbolizing the end of her life. If, during the Heian Period (794-1185), possessing long and untied hair was the standard of courtly beauty, in pre-modern Japan the case is the opposite. The elaborate styles of bound hair became the norm for women who wished to look exquisitely attractive, thus associating the complexly tied hair with the discovery of a woman's intimate, unkept appearance solely by those able to engage in sexual contact with her. As so, Edo *ukiyo-e* established a clear distinction between living women and *yūrei*, since the latter were represented as displaying long locks of black hair, evoking the conception of female *ikiryō* and *shiryō* as deprived of amorous and sexual contact by means of emotional exacerbation and deregulation, making it impossible to correspond to such wishes in a voluntary and safe way:

In the Edo Period, long, unkempt hair was reserved for depictions of ghosts – women whose sexual promise could never again be fulfilled – and also for women whose lives had been touched by the uncanny, and whose existence had been thrown into a spiritual turmoil as a result. (Sumpter, 2006, p. 11)

Their attire is also utterly significant. In *Shintō* and Buddhist tradition, it is customary to bury the dead dressed in white. The colour is related with the concept of *harae* – “(...) il colore bianco non viene scelto per i defunti per il suo legame con la morte, bensì poiché simboleggia ciò che è puro o viene purificato tramite un rituale (...)” (Annibaldis, 2022, p. 4)¹¹. This transpired into theatrical, and pictorial portraits, the former also being the main responsible for establishing *yūrei* as floating figures. In most *kabuki* performances, while the majority of the actors on scene embodied flashy characters featuring lavishly decorated garments and vibrant make-up, the one

¹¹ “(...) white is not chosen for the deceased due to its connection with death, but rather because it symbolizes what is pure or which is purified through a ritual (...)” (Annibaldis, 2022, p. 4). My translation.

entrusted with playing the *yūrei* wore a simple, long, white *kimono* capable of swallowing his¹² feet, creating the illusion that the spectral entity slid swiftly without needing them, and pale face-powder, contributing to the idea of *yūrei* as translucent, ethereal entities, to whom the prison of the opaque body was no longer a reality. Another technique used in Kabuki which contributed to their floating movement was the following: “The use of ropes to hoist actors portraying ghosts became extremely common, and in the performances the “ghosts” often seemed to float through the air due to this contrivance.” (Sumpter, 2006, p. 14). The use of such imagery is portrayed in many *Ukiyo-e* pieces, from which the most famous is Ōkyo Maruyama’s panel of a deceased young woman, probably depicting his own lover. In this piece, the *yūrei* possesses every distinguishable element analysed until this point, her figure fading from the waist down and disappearing completely shortly after the end of the pelvic region. This vanishing may conceal another subliminal meaning: the immersion and merging of the *tama* in the natural world, moving not through it but on it. Nevertheless, Maruyama’s depiction differs from the majority for a simple characteristic: the woman seems to have maintained her (even if neglected) beauty.

On the contrary, the widespread notion of *yūrei* as vengeful and blood-lust entities is strongly related to their depictions in *ukyo-e* as cadaveric creatures with



Figure 2 – Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, representing a *yūrei* (Ranpo, 19th century) From the book *Japanese Yokai and Other Supernatural Beings – Authentic Paintings and Prints of 100 Ghosts, Monsters, Demons and Magicians* (Marks, 2023)

¹² Although, during the first years, women could be actresses of *Kabuki* plays, their access to such profession was prohibited after the establishment of the common association between (female) acting, deterioration of moral conduct and prostitution. Thus, during the largest portion of history of *Kabuki*, feminine roles were brought to life by male actors.

elongated, mischievous smiles and deep, gaping mouths ready to scream and consume the ones who wronged them, their faces deprived of any elegant traits owned before. In one of his scroll paintings, Inagaki Ranpo represented a womanly figure with such features, giving her a horrendous but also pitiful expression, capable of recalling the idea of *yūrei* as destined to roam the world of the living and to torment the souls of their evildoers until the karmic balance is restored. Suison's depiction of the malevolent *shiryō* of the young Okiku¹³ employs the same set of traits but achieves a disparate result, turning her into an evil villain, whose sole purpose is to actively terrify those who contributed to her untimely passing. It is possible to establish a connection between the degradation of morality by the perpetration of unfair acts (from those who wrong the victim) and undesirably excessive emotions (from the deceased herself) with the deterioration of physical appearance, which is transmitted to the ethereal entity long before the body, either living or deceased, could show signs of decomposition. This relates to the concept of *mono no aware*, linked with the idea that ephemerality is inherent to every element of Nature, both highlighting the possibility of finding beauty in what is perishable and showing how everything will be subjected to change and, ultimately, decay.

The next paragraphs will be dedicated to non-archetypal representations of *yūrei*. The story of Seigen¹⁴ is a good example. In it, it is Seigen himself who transforms into a *yūrei* and, in a depiction of the *kabuki* actor Onoe Matsusuke II interpreting the character, he appears as a skeleton, showing how these mythological creatures do not necessarily need to have a phantom-like appearance to be classified as *yūrei*. In another

¹³ Okiku was a young woman (who served as a maid for a *samurai*) unjustly accused and executed by being thrown into a well – another important element in *yūrei*'s stories, especially in contemporary times. Her alleged crime was breaking the tenth porcelain plate of the samurai's collection, him being the one who carried out the sentence and, thus, the one whom Okiku pesters throughout the narrative (Marks, 2023, pp. 157-158).

¹⁴ This story is a remarkable representation of the themes of homosexuality and unaccomplished love in *Kabuki* theatre. In several versions, the priest Seigen is in love with Shiragiku, but the latter dies shortly after, leading to the reincarnation of his spirit into a princess's body. However, this narrative does not end well for the protagonist: "He is accidentally stabbed by Princess Sakura and then returns as a restless ghost still seeking love." (Marks, 2023, p. 164). As such, what motivates him is not revenge, but rather a strong, restless wish for love.

story¹⁵, the assassinated actor Koheiji's *yūrei* returns to punish his killers. According to Hokusai's *ukiyo-e* series *Hyaku Monogatari*, to do so he also takes the form of a (giant) skeleton. Therefore, it is not possible to establish two impermeable categories, one to group *yūrei* and another to contain skeleton-like creatures. This not only proves the danger of ascertaining Japanese cultural concepts and phenomena through Westernised references, but also the fluidity in appearance of this type of mythological entities, showing the utility of interpreting the categorisation as an encompassing, circular spectrum.

Notwithstanding, male *yūrei* did not always show a skeleton's appearance. In the case of the story of Asakura Tōgō¹⁶ and a respective pictorial representation by the *ukiyo-e* artist Utagawa Kuniyoshi, the crucified, barely breathing body slowly turns into a spectral entity, indicated by the appearance of the *hitodama* around him and the cadaveric holder at his feet (Marks, 2023, pp. 160-162). This is one of the only prints representing the liminary point between the living human being and the vengeful *shiryō*, marking a point of especially horrifying manifestation of *kegare*, accentuated by the blood tarnishing the carnal vessel and the cadaverous appearance of the monstrous figure at the cross' feet. It should be added that even certain female *yūrei* were not



Figure 3 – Detail of *ukiyo-e*, ink and colour on paper, representing actor Ichikawa Kodanji IV as the *yūrei* of Kozakura Tōgō and as the Tea Server Inba (Utagawa, 1851). From the book *Japanese Yokai and Other Supernatural Beings – Authentic Paintings and Prints of 100 Ghosts, Monsters, Demons and Magicians* (Marks, 2023)

¹⁵ Originally written as a fiction novel by Santō Kyōden, titled *Fukushū Kidan Asaka No Numa*.

¹⁶ This is the fictitious name by which Kiuchi Sōgorō is referred to in most *Kabuki* plays: “After the Tokugawa shogunate forbade the dramatizing of people who lived during their reign, playwrights were forced to adapt the names of historical figures.” (Marks, 2023, p. 160).

depicted by applying the set of traits usually attributed to them. Regarding the representation of Kasane¹⁷, several pieces give her the appearance of an *oni*, a type of *yōkai* demon looking like an ogre or ogress. That is the case in Utagawa Kuniyoshi's woodblock print depicting the killing of Kasane by her husband, contained in *Kisokaidō Rokujūkyū Tsugi No Uchi*. In this piece, it is possible to see a yellowish unsubstantial shape leaving Kasane's body, while her face turns even more hideous, the blue colour indicating her demise. While the female character's deceased body should not be perceived as the equivalent of the developing *shiryō*, it is plausible to argue that, similarly to Kuniyoshi Tōgo, she dwells in the frontier between her *tama* residing within the body and leaving it behind, thus allowing for changes in flesh which resemble the attributes of her subsequently completed *yūrei*.

Ubume are also represented in a distinctive manner. Since the main reason for their demise is umbilically connected with childbirth, their lower body tends to be heavily stained with blood. Additionally, they may be portrayed with swollen breasts and a prominent belly, indicating the event which led to their demise. These characteristics, present, for instance, in Toriyama Sekien's *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō* or in the anonymous scroll *Bakemono No E* (Marks, 2023, pp. 140-141), still serve a purpose, since *ubume* are the only *shiryō* thinking they hold in death what they left behind in life: their own baby. Their motherly duties still burden them during this ethereal state of existence, the design of their facial expressions conjuring suffering and pain. Lastly, *Yuki Onna's* association with cold weather and intense snow makes her appear in another of Toriyama Sekien's *ukiyo-e* works, also inserted in *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō*, as a beautiful woman with discoloured, fluttering long hair, dandling in the wind and emerging from the snowy ground. In contrast, her depiction in *Bakemono No E* establishes strong parallels with other typical representations of unclassified female *yūrei*, showing to the viewer a woman surrounded by snow and dressed in a wide, long, white *kimono*, whose only distinctive element is, precisely, her loose, dark hair. Therefore, in this and other

¹⁷ Unlike most of the women who turn into a *yūrei* after death, Kasane was not regarded as beautiful in life. In fact, she is described as disfigured (Marks, 2023, pp. 146-147).

cases, it is not the elements of this mythological creature's appearance that contribute to her identification, but the components forming the environment she is known to inhabit.

Regardless of being *shiryō*, *ikiryō*, *onryō* or something more fluidly categorised, *yūrei* are prone to be represented as young women, dressed in immaculate *kimonos* capable of either concealing their feet or hiding the lack of them. They usually display a translucent appearance, proper of entities deprived of a physical body, gradually vanishing from the waist down. Their hair, symbol of the loss of both feminine beauty and amorous-sexual relationships, is dark and long, remaining unkept. In most cases, they exhibit horrendous mutations to their appearance, channelled by their suffering and by their relentless desire for vengeance.

*

This chapter aimed to understand how the figure of the *yūrei* originated and evolved since its foetal roots in the Nara Period (710-794) until the end of the Edo Period (1603-1868). The complementary relation between the first subchapter, responsible for explaining the mythological development and presenting exemplary written and oral narratives portraying different kinds of *yūrei*, and the second, focusing on the analysis of the visual representations of the types previously alluded and searching for common characteristics uniting a vast majority of the *yūrei* represented, is essential to the following analysis, which will ponder upon how contemporary works perceived and reinterpreted these entities.

2. Burst Bubble, Released Spectres: *Yūrei* in Contemporary Japan

The question regarding the beginning of Contemporaneity in Japan is not untouched by debate. Nevertheless, it is most accepted to establish it at the end of the Second World War, more precisely after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These events, which led to the country's capitulation, marked the beginning of a new era in Japanese history, propelled by the rules emanated from the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP, 1945-1952). Japan was forced to open to the West, incorporating, while also adapting, its mental framework, economic strategies and modern appliances to reconstruct a nation dissociated from its belligerent and imperialistic former attributes.

The main concern of the present chapter is not to discuss how the representation of *yūrei* in different narratives evolved throughout this period until the present day, but to focus on such representations developed during smaller chronological gaps within that same period, known as the *Ushinawareta Jūnen (Lost Decade)* and the *Ushinawareta Nijūnen (Lost Twenty Years)*. Corresponding to the decades of the 1990s and the 2000s, the burst of the economic bubble led to an unprecedented crisis since the end of the Second World War, which, in turn, gave rise to new social anxieties, unable to be attended by the official models of action that, until then, seemed to ensure steadily, rising growth. Japan, already fully integrated in the globalised, Westernised and capitalist world, was experiencing the end of the miraculous economic development and was now faced with the need to conciliate the modern system with ancient traditional beliefs and cultural manifestations. Searching for a sense of individual but also national identity, while pursuing effective solutions to everyday problems (such as the rising unemployment rates, the fragmentation of the ideal of the conventional family structure or increasing pollution) became essential.

This was the context in which Junji Ito's *Tomie* (1987-2000) was created. Consequently, granting special attention to other narrative works from this period displaying *yūrei* as important elements is the key to understand this manga's inheritance, strategies and innovative processes, responsible for constructing a different manner to understand and interpret these creatures, embodied through the *shōjo*

protagonist. To do so in the most exhaustive way possible, I will pay attention to other contemporary works and problems not necessarily directly born out of the *Ushinawareta Jūnen's* context but whose impacts were sharply felt during it. Additionally, this chapter will be divided in two parts. The first subchapter will be dedicated to new representations developed and shared by different narratives, conveyed through three different media: films, books and videogames. The second will be entirely dedicated to the analysis of the same matter within the *manga* universe.

2.1. Paper, Screen and Joystick: New Representations of *Yūrei*

In Japan, contemporaneity is a child of traumatic events. The country's own suffering derived from the agonizing atomic bombardment and the dismantling of traditional powers of order and structure presented both the holders of governmental authority and the Japanese people with the problem of rebuilding a nation in line with the models idealised by Western democratic political entities, while preserving a sense of artificially uniform "Japaneseness" (*Paradoxical Japaneseness*, Dorman, 2016). On the other hand, its position as unquestioned victim is challenged by other events: the war crimes conducted by imperialism-driven Japan prior to 1945, stretching from human trafficking and sexual abuse – the Comfort Women (*ianfu*) Issue at its core – to human experiments and biological warfare – with the atrocities committed within Unit 731 being the most well-known examples. Additionally, the inability of governmental officials, departments and society to fully recognise the country's responsibility and duty to actively apologise and bring justice to the victims, places it as a nation unable to reconcile with its recent history and, ultimately, with its own contemporary identity.

This conflicting context acquires even greater importance when dealing with the key-questions at hands. Most of them are addressed by works classified as belonging to the horror genre, with *J-Horror*¹⁸, very different from the traditional *kaiki eiga* of the

¹⁸ This movement became more solidly defined after the national and international success of Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998). For more information, see *Asian Horror Encyclopaedia: Asian Horror in Literature, Manga, & Folklore* (Bush, 2001), *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film* (Balmain, 2008), *J-Horror: Its Birth*

1950s and the 1960s, being one of the most influential cinematographic movements of the time and the primary responsible for “(...) radical change in the representation of ghosts and narrative structure (...)” (Mukae, 2011, p. 1). It is precisely within this framework that several stories, conveyed through cinema but also through literature and videogames, serve themselves of one of the most meaning-charged images of post-war Japan: that of the child. Before being re-evoked by the new horror narratives, it already embodied both the feeling of anxiety towards the uncertain future and the idea that hope was able to subsist through the new generations (Nelson, 2009). Several fictional works will choose this seemingly paradoxical pairing and apply it to a plot dealing with outwardly hauntings.

The figure of the child is one associated with inherent fragility, since children are supposed to be nurtured and protected by adults. If a child is not only neglected but also mistreated, ending up dying in the process, it is possible to take the audience’s reactions to an extreme, which the horror genre aims to achieve. Contrary to what was commonly portrayed during Old Japan’s time, the most famous contemporary *yūrei* are almost always children or pre-adult individuals. *Ringu’s* (*Ring*, Suzuki, 1991) Sadako is raped and thrown into the well before reaching adulthood¹⁹; Mimiko, from Takashi Miike’s *Chakushin Ari* (*One Missed Call*, 2003), is about six years old when she dies of an asthma attack; Satsuki, the narrator from Otsuichi’s *Natsu to Hanabi to Watashi Shitai* (*Summer, Fireworks and My Corpse*, 1996), is mortally pushed from a tree branch at nine years old; Mitsuko, from *Honogurai Mizu no Soko Kara* (*Dark Water*, Suzuki, 1996), is still a primary-school student when she drowns; Toshio, from the first *Ju-On* film (Shimizu, 2000) is killed by his father before reaching adolescence.

More than looking at the matter from a quantitative perspective, it is necessary to understand the reasons behind such a widely made choice, as well as the significance it bears. The previously mentioned fragile condition of the child turns it into a perfect candidate to become a *yūrei*. Children have their power of agency limited by their

and the Theory Behind It (Mukae, 2011) and *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan* (Crandol, 2021).

¹⁹ Legal age in Japan is twenty years old.

parents since the moment they are born and they do not possess neither the physical, nor the mental capabilities to bypass such ruling. In the contemporary Japanese context, deeply preoccupied with the successful upbringing of children (the future working and (re)productive generation) families are faced with a new myriad of problems, stemming from the previous establishment of the figure of the *sararīman*, charged with the responsibility of collectively leading Japan's development and international affirmation, and the necessity to escape the growing unemployment rates. It will be during this period that fathers, traditionally seen as the sole providers, will become increasingly unable to support their households alone. Mothers, whose primary socially-constructed function within Japanese society was to care for the house and their progeny, will leave the domestic space to find a paying job²⁰. This necessity not only called into question matters of gender inequality within the workplace and regarding household-related duties, but also the traditional gender roles within the family, as well as the old, patriarchal and unequal *ie* system²¹. These changes led to the construction of new ideas of family, in which the child was perceived as a central element but to which neither parent was able to exclusively attend to. It was also during this period that the number of single-parent families grew larger, despite the rising valorisation of matrimony (Hertog, 2020, p. 92).

Thus, the child works as a figure constrained by its position as a subordinate within a morphing society and family, unable to independently fully care for itself, relying on others who have the duty to fulfil its every need but are now unable to fully concentrate their efforts on caring for it. The child can try to make itself heard but does

²⁰ Japanese women's entry in the workforce is not a novelty of the 1990s. It was common for both single and married women to have a job during and before this period, but the economic situation left by the burst of the economic bubble demanded a greater involvement from women. At the same time, the general population (female and male) expected the husband to support his family alone as soon as possible, especially after the birth of the first child, as sustained by Ekaterina Hertog, in the chapter "Attitudes to Marriage and Childbearing", in *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Japanese Studies* (Coates; Fraser & Pendleton (Ed.), 2020).

²¹ For further reading see Allison Alexis' "Intimacy In and Beyond the Family", in *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Japanese Studies* (Coates; Fraser & Pendleton (Ed.), 2020).

not have the power to ensure it will be met with a response – just like *yūrei*, which usually cannot find the channels through which to attain *harae*. In the context of horror works, these ideas are taken a step further, with children being brutally abused and violently killed. They do not stay dead for long, usually returning, in the form of *yūrei*, to use their earthly attachments to draw attention to their existence. Most do not exactly wish to harm the living but to make them acknowledge their suffering and to take responsibility for it. This responsibility is not individual, since, in most cases, *yūrei* do not attack the ones directly guilty of their demise, who, most often than not, are already missing or dead. On the contrary, they find other people to haunt and attack, with whom they usually have no direct connection to. These people come into contact with them by accident or chance. Notwithstanding, they often display some specific characteristics capable of bringing them closer to the elements involved in the child's mistreatment and demise.

This representation of *yūrei* brings to light the collective responsibility Japanese society has regarding this new generation, the first to be born in the context of an economic and social crisis which created the possibility of being unable to find a steady, well-paid job after reaching adulthood. This generation's childhood was one in touch with questions of divorce, single-parenthood and increased difficulty to support the cost of raising a child, with many Japanese feeling its direct consequences from early age. Many works depict children *yūrei* as desperately wanting to be taken care of after being neglected by their biological parents and forgotten by society and by legal authorities, unpreoccupied with their (corpses') whereabouts. To trigger awareness in their targets, they choose aggressive strategies, commonly ending up killing some minor characters before catching the undivided attention of the protagonist(s). This happens, for instance, in *Shibuya Kaidan (The Locker)*, Horie, 2004), where the female protagonist's group of friends deepens into madness, one after one, passing away a few days after seeing the locker's *yūrei*, a young girl who, as a baby, was left by her mother to die within

it. Only the protagonist survives by accepting the girl's presence and, ultimately, embracing her. This endows the spectral creature with the selfless love she was never able to feel before, protecting her from having to keep fighting to be perceived as a wronged individual. Similarly, in the first chapter of *Honogurai Mizu no Soko Kara* (*Dark Water*, Suzuki, 1996), titled "Floating Water" in the English version, Mitsuko's *yūrei* turns to the most sensitive character to her presence: Yoshimi, a divorced mother desperately trying to protect her daughter Ikuko from the dangers posed by the modern world, while still working a full-time schedule to support the household. Mitsuko wishes to find in this motherly figure what she apparently could not find in hers. Yoshimi is the only character in the entire story to experience anomalous events starring Mitsuko's ethereal form, making her perceive them as hallucinations. Regardless, the child haunts the protagonist, arising a real fear in her for Ikuko's safety, which makes her leave the apartment building where Mitsuko's corpse allegedly lies, decomposing inside the roof's water tank.

These examples show two different ways to react to the presence of the child *yūrei*, the first accepting it by recognizing the responsibility to receive and care for it, no matter how hideous its aspect or how damaged its spirit, while the second runs away from confrontation, trying to justify the unsettling experiences with rationalised thoughts. The former case allows the *yūrei's harae* and the restoration of *wa*, the spectral child now feeling accepted within society and having been able to experience protective affection; the latter does not, the entity still residing within the earthly space it is attached to, irrespective of how much Yoshimi forces herself to ignore her presence in that world. Accordingly, more broadly than literally functioning as representatives of

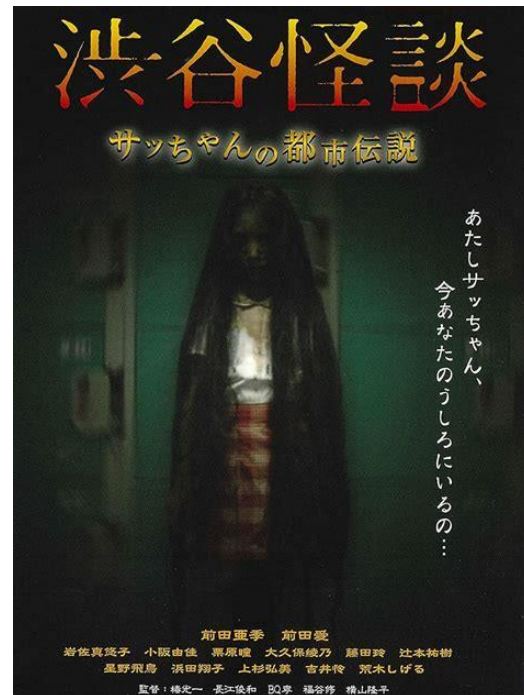


Figure 4 – Official poster for the film *Shibuya Kaidan* (Horie, 2004). In it, the child *yūrei* stands as the central figure.

brutalised children, these representations serve as metaphoric embodiments of those victimised by the inglorious effort of trying to maintain normative societal frameworks at all costs, strengthening official narratives regarding Japan's convoluted past and neglecting the calls for recognition of those victimised by it. These victims are relegated to the position of the spectral child as individuals or groups of individuals unable to make their power of agency felt due to systemic obstacles posed to their attempts to see their dignity restored. Nevertheless, they continuously haunt Japanese society by demanding that it recalls such realities – as it happened, for instance, when several foreign *ianfu* took their cases to court, in the early 1990s, only to find the justice system linearly supporting the defendant's (the government's) side (Kazue, 2016, p. 623).

I will focus my attention on another common and complementary way to represent these creatures as entities linked to the modern, urban landscape rather than connected to the distant rural space and with the traditional past it is usually associated with. When, in the 1970s, the legend of the *Kuchisake Onna* began to spread, Japanese society was feeling the effects of the resurfacing interest regarding ancient tradition²² and its incorporation into the context of growing metropolitan centres. This new monster falls within the category of *yōkai* and it can even be argued that the disfigured woman may be interpreted as a *yūrei*, since she seems to be unkillable by traditional methods, always returning after being stabbed or shoot to continue haunting and hurting her targets. Even though there are several different versions of this legend, which, in the 1990s²³, was still very well-known among both adults and children, *Kuchisake Onna* works as a symbol for the nation's inexhaustible efforts to rebuild, culminating in her own distorted face²⁴, metaphorically representing the "(...) suffering

²² Campaigns such as the 1970s *Discover Japan*, followed by the 1980s *Exotic Japan*, contributed to develop the desire to travel (by train) to "rediscover" the countryside, establishing a division between "real" Japan – enclosed by the rural context with all its human, cultural, religious and natural elements – and "another" Japan – constructed by the contemporary, urban ideals perceived as non-exclusive to the country's history and identity. For more information on this topic, see *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (Ivy, 1995).

²³ A homonymous movie was released in 2007, depicting the story of the creature's origins and subsequent murders (*Carved: The Slit-mouthed Woman*, Shiraishi).

²⁴ The creature's mouth, slit from side to side, also recalls what Barbara Creed defines in her work *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1992) as the *Vagina Dentata*, evoking the fear

incurred during Japan's post-war drive towards economic success." (Foster, 2009, p. 197). While all the major cities were in no need of more skyline development, and the construction projects, begun in the previous decade, were being abandoned, the collapse of such "economic success" was likewise accompanied by the rising of dangerous criminal phenomenon within these spaces, such as the *Otaku* Murderer case of 1988-1989, the Murder of Junko Furuta, in 1990, the *Aum Shinrikyō* sarin gas attack of 1995 (Dumas, 2018, pp. 132-133) and the Kobe Child Murders case of 1997 (Clark & Fraser, 2020, p. 297). Consequently, the urban landscape, previously associated with success and development, was rapidly becoming a threatening place to live, removed from the seemingly safe and calm countryside and from the nation's traditional ways of living. However, these problems, similarly to the ones analysed before, were neither immediately visible, nor easily solved, allowing the artistic creation of metaphysical embodiments of the anxieties.

Often, *yūrei* represented in works from this period are not ripped from a rural town or village to be introduced into a city, but are rather the direct result of their violent, untimely and unrighteous death within the urban centre they inhabited. The mythological figures are summoned to a new context without literal or intransigent transposition. They are not merely adaptations of the old ones, but individual and complete creatures of their own who, inevitably, inherited a cultural and folkloric framework, although necessary to their categorisation as *yūrei*, far from serving as a model which should merely be transported from the distance past it developed in into contemporary times and available new media. Contrary to what happened in the context of the production of the *kaiki eiga* of the 1960s, with works such as *Onibaba* (*The Hole*, Shindō, 1964) or *Yabu no Naka no Kuroneko* (*The Black Cat*, Shindō, 1968) serving as paradigmatic examples²⁵, the literary and cinematographic works of horror

of the female castrative power that renders outspoken, non-conformist women in patriarchal societies dangerous and monstrous: "She is either the tamed, domesticated, passive woman or else the savage, destructive, aggressive woman." (p. 195).

²⁵ For further study, see the chapter by Michael Crandol "Horror: The Ghosts of Kaiki Eiga", in *The Japanese Cinema Book* (Fujiki & Phillips (Ed.), 2020), and the book, by the same author, *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan* (2021).

from the 1990s and the 2000s did not make use of old-fashion looking *yūrei*, leaving behind depictions of them as demonic entities resembling angry *hanya* masks and dressed in long *kimonos*. These entities are now indistinguishable from the general urban population, if not by their translucent figures. They manifest their presence by appearing either as they were when they died, without growing, aging or decaying, their modern, Westernised clothing and accessories (jewellery, bags, cell phones, earphones, toys...) remaining intact, or as the inevitable corporeal decomposing process forces them to look. In the latter case, they take the form of zombie-like creatures, exposing how their spirit remains troubled within their physical prison.

This is the case, for instance, of Marie's *yūrei*, a character from Takashi Miike's film *Chakushin Ari* (*One Missed Call*, 2003), found in the abandoned building of a dismantled urban hospital. Her rotting



Figure 5 – Frame from *Chakushin Ari* (Miike, 2003) representing Yumi holding the lifeless corpse of Marie inside an abandoned hospital.

cadaver, kept within a trunk for six months, encloses her disturbed *tama*, showing how *yūrei* can be restrained by their bodies' own condition even after death. The *harae* compelled by Yumi by, once again, accepting the abject presence and embracing it, enables the spirit to disappear from the earthly plane, appeased by seeing its suffering finally ending when the protagonist, representing the filial figure, apologises for rejecting her and causing troubles for Marie, symbolizing the motherly figure. On the other hand, Yukiyo's *yūrei*, from *Apartment 1303* (Oikawa, 2007), evokes some traditional aspects of these entities' appearance by wearing a white gown and having dishevelled, long hair, while still being clearly inserted in a contemporary, urban context. She haunts the flat where she killed her mother and later committed suicide, which is part of an enormous, recent residential building, constructed in a coastal metropolitan region. Outside Yukiyo's household, the two characters most directly involved in the plot, the sisters Sayako and

Mariko, leave their family's home, relatively removed from the city's busy areas and respecting Japanese traditional construction models, to go to an area connoted with metropolitan life. This movement, from the outskirts to the centre, helps to illustrate the idea of danger posed by the city and by wishing to cut the ties with one's private and collective past, unsustainably looking forward to the future without caring to understand and conciliate with history. Nonetheless, that same idea of conciliation does not mean a reckless return to the past, since, as shown by game titles as *Fatal Frame I* (Shibata, 2001) or *Siren* (Toyama, 2003), adventuring far too deep into the folkloric-charged rural landscape, forgetting to recall the present and preparing the future while being stuck in the repetition of ritualistic practices of the past, may be as dangerous as to completely ignore its existence.

The question regarding the usefulness of ancient ritualistic practices should also be taken into consideration. *Yūrei* now tied to an inherently different context of origin and operation are considerably less fond of religious strategies to untangle their condition as troubled spirits. Such strategies either do not work, enraging them further, or straightforwardly contribute to their apparition and multiplication. The powers of *Shintō* and Buddhist practices cannot answer the modern cries for help of *yūrei* turned so because of their painful existence as victims of systematic abuse and unrelentless anxiety propelled by contemporary society, ultimately leading to their demise. Additionally, the elements representative of traditional religious doctrines are usually portrayed as being motivated by money and fame, disregarding the serious study and understanding of the practices and beliefs they swore to abide by. Consequently, neither the archaic rituals and talismans, nor the priests and priestesses responsible for conducting and forging them serve as suitable approaches to battle the rise of these culturally and chronologically different *yūrei*, whose earthly attachments and conditions of *kegare* concern more the recognition of their existence, suffering and violent deaths than the restoration of *wa* through traditional means of cleaning their spirits by bringing them closer to religious teachings.

This question is explored, for instance, in *Shibuya Kaidan (The Locker)*, Horie, (2004): the haunted group of friends goes back to the rural place where they deliberately

broke a *Jizo* statue, gluing it together, making offerings and apologizing in hopes of stopping the death streak, but nothing changes. Another example would be *Chakushin Ari* (*One Missed Call*, Miike, 2003): Natsumi is forcibly recruited by a television crew to be exorcised of the *yūrei* threatening her life only to brutally die during live broadcast, the incompetent priest and occult specialist being unable to help her. Contrarily, most narratives portray *yūrei* as being able to surpass their attachments to the plane of the living by seeing their particular needs attended, acquiring a greater degree of individuality while still retaining the collective characteristics which make them the mythologically based creatures they are. Now, *harae* is not obtained by applying conventional, broad and anachronic religious methods, to which the contemporary *yūrei*'s condition is barely related to. They demand a higher degree of personal involvement in their case and background story, forcing the characters to do detective work and to reflect upon the clues they find, seeing the events from the entities' perspective and coming to terms with them and with what they signify, be it the vulnerability of certain individuals within specific socio-demographic groups and the problems they are faced with or national experiences of trauma and buried guilt. This explains why Mimiko, from Hideo Nakata's film *Honogurai Mizu no Soko Kara* (*Dark Water*, 2002), adapting the first chapter of Koji Suzuki's literary work with the same title (1996), stops trying to kill Ikuko – the rival figure – after being fully accepted by Yoshimi. She chooses, not without suffering, to sacrifice herself by becoming the *yūrei*'s motherly figure, leaving behind the realm of the living and her own six-year-old daughter in order to fill the gap left by Mimiko's biological mother. Yoshimi shoulders the entire responsibility for stopping the entity's harmful actions and of protecting both young girls of the dangers posed by the creation of this *yūrei*²⁶. It also contributes to understand why the narrator from *Natsu to Hanabi to Watashi Shitai* (*Summer, Fireworks and My Corpse*, Otsuichi, 1996) is unable to leave behind the realm of the living at the end of the

²⁶ Mimiko does not exactly pass on to become an ancestral *kami* because, while Ikuko is still living, there is the possibility that Yoshimi – now herself a *yūrei* – will go back on her decision, leaving her behind as her own mother did. Nevertheless, despite not achieving a complete *harae*, the spectral girl is now free of murderous intents, happy to have in death what she was refused in life. No religious practices contribute to this resolution, nor are they ever alluded to.

story, her corpse being thrown into a cold storage amongst the bodies of other assassinated children. Her main desire – to be discovered by an accountable adult, whose extreme embodiment are the police officers – is never attained. Despite her cadaver having been dragged through the grounds of a temple during a summer festival, Satsuki never once manifests her will to be purified through religious rituals, always highlighting her wish to be discovered and acknowledge as dead²⁷.

The stale religious strategies to purify or, at the very least, restrain *yūrei* from hurting the living are set aside to open space for more modern approaches: the use of technological elements, such as cameras, cell phones or videotapes. The mythological creatures are represented as being vulnerable to exposition through the mechanical and digital channels components, remaining otherwise concealed from naked eye unless they decide to expose themselves to it. One of the main factors for the success of their hauntings and lethal endeavours is the element of surprise, which they easily achieve by only revealing their corporeal dimension and directly attacking during convenient moments, the victim being cornered and unable to fight back. The efficacy of this method decreases exponentially when the targets are in possession of technological tools capable of undermining the creatures' invisibility. Those allow the victims to perceive their presence and intent earlier, adapting their course of action. Moreover, the effects of using such objects, which, after the beginning of the 1990s, gradually became more common among the general population, can have direct and indirect consequences for the *yūrei*. Independently, it always threatens to either constrict their actions or expel them from the earthly dimension.

²⁷ Satsuki is purposefully killed by her best friend Yayoi, who, with the help of her brother, hides the body from the adults and the authorities. Her case is not treated by the police force as a homicide, but rather as a missing child's one. As such, at the end of the narrative, no one besides the pair of siblings and the pre-adult Midori – responsible for the kidnapping of various young children, then killed to be encased in an ice cream store's cold storage – know what truly happened to her, ignoring her condition as a *yūrei* and hoping for her to be found alive.

A good example of *yūrei* being directly affected, weakened and purified by one such tool is the mechanics of *Zero's* videogame franchise (*Project Zero*, Nagasaki; Osawa; Shibata & Suda, 2001-2014), whose main trilogy – *Fatal Frame I* (Shibata, 2001), *Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly* (Shibata, 2003) and *Fatal Frame III: The Tormented* (Shibata, 2005) – has as recurring element the



Figure 6 – Screenshot from *Fatal Frame III: The Tormented* (Shibata, 2005) showing how the *Camera Obscura* is an essential tool to see and fight *yūrei*. Retrieved from Fatal Frame Wiki

Camera Obscura. This photographic device enables the player to damage and ultimately banish the hostile spirits he or she encounters during gameplay by pointing the lens in their direction and waiting for the right moment, when the entity is dangerously close, and the focus is at its peak. If the player chooses to put down this tool it will seem as if no entity is nearby. The *yūrei* becomes able to attack at will, damaging the player even if he or she cannot see them. On the other hand, *Chakushin Ari (One Missed Call*, Miike, 2003) shows how Mimiko tries to conceal her role as the murderous *yūrei* to continue to persecute and kill her victims while remaining absent from suspicion. Since knowing the true identity of these entities is the first step to reconstruct their personal story and unravel the mystery of their motivations and desires, it also represents the first step in the path of *harae*. Mimiko knows that revealing herself presents a serious danger to her existence, so she remains invisible to everyone but her immediate victims. However, she is betrayed by the phone and television cameras, which capture her real form. The characters are unable to identify her because of the absence of sufficient light and the position of her long hair, covering

her face²⁸, but it cannot be denied that those were the moments where Mimiko was rendered most vulnerable, despite her immense power.

Nevertheless, she passes on the mark of her hauntings by making use of cell phone devices' voicemail mechanism. *Yūrei* are complementarily represented as being empowered through technology, proving that their origin is contextualised by the digital contemporary paradigm. If they lived, suffered and died within such paradigm, it is only natural that they make use of the instruments available to make their hauntings more effective. Additionally, *yūrei* become representatives of the fears associated with technological novelties, such as the advent and banalisation of the internet and portable communication devices, as well as of the anxieties created by the possibility of constant but distant contact with known and unknown parties, paradoxically influencing the rising numbers of social isolation phenomena, with psychiatrist Tamaki Saito creating and defining the concept of *hikikomori* in 1998²⁹, and its association with deviant behaviour, embodied by the *otaku* and their relation with the negatively-perceived concept of *moe* as “ (...) affection and possibly sexual arousal felt for fictional characters (...)” (Ting, 2020, p. 312).

Additionally, a parallel is established between the *modus operandi* of *yūrei* and that of a virus, which spreads from person to person due to either direct or indirect contact (depending on its contagious strength) setting within the organism to develop an incurable disease and leading the individual to its death. The infected corpse works as the perfect environment for the virus's multiplication, creating new entities which take their pollution (*kegare*) to others, reinforcing the cycle. In *Kairo* (*Pulse*, Kurosawa, 2001), people are massively dying after establishing contact with *yūrei* through the internet, leading the few survivors to flee the infested cities. Most of the affected people

²⁸ Even when possessing the body of another person, Mimiko's true appearance is revealed by mirror reflexions, as shown when she is about to kill Yamashita immediately before the oneiric conclusion of the film. Consequently, it is implied that the mirrored mechanisms and lenses of the camera devices can also uncover her true form, even if the people looking at them are unable to discern it.

²⁹ For more information about this topic see *Shakaiteki Hikikomori Owaranai Shishunki* (*Hikikomori: Adolescence Without End*, Saito, 1998).

did not choose to establish such contact, entering and exploring the web with other purposes in mind before being caught by the videos starring the entities. By their turn, both in Koji Suzuki's literary work *Ringu* (1991) as in Nakata's famous film adaptation of the same name (1998), the *yūrei* Sadako extends her curse through the haunted tapes in which clues for her death are shown. In the cinematographic version, she murders her targets seven³⁰ days after watching the tape, transposing the television screen and blurring the barriers between the spiritual and digital world she is encased in and the target's earthly dimension.



Figure 7 – Frame from *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998) showing Sadako leaving the cursed tape to kill her targets. She displays the traditional characteristics of *yūrei*.

Before concluding the present subchapter, it is necessary to analyse a last common way to represent *yūrei* in contemporary narratives, influenced by the visual framework solidified during the Edo Period (1603-1868). As I have been demonstrating while addressing other topics, statistically *yūrei* usually are women. Despite wearing modern clothing, accessories and makeup, their appearance combines elements evocative of traditional characteristics, such as long black hair, white garments and concealed feet. The article “From Scrolls to Prints to Moving Pictures: Iconographic Ghost Imagery from Pre-Modern Japan to The Contemporary Horror Film” sustains that Sadako from *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998) works as the archetypical example of this, when mentioning, for instance, that “[i]n *Ringu*, Sadako never once appears in any clothing other than a white dress, not even in the scenes in which she is shown living” or that

³⁰ In Japan, the number seven is sometimes associated with death since one of its readings (*shichi*) resembles the one for the *kanji* meaning “death” (*shi*). Moreover, this period of seven days also reinforces the idea of *yūrei* as able to infect their targets. Just like a virus, they need the incubation period to be complete for their deadly symptoms to manifest.

“(…) her approach toward the front of the television set is awkward (…) and conveys a sense of someone totally unaccustomed to using her feet for transportation” (Sumpter, 2006, p. 12-13). This is also true in other cases. Mimiko dresses in white, having black, loose hair, and Ritsuko, from the same film, is encircled by a translucent lining; Mitsuko, from Nakata’s filmic adaptation of Suzuki’s 1996 work, is shown wearing a translucent yellow raincoat, wetted by rain and by the water tank’s polluted liquid, enveloping her appearance in a fuzzy glow, while her hair surpasses her shoulders; Kayako from *Ju-On* original trilogy (Shimizu, 2000-2002) has immaculate pale skin, long black hair and rarely uses her feet to move around, usually dragging herself in twisted ways to catch her victims; Yukiyo’s inhumanly long hair give her an imposing appearance, contrasting with her light-coloured gown.

Notwithstanding, most of these girls and women’s *kegare* conditions are associated with the domestic space and, especially, with complex and unhealthy filial relationships. Except for Kayako and Ritsuko, all of them are direct victims of generational abuse and trauma perpetrated by their parents, with special emphasis placed on the maternal figure’s role in it. The focus is shifted from broken romantic promises as the driving forces of the individual’s untimely and emotionally exacerbated demise, to the dangerous, neglectful and, in some cases, purposefully violent attitudes of mothers regarding their children, who, for the most part, are daughters and not sons. Consequently, *yūrei* are commonly represented in fictional works from the 1990s to the 2000s as creatures destined, both by the sex they were assigned at birth as well as by the inescapable heritage of systemic mother-perpetrated violence, to turn into such. Usually manifesting ambiguous feelings towards their abusive mothers, the troubled daughters cannot ascend to the place of ancestral *kami*, unable to decide if they wish to mercilessly haunt other maternal figures resembling their own, dragging their children to the depths of the abyss they are enclosed within as a manner of revenge, or if they desire to be accepted and receive the love they were never able to attain during life and which consequently culminated in their passing. Since the figure of the defenceless and scarred women became associated with the country’s own public image after the end

of Second World War³¹, these *yūrei* represent the daughters of a mutilated nation which was then showing signs of being unable to take on the burden of motherhood with which it was inevitably charged, neglecting and abusing them by undermining their basic rights – until 2016, Japan had not conducted any revision regarding rape in its Penal Code established in 1907 (Kazue, 2016, p. 628), for instance – while still proclaiming its respect for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and expecting them to fulfil their role as dedicated mothers, as well as inexhaustible and economically valuable corporate employees. Additionally, the *yūrei*'s inability to reach *harae* relates to the idea of being trapped between forgiving their mother's irresponsible and violent behaviour towards them, reconciling with the previous generation, and demanding acceptable explanations and sincere apologies from the mentioned generation, who also needs to reconcile with the newest members of society.

To conclude, the fictional narratives from the 1900s and 2000s (re)construct these mythological creatures in different, complementary ways. *Yūrei* are now commonly represented through the figure of the child, especially the young or adolescent girl, inhabiting and haunting the urban landscape and having a modern-looking appearance, despite preserving traditional elements that bring her closer to the creatures of which they are direct, folkloric heirs. Moreover, they are represented as entities capable of making use of the technological devices familiar to them to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their lethal actions, resembling a deadly virus but also exposing themselves to being perceived and identified by the same devices' capabilities, which surpass the human naked eye. Regarding their motivations and conditions of purification, *yūrei* are represented as demanding personal and emotional involvement from their targets in what their tragic stories and recognition of their horrendous liminal condition concerns, embodying specific and national traumas and unclaimed responsibilities alike, while still emphasising the complex and precarious condition of the daughters (and sons) of the generation born and upbringing during the turbulent and uncertain times of the economic and social crisis.

³¹ For more information regarding this question, see "Demon(ized) Women: Female Punishment in the 'Pink Film' and J-Horror" (Taylor, 2012).

2.2. Drawing the Invisible: Representing *Yūrei* in Manga

Manga, an art form whose large variety of genres allows for a diversification of audiences, saw the number of devotees rise further during the 1960s, when Japan's reconstruction process was already in an advanced state and the working-class population regained purchasing power, beginning to enjoy more varied ways of spending their leisure time. It was also during this decade that *shōjo* manga emerged, proving a fertile ground for the development of horror stories³² (Dollase, 2010).

The first serialised depictions of *yūrei* began in this period, with Mizuki Shigeru's *GeGeGe no Kitarō* (*Kitarō from the Graveyard*, 1960-1969) greatly contributing to establish a new way to write and, especially, draw these mythological figures, influencing later representations such as the ones present in *Hanada Shōnen Shi* (Isshiki, 1993-1994) or in *Natsume Yūjin Chō* (*Natsume's Book of Friends*, Midorikawa, 2003-present). Shigeru's protagonist, the young boy *yūrei* named Kitarō, resembles a normal child except for the cadaverous skin colour and the lack of his left eye, covered by a long strand of black hair. Laying the foundations for what, from the 1990s onwards, would become one of the most widespread representations, Kitarō is not a creature originated in the distant past, but rather a modern, contemporary individual who also happens to have been born within the ancient *Yūrei Kazoku* ("Ghost Tribe", in the English version), of which his parents were the last survivors. Kitarō is neither especially different, nor even immediately frightening. Classified as a *shōnen manga*, it would be perfectly fitting for the main character to have been drawn in a more gloomy, scary way, but Shigeru's decision helped establishing a new way to represent *yōkai* and *yūrei*, even within the horror and supernatural genres, by narrowing the barrier between these entities and living people, in what physical appearance, physiological needs and social behaviour

³² Junji Ito's *Tomie* (1987-2000) is considered by scholars such as Tosha R. Taylor and Rachael Dumas as belonging to this genre. This topic will be furtherly explored in the next chapter. For further reading see *Gendered Violence and the Abject Body in Junji Ito's Tomie* (Tosha R. Taylor, 2023), in *Critical Approaches to Horror Comic Books* (Berns & Darowski (Ed.), 2023) and *The Monstrous Feminine in Contemporary Japanese Popular Culture* (Dumas, 2018).

concerns³³, ascertaining their place as constitutive elements of contemporary society, who are core elements of the collective Japanese imaginary, in constant mutation and adaptation.

Kitarō's harmless, cartoonish and goofy appearance will be reconvened by other *yūrei*. In the fourth chapter of *Hanada Shōnen Shi* (Isshiki, 1993-1994), Ichiro, a young boy who becomes able to see and contact with *yūrei*, is faced with the spectral presence of a nice old lady. When Ichiro refuses her request, she lets her hair down, shaking it and giving rise to a sudden but brief transformation, her face now bearing an exaggerated open mouth, her eyes popping and her hands reaching for the boy. Despite looking menacing, her missing teeth are still visible, her wrinkles clearly perceivable, her thin hair fluttering ridiculously in the air. In *Natsume Yūjin Chō*



Figure 8 – Cover of the 14th *tankōbon* volume of *GeGeGe no Kitarō* (Shigeru, 1986)

(*Natsume's Book of Friends*, Midorikawa, 2003-present), several of the *yūrei* are portrayed as wobbly creatures, having just one eye or simply exhibiting the empty sockets for the pair. The exaggerated proportion of these characteristics, coupled with their foolish smile-shaped gapping mouths, turns them into comical figures. Additionally, the homonymous sidekick from *Pupipō!* (Oshikiri, 2008-2009) embodies this idea even further. The readers later discover that the character is the future child of Wakaba, the female protagonist, who was killed by the *onryō* pestering her and has now returned as a benign *yūrei* to protect her. However, *Pupipō* is far from looking like a traditional Japanese spectral entity, his cute, round and pink

³³ Every member of the *Yūrei Kazoku* must eat to survive. Despite being impossible to die of old age, they are mortal creatures that humans have been slaughtering for several centuries. Moreover, before being almost driven to extinction, they lived in large communities, constituting families, having children and working hard to ensure their successful upbringing. They can feel emotions and are utterly afraid of human society, hiding from it in the hope of being spared.

body resembling the popular Nintendo character Kirby, whose debut occurred in 1992. He is visible to everyone – contrary to what happens with the evil spirits, which only Wakaba is able to perceive – and some of the most comic scenes involve other characters being afraid of his condition as a *yūrei*, despite the entity unquestionably working as the perfect embodiment of the contemporary understanding of the concept of *kawaii* (Dave, 2020), a topic which will be addressed again when analysing the protagonist of Junji Ito's *Tomie* (1987-2000).

Not every representation of *yūrei* in contemporary manga developed upon Kitarō's precedent, focusing on creating new terrifying ways of visually constructing these mythological creatures and having as important references Umezu Kazuo's manga works, such as *Hebi Onna* (Reptilia, 1965-1966). The idea of *yūrei* as creatures entrapped within their physical, rotting corpses is of great interest for this topic, since several depictions bring them closer to the figure of the zombie. The corporeal dimension is prioritised in several stories as the natural and visible vessel of the creature's encased spirit, unable to leave the body to either ascend to the place of ancestral *kami* or to ethereally haunt its targets without the restrictions presented by the cadaver. This is a recurring trope in *Kurosagi Shitai Takuhaibin* (*The Kurosagi Corpse Delivery Service*, Ōtsuka & Yamazaki, 2002-present). In this series, all *yūrei* in need of *harae* are contained within their bodies (or parts of their bodies), which they cannot move on their own. It is through the protagonist's power that they regain agency and become able to attack and murder those responsible for their suffering, torture and death. After completing their task, their corpses become motionless again, their spirits are finally able to depart from the earthly world. In *Fuan no Tane's* (*Seeds of Anxiety*, Nakayama, 2004-2005) short-story "The Visit II", the symbiosis between the *yūrei's* metaphysical dimension and its decomposing corpse's tangible condition is emphasised by representing him as a zombie-like creature holding a scythe who, after realizing his mistake, leaves the

apartment building, without killing anyone, by passing through the door and disappearing.

Still regarding the topic of fear-inducing representations, several manga series choose to merge the traditional visual framework with the monsters and anxieties born during contemporary times. Many chapters from *Fuan no Tane (Seeds of Anxiety)*, Nakayama, 2004-2005) portray paradigmatic depictions. In “Ear-Slashing Monk”, the antagonist is an alleged monk who follows young girls to cut their ears with scissors, recalling the figure of the *Kuchisake Onna* and combining it with the figure of the maddened and possessed priest linked to ancient religious practices.

In “Apparation”, a *yūrei* resembling a translucent-white spirit tails a man suspicious of its presence, evoking the contemporary fear of being stalked. In “Fog”, a man is led out of a dangerous foggy area by a *yūrei* whose figure resembles that of a hiker but whose *modus operandi* recalls that described by some legends concerning the *Yuki Onna*. In *Gakuen Hyaku Monogatari (100 School Ghosts Stories)*, Hino; Iwakoshi; Naoe, 1993) the first story, titled “Demonic Foetus”, portrays these creatures as being entities paralleled to an infectious disease while, at the same time, evoking the legend of the *ubume* and their dead children. *Inagawa-san no Kaidan Tamatebako (Mr. Inagawa’s Ghost Story Treasure Box)*, Inagawa & Ito, 2007) portrays its main *yūrei* as a woman, dressed in corporate attire, who hanged herself in a forest tree branch. Her long, black hair continued to grow until reaching unprecedented dimension, recalling the consecrated folkloric idea of this characteristic as a symbol of the abrupt end of the entity’s life.



Figure 9 – Manga page from “The Visit II” (Nakayama, 2004, p. 74) depicting a zombie-like *yūrei* disappearing through the solid door.

The complementary representation of *yūrei* as members of an urban society, whose hauntings take place during every-day events of lesser meaning. This emphasises the power of horror belonging to the daily, contemporary, metropolitan landscape and the entities' unbreakable connection with it. Their coming to existence is not a question of reuniting a set of especially rare requirements, but of disturbing ordinary scenarios by making them perceivable, fostering a sense of omnipresent anxiety. As explained in the previous subchapter, *yūrei* are now represented as beings whose conditions of *kegare* concern more structural and systematic abused deeply rooted in the inherited and newly generated problems of the post burst of the economic bubble's context. As such, in manga, constructing them as elements belonging to the isolated, traditional rural scenario is not very common, associating their existence and (usually) harmful conduct with the places inhabited by most of the population, as locations of great collective suffering and higher amounts of potential victims of unfair, painful and untimely deaths. Of the more than sixty tales composing *Fuan no Tane (Seeds of Anxiety)*, Nakayama, 2004-2005) only five have *yūrei* haunting a non-urban landscape. Similarly, most of the cases in *Kurosagi Shitai Takuhaibin (The Kurosagi Corpse Delivery Service)*, Ōtsuka & Yamazaki, 2002-present) are solved inside the big cities. In *Ibitsu* (Haruto, 2009-2010), the main antagonist – a Lolita fashioned³⁴ *yūrei* – stalks the protagonist and his sister, invading their home and interfering with their daily activities in the urban environment. Additionally, schools, as the places where children and teens spend most of their weeks' time – with all the positive (contact with friends, controlled learning environment, safe space for practicing sports) and negative (bullying, integration-related problems, academic stress) implications of it – and as the space in which they should be, according to Japanese conventional framework, prepared for their future as

³⁴ Lolita fashion was developed during the late 1980s in Japan and is used to describe a type of fashion which makes use of Victorian-styled elements, such as flared skirts and dresses with ruffles, long socks, high heels, hair bows and ribbons, statement jewellery and whitish foundation, with contrasting red, pink or black lips. For further reading, see "Transcultural Flow of Demure Aesthetics: Examining Cultural Globalisation through Gothic & Lolita Fashion" (Monde, 2008), in *New Voices Volume 2: A Journal for Emerging Scholars of Japanese Studies in Australia*, and *The Lolita Complex: A Japanese Fashion Subculture and its Paradoxes* (Bernal, 2011).

valuable employees and dedicated family and nation members, are shown in several works as being the most suitable habitats for the creation and activity of *yūrei*, embodying both a sense of reigning dread and fear regarding present issues and the uncertain future but also a sense of growth accompanied by the discovery of a different, impactful and, ultimately, scary world. This is accurately portrayed in *Gakuen Hyaku Monogatari* (100 School Ghosts Stories, Hino; Iwakoshi; Naoe, 1993), whose title, by referring to *gakuen*, denounces the supernatural events as taking place at school. Likewise, *Gakkō no Kaidan* (Ogawa, 2003-2009) has as central characters *yūrei* who disturb the life of the young Iijima, terrifying him and influencing his relationship with the school's environment. Additionally, since Wakada from *Pupipō!* (Oshikiri, 2008-2009) is constantly haunted by the malicious *onryō*, it is common for them to appear during school hours.

Notwithstanding the increased association and representation of *yūrei* as modern components of the urbanised landscape, one specific traditional element regarding their abilities to communicate and interact with the living remains very present in several manga series from the *Ushinawareta Nijūnen*: the necessity for an *itako*-resembling individual to serve as their contact channel with the earthly dimension they are bound in. According to Japanese beliefs, *itako* can be defined as people endowed with special supernatural gifts of communication with the deceased, who "(...) enact scenarios of losses momentarily confronted, remembered, and mourned, allowing Japanese to confront both personal and historical pasts, often in ways that come to terms with Japanese modernity and its disappearances" (Ivy, 1995, p. 142). Currently confined to specific isolated locations related with ritualistic practices concerning the dead, such as mount Osore (Aomori prefecture) or Ise shrine (Mie prefecture), *itako* and the spirits they channel are greatly associated with past traditional folkloric practices preserved by some rural areas and left behind by metropolitan and suburban locations. By contrast, their importance to the modern, urban and technological world is strongly emphasised in various manga works.

During most of *Natsume Yūjin Chō* (*Natsume's Book of Friends*, Midorikawa, 2003-present) the protagonist is the only character exhibiting *itako* abilities, having

inherited them from his grandmother Reiko. This manga specifically plays with the idea of *yūrei* as being chained to certain clans and, within them, to specific individuals, who could not escape the horrific manifestations of their genetic supernatural qualities. In this sense, the mythological entities are represented as needing an intermediate element to fulfil their desires and attain *harae*, restricting their individual agency and forcing them to compromise with the *itako* figure. Another archetypal example is that of Kuro Karatsu, the main character from *Kurosagi Shitai Takuhaibin* (*The Kurosagi Corpse Delivery Service*, Ōtsuka & Yamazaki, 2002-present). Yaichi, the only recurring *yūrei* in



Figure 10 – Manga page from *Kurosagi Shitai Takuhaibin: Volume 3* (Ōtsuka & Yamazaki, 2004, p. 16), representing Karatsu using his *itako* abilities to channel the voice of a dead man.

the entire narrative, inhabits Karatsu’s corporeal dimension, manifesting himself whenever contacting with another *yūrei*. However, it cannot simply be stated that Yaichi possess Karatsu, since the reader is presented with the image of both entities occupying the same space but remaining clearly distinguishable from one another. In this sense, Yaichi works as a symptomatic representation of *yūrei* as creatures metaphysically linked and (potentially) contained within a living human being without either directly relying on his or her body, or overlapping his or her will. It is possible to interpret the duo’s condition as one of double possession or, more accurately, of bilateral infection. This means that it is not only Karatsu who is affected by Yaichi’s presence and abilities, but that the transcendental entity is likewise impacted by Karatsu’s choices, actions, and emotions. This portrays how *yūrei* are conditioned by their vessel, thus turning them from omnipotent manipulators into entities whose earthly and human attachments force them to subdue to a certain degree of fragility and dependence in order to fulfil

their wishes. Ichiro from *Hanada Shōnen Shi* (Isshiki, 1993-1994), Wakara from *Pupipō!* (Oshikiri, 2008-2009), Hikaru from *Hikaru no Go* (Yumi & Obata, 1998-2003), Shizuru from *Mokke* (Kumakura, 2000-2009) and Ryosuke from *Natsuyuki Rendezvous* (Kawachi, 2009-2011) can all be designated as contemporary *itako*.

I will turn my attention to the specific representations of female *yūrei* in manga works for the sake of understanding how they make use of the folkloric consecrated visual framework and/or distance themselves from it, conjuring new constructions. Most of these works apply the distinguishable elements traditionally recognised as belonging to female *yūrei*, such as white garments, long black hair and the lack of visible feet. Moreover, they work on these characteristics to maximise their terrifying aspects, turning some into dreadful murderous tools instead of using them as simple distinctive attributes. As such, it is common to find entities whose hair has grown to such an extent that it is able to either strangle, hang or choke their targets without breaking. Its condition as a continuously developing body part emphasises the *yūrei*'s ambiguous position as neither entirely dead nor alive, as well as an individual who takes advantage of the abject elements of its condition to continue its reign of terror. The hair also works as an infectious weapon. Many *yūrei* are able to force strands resembling theirs to bulge out of their victim's skull (and body), creating gashing wounds and inflicting serious damage to essential unrelated organs. They can use specific parts of their physiognomy to carry out the hauntings, killing at a distance and avoiding touching their targets. Their *kegare* is reinforced by associating their existence – and not necessarily their intrusive actions or immediate presence – with the idea of unstoppable doom and death. This is what happens, for instance, in *Inagawa-san no Kaidan Tamatebako* (*Mr. Inagawa's Ghost Story Treasure Box*, Inagawa & Ito, 2007), previously explored, as well as in Hideshi Hino's story "Curse of The Black Hair", from *Death's Reflection* (2004), where a student whose hair was forcibly cut by her teacher and principal – alluding to the castration of female sensual desire, the strongest manifestations of which are felt, precisely, during adolescence – passes away after being run over by a car. She infects her teacher's head with excruciating organic lumps of hair, from where her severed head incubates and detaches itself to end the job by strangling the evildoer's neck. In another story by the

same author, titled “The 3737 Mystery”, one of the many *yūrei* is a female student serving as a spokesperson for the rest, begging for help while her unkempt, moist hair dangles in front of her cadaveric face.

Additionally, these mythological entities are also represented as being both empowered and subdued by exacerbated emotional attachments to the world of the living. Those attachments are of either romantic or filial nature, summoning specific types of legendary *yūrei* to enrich their characterisation and link them to a clear folkloric background. The stories “Pepping”,

from *Fuan no Tane (Seeds of Anxiety*,

Nakayama, 2004-2005), “Anything but a Ghost” and “Songs in the Dark”, both

from *Shin Yami no Koe Kaidan (New Voices in the Dark*, Ito, 2006) serve as good examples. In the first, a head

peeps out of a filled bathtub, gazing directly into the living woman’s eyes. It establishes an association with the

idea of a new biological birth – as the entity is “born” out of a filled bathtub, symbolizing the womb – and with the

folkloric narrative of the *Kawa Hime*, a female entity of metaphysical form

who is said to inhabit Japanese rivers. The former of Ito’s stories has as

antagonist a girl who was born when her mother was already dead, man ifestly recalling the tales concerning *ubume*. This *yūrei* has an exposed skull for face but preserves the

breasts of a mother who as just given birth, now in need of feeding her child. The last narrative concerns a singer plagued by a heart-break song authored by her ex-boyfriend,

who could not accept the end of the relationship and, after a long period of stalking her, committed suicide while she was watching. When the professor helping her tries to



Figure 11 – Manga page from *Shin Yami no Koe Kaidan* (Ito, 2006, p. 108) depicting Misaki explaining how her mother died giving birth to her.

change her brainwaves to stop the song from playing in her mind, her head cracks open and a suffering spirit, engulfed by the song, leaves her body through the wound. This everlasting and recurring song enveloping the *yūrei* helps establish it as born out of the unfulfilled love and the traumatic events that she, as a woman, had to experience due to her male counterpart's possessive and toxic feelings.

Notwithstanding, manga horror fiction concerning *yūrei* developed during the period in question conceded greater attention to dangers more commonly posed to girls and women, such as sexual harassment and abuse, rape and paedophilia. Several *kegare* conditions are now directly or indirectly related with such criminal acts and the ethereal entities' targets are usually either the culprits themselves or passive accomplices, complexifying the matter to reflect upon personal and social responsibility for the continuous suffering of thousands of victims. While presenting the readers with both the shock of sexualised female bodies and the horrendous events endured by the recently turned *yūrei*, these works show how sexual traumas endured in life do not disappear after the person's death, returning, if not to haunt the guilty party's conscience, to cast a dark and dangerous shadow upon the society and the official structures allowing it to happen. This is the case with the story "Magician of Lost Love", from *Kurosagi Shitai Takuhaibin (The Kurosagi Corpse Delivery Service*, Ōtsuka & Yamazaki, 2002-present). In it, the striped corpses of several *yūrei*, cut, mutilated and sewn together in a single unidentifiable body by the perverted mortician Tsutsui, come back to life to confront him by saying "I didn't ask for this", which Kuro interprets as "I didn't ask for this cut" (p. 152; p. 154), calling into question the necessity not only to interpret each sexual abuse case as a separate one, avoiding, at all costs, viewing it as a collective, amorphous phenomenon, but also of battling against a discourse founded on victim-blaming. In Junji Ito's *Snow White* (2014), a (presumably) underage girl symptomatically resembling Tomie is subjected to progressively worse deaths – she always comes back to life, unable to change her fate – after the queen discovers she surpasses her in beauty, according to the enchanted mirror's standards. The girl, who is taken as a protégée by the queen's husband (who implicitly denounces his will to fulfil his sexual desire through Snow White, to which she has no other choice but to agree) is

actively ostracised, imprisoned and tortured, demise after demise, due to her foster mother's orders, who sees her more as a rival figure than as a victim of opportunistic, predatory and abusive behaviour. When the queen desperately tries to set her ablaze, they both burn, the evildoer's charred monstrous skeleton standing by the girl's preserved figure, sitting over her knees and looking forward, betrayed repeatedly by her immense beauty's instrumentalisation.

With this topic, I conclude the analysis of the contemporary representations of *yūrei* in manga. In this media, they are represented as beings inherently linked to their traditional folkloric visual framework and complementarily merged with contemporary and urban characteristics, capable of conveying new anxieties and addressing everlasting problems still commonly felt within Japanese society. Recalling ancient figures and legends, such as the *ubume* or the *itako*, *yūrei* are (re)constructed both as the antagonists and as important sidekicks of stories whose categorisation does not have to exclusively fall into the horror genre. As to the specific representation of female spiritual entities, these works take advantage of previously established attributes to grant the characters a greater power of agency, inherently related with their condition as *yūrei*, while also drawing attention to problems and dangers mostly posed to girls and women.

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Through the study of how *yūrei* are represented in films, literature and videogames, as well as portrayed in manga works created during the period of the *Ushinawareta Nijūnen* I composed the second chapter of this study, which aimed to demonstrate how those have changed, creating innovating ways to interpret and visually portray these mythological creatures without forgetting the traditional framework they are inevitable heirs to. This chapter contributes directly to the analysis concerning the case study of Junji Ito's *Tomie* (1987-2000) as a work having as central figure a female character embodying the concept of *yūrei* through a singular, contemporary perspective.

3. The Monster Creeping Within: The Reinvention of *Yūrei* in Junji Ito's *Tomie* (1987-2000)

Tomie (Ito, 1987-2000) owes as much to its fantastical past as to its technological present, conjuring traditional concepts and innovative features to produce a character belonging simultaneously to old and modern Japan. Naturally, this creation is fuelled by the author's imagination, but also by ancient, deeply entrenched myths and contemporary narratives, such as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) or Hideki Sena's *Parasite Eve* (1995). To cover the two main axes composing this chapter, one dealing with *Tomie*'s mythological heritage and another with her innovative and modern characteristics, it will be divided in two parts. The first will focus on the protagonist's physical, psychological and contextual features associated with the traditional framework of *yūrei*. It will especially centre around her inability to remain dead and the conditions of *kegare*, related with the motives and the ways of her demises. Parallels with specific creatures such as the *Yuki Onna* will also be considered, as well as her *modus operandi* and search for retribution. In the second subchapter, I will turn my attention to her undeniable necessity to possess a corporeal, organic form to act and ensure her existence and perpetuation. It is essential to focus on her unprecedented regenerative powers and on her ability to multiply, while considering her role as a simulacrum (Dumas, 2018). Additionally, the association between *Tomie* and the idea of an unstoppable, epidemic virus, as well as her capacity to physically possess and eradicate other female-coded individuals will be studied.

Before moving to the case study, it is beneficial to provide some additional information related with the manga's gender-age classification and with *Tomie*'s labelling as one of the most paradigmatic representations of the *kawaii*, *enjo kōsai* branded *shōjo*. When the first story of the series was published in 1987, it was integrated in *Gekkan Halloween* (1985-1995), a monthly horror manga magazine whose target audience were middle and high school girls. Accordingly, *Tomie* (Ito, 1987) was primarily oriented to a public resembling the protagonist's own demographic stratum, which had greater potential to relate with her situation and endeavours. The fact that she is

portrayed as brutally murdered, severely and repeatedly stabbed by a group of male classmates led by a likewise male authority figure, solidifies important subliminal and metaphorical meanings, strengthening her position as a victim of systemic and systematic violence perpetrated against young girls, a topic to which I shall return later. Defiantly to what is sustained in *'Shōjo' Spirits in Horror Manga* (Dollase, 2010) – “The ghosts are female (mothers or peers), the victims are adolescent girls, the writers are women, and the viewers are normally young girls.” (p. 60) – this narrative was created by a male author responsible for developing a character representing simultaneously and endlessly the powerless sufferer and the threatening monster. Additionally, the protagonist is contextualised within the rise of the *kawaii*³⁵ culture, enhanced by late capitalism driven models and ideas, strongly appealing to adolescent girls. It prompted them to acquire all sorts of “cute” goods, able to render them lovable by propelling an image of vulnerability, and innocence, while defining the *shōjo* as endowed with little power of agency. Subsequently, after the burst of the economic bubble, these figures “(...) faced no demand to inhabit a productive place in society, which represented an unattainable freedom to adults.” (Dave, 2020, p. 326). In association, rose the dating phenomenon of *enjo kōsai*, generally consisting in a relationship between a man and an underage female student based on material compensation from the adult to the minor for the upkeep of a romantic and sexual link. This practice was penalised precisely during the 1990s, but, in Japan, it remains more commonly regarded as a matter of juvenile delinquency rather than as an exploitation scheme used by adult men to enhance objectification and sexualisation of underage girls³⁶. Since Tomie herself is depicted as taking part in this “compensated dating” and since her body is recurrently portrayed and

³⁵ Despite regarding a different concept, Sianne Ngai’s study developed in “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde” (*Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, 2015) helps understand some important associations between this idea and that of something inherently fragile and powerless: “(...) in vivid contrast to beauty’s continuing associations with fairness, symmetry, or proportion, the experience of cute depends entirely on the subject’s affective response to an imbalance of power between herself and the object” (p. 54).

³⁶ For more information regarding this topic, see *An Examination of the Causes and Consequences of Compensated Dating (Enjo Kosai) in Contemporary Japanese Society* (McLellan, 2013) and *Human Trafficking in Japan Through the Use of Schoolgirls* (Acadimia, 2018).

perceived by most characters as an object of desire, able to drive men to their ruin, ignoring that she is always grimly murdered in the process, I will abandon the biased vision of her as the “immortal succubus” (as she is referred to in the previously mentioned Viz Media edition) to understand her character as substantially more nuanced, complex and ambiguous, capable of evoking the folkloric spectral entities still haunting the country’s artistic practices today, while introducing and developing new and valuable features turning her into a fitting contemporary monster.

3.1. Recalling the Old to Create Anew: Traditional *Yūrei* Features in Tomie’s Character

Tomie’s narratives are intricate and fragmentary. Even if diegetic time appears to follow the chronological order of publication, it is not possible to pinpoint the protagonist’s origins with exact precision. On the one hand, her supernatural reappearance and vengeful conduct manifest after she is firstly presented to the readers. On the other, she is depicted regrowing as soon as in the final page of the first story, hinting that it is not an unprecedented event. Additionally, at the beginning of the story “Tomie Part 2: Morita Hospital” (pp. 35-64), she is described as someone who was “(...) never a normal human being to begin with” (p. 37). This analysis will neither insist on finding the character’s first demise, nor on speculatively reconstructing her life and death history. Rather, it will focus on exploring the way she is portrayed and how she has passed away and returned multiple times to perish again.

Tomie is always depicted as a young woman. Except in the case of “Gathering” (pp. 615-646), she displays long, black hair. In several stories, characters make comments about her unrivalled pale skin, granting her an ethereal appearance – “Her skin is so fair, it might as well be transparent” (p. 427). She possesses a beauty mark below her right eye, allowing both the readers and other elements directly involved in the narratives to quickly identify her. Additionally, the cover page for “Basement” (p. 65-116) shows Tomie enveloped in a white bed sheet, resembling a loose piece of garment covering her whole body and presumably dragging on the floor, concealing her

feet. The most notorious of her features is her overwhelming beauty, deeply prized by the protagonist and obsessively appreciated by almost every other character, especially when those characters are men. This set of visual characteristics aligns with the traditional portrait of *yūrei*. The importance given to Tomie's lustrous strands reinforces the association between her and those same creatures.

As addressed in previous chapters, several contemporary works of fiction conjure the significance of unkept hair, as representative of untimely death and abrupt suppression of amorous and sexual life, to enhance its role as a weapon

endowing *yūrei* with the power necessary to fulfil their revenge. Despite contemporary Japanese fashion standards having trivialised the use of loose hair falling over girls' and women's backs, in Ito's manga every female character occupying the role of Tomie's frail competition wears short haircuts, rendering her the only girl exhibiting the distinctive long locks. This contributes to widen the gap separating Tomie from other *shōjo*, placing her in an unreachable and dangerously high pedestal. Granting special prominence to this element's importance and supernatural capabilities, the story "Hair" (pp. 143-452) centres around a high school girl named Chie, who finds a small box full of mysterious black hair. Miki, Chie's friend, starts cultivating them by cutting the strands in several pieces, triggering their multiplication. Her final goal is to implant as many strands as possible, leading to the replacement of her short, fuzzy hair with a new, more beautiful one. Both students experience strange hallucinations after the process. Since Michi implanted a lot more hair than Chie, she hallucinates constantly and becomes able to speak with Tomie. Chie becomes envious of Michi for establishing more intimate contact



Figure 12 – Cover page for the story “Basement”, from *Tomie* (Ito, 2023, p. 65). Tomie displays the traditional characteristics of *yūrei*.

with their idol than her and, in a desperate attempt to surpass her limitations, she mutilates her face by inserting several strands onto it. As the readers discover later, Tomie was murdered by Chie's father after rejecting his advances. He kept her hair stored in a box to gruesomely remember her by.

Developing from this premise, this story depicts Tomie as an entity deprived from her complete material form working through a small but fundamental dimension of her body to induce intrusive and threatening thoughts on school-aged girls wishing to establish a bond with their newly found role-model. The desire to have access and, in Michi's case, to literally possess Tomie's beauty, represented by her uncanny hair, offers the protagonist the opportunity of taking over their minds, manipulating their actions, their personalities and, ultimately, their identities. They objectify her by taking advantage of her physical attributes to fulfil their own desires. In this sense, she evokes the figure of a *yūrei* who nurtures her retribution in the shadows and revived her memory through the power her hair holds, influencing the ideas of young students, like she once was. Tomie, who benefits from Chie and Michi's actions, punishes them for their transgressive attitude of willingly taking ownership of one of her most distinctive features by inverting the possession: she sends the former to the hospital after self-mutilating her face and kills the latter by allowing millions of follicles to sprout from every pore of her body. This reinforces the direct correlation between proximity to Tomie and the danger she poses to the individual's life, since Michi gets the ultimate prize and penalty for wanting and trying to be like her, becoming a dead *shōjo* murdered due to owning unparallel beauty signified by the loose, black hair. Moreover, Chie's father is condemned to be rejected once more by his victim through Michi's mediation, as well as forced to testify the transformation of beauty into monstrosity when the girl is killed. Tomie reverses the roles by becoming the threat while maintaining her status as the primarily wronged person. The criminal, who had centred his life around Tomie's locks, is confronted with the permanent loss of his most esteemed possession: the memory he had of Tomie as the sexualised, physically perfect female, crystallised as such by dying while at the peak of her youth and beauty, a topic to which I will return later.

The question regarding the protagonist's cyclical and violent deaths is key to the narrative and this analysis. Certain aspects are common to every story where Tomie is murdered, such as the presence of blood and the use of bladed weapons to carry out the crime. The most paradigmatic example is the first, simply titled "Tomie" (pp. 5-34), in which she is repeatedly stabbed and mangled by a group of high school boys led by their male teacher. It begins with Tomie's reappearance in school after the funeral and memorials. Even though most students show doubts about her being alive, referring to her as a zombie (p. 10) or a ghost (p. 12), they feel surprisingly attracted towards her and remain more concerned with the legal connotations of their impulses than with her feelings and rights as a human being – "Necrophilia's a crime, you know?" (p. 10). The manga shows how she and Mr. Takagi, the predatory teacher, kept an amorous and sexual relationship while she was alive, which, according to the characters' words, got her pregnant. It is significant that, after her return, Tomie willingly embraces Mr. Takagi, professing her love and asking for reassurance regarding the promise he made before committing the crime – "(...) you'll still marry me, won't you?" (p. 12). It is worth noting that the main responsible for Tomie's death light-heartedly exploited a subordinate girl for her body and brutally eliminated her as soon as she became a threat to his career and marriage without exhibiting any psychological distress from guilt-related feelings. Nonetheless, when the victim, who is conveniently able to appear and disappear out of the characters and the reader's sights as if unbound by physical and spatial obstacles, returns to remind him of the promise he has broken, analogously recalling his inexcusable conduct as an adult and as an authority figure, she proves how she now possesses control both over his body, by squeezing it tight and not letting go, and his mind, by driving him mad and fulfilling at least one of the steps of her revenge.

This contextualisation helps introduce another important aspect of *yūrei's* traditional framework in Ito's work: the shattering of the romantic commitment. It also contributes to the study of Tomie's conditions of *kegare* in their multiple manifest and subliminal meanings. In this sense, it is essential to note that, before the crime is committed, Tomie was pressuring Mr. Takagi to leave his wife, hinting that she would spread the truth about their relationship if he did not abide. A student named

Yamamoto eavesdrops the conversation and condemns Tomie for her romantic involvement, slapping her in the face. The other students look at the scene from below the cliff where the three characters are standing, witnessing Tomie's fall from it after she loses her balance while trying to leave. The female protagonist is rendered shameful for her transgressive sexual conduct, metaphorically falling from the pedestal where male observers had placed her due to their obsession with her beauty. Tomie is considered the unvaluable dissident in a society where women are seen as responsible for what happens to them, especially when they are not particularly protective of their socially constructed and imposed ideal image as passive, sexually naïve individuals. She is perceived as an unsavable, polluted and disgraceful girl before even reaching adulthood. The culprit is carved out of the picture and viewed as someone who was seduced by the malevolent and sexually depraved woman, a cross-cutting theme throughout the whole collection. After falling, she is immediately declared dead, despite still being alive. The class discusses what to do with her body, protecting Yamamoto (the figurehead for the crime) from turning himself in and completely discarding, by not addressing it, Mr. Takagi's (the *de facto* criminal) involvement and inability to ensure his student's safety while on the field trip. The other *shōjo* partake in the victim-blaming by weighing her value against that of their classmate, dehumanizing her as if her rebellious conduct made her life disposable: "There's no reason for Yamamoto to ruin his whole life over for someone like her" (p. 22).

Ito created this story in a way which makes it plausible to argue that Tomie's *kegare* precedes her death and intensifies after it, especially because it was not accidental. In the interest of hiding her body and ensuring Yamamoto's and his own exoneration, Mr. Takagi orders his male students to help him cut her into pieces. When she opens her eyes, the teacher grabs a pair of scissors, stabbing her in the open mouth and urging his accomplices to keep on tearing her apart. Firstly, the fact that Mr. Takagi convinces all male students to get undressed and to use pointy tools to pierce the defenceless adolescent (who is also naked), while the girls are keeping watch,

establishes an explicit parallel with a scene of gang rape³⁷, turning Tomie not only into the objective victim of a murder but also into the symbolic victim of sexual abuse. This idea is emphasised by Mr. Takagi perpetuating in her death the corporeal exploitation and objectification he subjected her in life. Her groans of pain and the opening of her eyes work both as a narrative mechanism of non-verbally confronting her wrongdoers with their present crimes and as the last opportunity to escape the hauntings that will follow by recognising her as the victim and accepting she is alive and has the right to keep on being. Ito’s incorporation of the defiled *shōjo* condemns Mr. Takagi, as well as every other element involved, to Tomie’s revenge, especially after using the scissors to eternally silence her voice, in a way reminiscent of the legend of the *Kuchisake Onna* who, after having her mouth slit from ear to ear, insistently asks “Am I pretty?”. Equally significant is the resemblance between this act and that of the fellatio, rendering the women silent while the man derives pleasure and gratification from it. Additionally, the cuts and gashes inevitably lead to large flows of blood, one of the elements most traditionally linked with *kegare* in general



Figure 13 — Manga page from “Tomie” depicting Mr. Takagi and Tomie’s male classmates dismembering her while the female students stand watch. From *Tomie* (Ito, 2023, p. 23)

³⁷ Similar ideas are also developed in “Gendered Violence and the Abject Body in Junji Itō’s ‘Tomie’” (2023, Tosha R. Taylor), contained in *Critical Approaches to Horror Comic Books* (Berns, F. P. G., & Darowski, J., 2023): “Though statements of blame evoke popular discourses of rape and other forms of gendered violence, and even as the reader may eschew Tomie’s cruelty, the *shōjo* context thus establishes male violence as the manga’s true source of horror” (p. 83).

and also with that specifically associated with women, related with menstruation but also with the hymen's rupture. Lastly, the culprits carve out her organs, rummaging through her internal secretions, escalating the pollution and disruption of her demise.

Tomie can heal and regrow from fragments of her body, but neither the doctors nor any other character in the entire plot can identify biological reasons for it. In this sense, despite the undeniable need for a corporeal dimension – a question I will analyse in the next subchapter – it is plausible to argue that the *magaka* designed a clear intentionality propelling Tomie's healing and mimetic development, upholding the idea that behind her powerful physical characteristics lies an even more impressive immaterial and incomprehensible strength, solidified by the cyclical violence and by her constant and exclusive labelling as a blood-thirsty monster. No matter how many Tomies come to existence, nor how many of them perish by being stabbed by a maddened romantic interest, they all seem to share a common core of collective memories. In "Assassins" (pp. 373-412), Tetsuo buries a stabbed Tomie in the forest only to carve an obnoxious head resembling her own out of her chest. The new Tomie regenerates slowly, becoming increasingly demanding, but Tetsuo denies every expensive request. Eventually, the head gets unprecedentedly nervous due to the idea that the buried Tomie is no longer dead and is now seeking to kill her. It is worth noting that Tomie not once physically hurts any of the individuals that end up passing away due to their relationship with her. She is depicted as always acting by proxy, manipulating the minds and the willpower of those vulnerable to her charms. When Tetsuo reencounters the dead Tomie out on the street she convinces him that he was able to nurse her back to health, subsequently fulfilling every desire she expressed. Those were the same requests the head/Tomie had demanded Tetsuo to attend to. Even if physically distant and even if, during a great portion of time, the buried Tomie remained dead, both have access to roughly the same group of memories, allowing each of them to distort the events as they please. In this sense, Tomie is multiple corporeally but one metaphysically. Tetsuo is convinced by the woman he helped that she is telling the truth, allowing Tomie to take advantage of his perception of what he lived as a haunting experience by saying: "Destroy the phantom controlling you." (p. 411).

This idea of Tomie as one intangible entity, manifested and connected through multiple and identical corporeal vessels sharing a collective memory, is also present in other narratives, such as “Little Finger” (pp. 493-526) or “Top Model” (pp. 679-710). In the first, a widowed Tomie is buried in a remote forest by the youngest of four brothers, who suffered from bullying for being ugly and frail. While alive, Tomie had tried to convince him to surrender his affections to her. After forcibly becoming in charge of hiding her body, four of her fingers suspiciously fall into his pocket, which he burns in a firepit. They are reborn into four new Tomies, regenerating their beautiful appearance gradually. However, Little Finger is unable to heal like her sisters and she is brutally mistreated because of that. After every Tomie leaves the cave while their grave keeper is slowly dying of an infected wound, Little Finger stays behind to profess her love for the one who tried to protect her. He then returns the feeling, which leads to her saying “I’ve finally found something to tease you about...” (p. 526). This shows how Little Finger remembers the man’s past trauma, even though she is just a corporeal part of this story’s Tomie’s cadaver. By making her play with his feelings and forcing him to witness the re-enactment of his own tragic story, Ito is able to create the favourable circumstances to the establishment of a personal and emotional connection between the two. Much like a *yūrei*, she uses emotional games and psychological attacks to subdue him to her power, drawing strength from his vulnerability and forcing him to die in humiliation. In the case of “Top Model”, the protagonist Ryo has his appearance mocked by Tomie, who he then disfigures and murders. After Tomie lies dead in his bed, several others start growing from her body, all of them taunting Ryo’s beauty. He incinerates the apartment and flees only to find, near a lake, an undamaged “(...) different Tomie.” (p. 709), whose first line is the following: “Gosh, what a horrible burn...” (p. 708). This “new” Tomie once again mocks the man’s looks, now irredeemably harmed by the fire. She is made to return precisely when he becomes aware of his condition while looking at his reflection in the water, haunting him with her unblemished beauty and recalling both his most feared insecurity, and his failed attempt to annihilate the trigger for it.

The existence of this single, unifying memory concurs with another fundamental topic of Tomie's narrative: her inexorable capability to reconstruct herself regardless of the circumstance of her passing, coming back to life in a cyclically unbreakable manner³⁸. Every time the protagonist is killed, she takes revenge on her wrongdoers, even if, in some cases, it is only hinted at. Nevertheless, similarly to what happens in both traditional and contemporary stories portraying *yūrei* as central figures, she is presented as neither able to escape the closed circle of *karmic* reincarnation nor the perpetual flow of violence and abuse she becomes victim of. It is important to highlight that Tomie is not constructed as a harmless and passive element, voluntarily and consciously affecting her inevitable demise, which seems to enclose a specific purpose: to multiply and spread throughout her fictional universe, perpetuating her hauntings and her affirmation as a monstrously beautiful female-coded creature, who will always be killed but will never have an end. Simultaneously, Ito also makes her the primary and chronical sufferer of incessant objectification, exploitation and brutality, since the men she is able to manipulate intimately possess the tendency to act immorally and criminally, especially against women. This idea is emphasised by the fact that not all male characters are subdued to Tomie's charms merely because of her physical and sexual appeal. As explained previously, the story "Little Finger" features a man who learns to love Tomie in her most disgusting form, his feelings deriving from human, self-projected empathy and not from erotic-driven desires. Additionally, in "Gathering" (pp. 615-646), Umehara – who recently lost his girlfriend for whom he nurtured intense feelings – is immune to Tomie's corporeal attributes and to her amorous advances, showing greater concern for her well-being than for his own precarious situation. He openly states what uncountable men throughout the collection chose to ignore – "You're still a teenager, aren't you?" (p. 628) – advising her against using her own body and sexual insinuations to try subduing those capable of tearing her to pieces, both physically and metaphorically.

³⁸ The question of cyclical return becomes even more important when considering the serialisation of Tomie's stories. Her perpetual return represented a lucrative circumstance. The character presents the perfect attributes to be continuously functional in the manga industry, allowing the development of several different stories, theoretically infinite.

Simultaneously, Umehara understands Tomie's position as someone endowed with great power to influence and manipulate others. He does not fall for her role as a completely innocuous victim of a group who, besides worshipping her, is also trapping her in the building where the gatherings are held. Notwithstanding, he decides to protect Tomie when the maddening men try to butcher and dismember her because he thinks of his deceased lover as someone who may have found herself surrounded and threatened by a group of people who previously seemed to adore her. His actions are not driven by his attraction towards the protagonist (probably inexistent in this case), but by sympathy towards her smothering situation and by the realisation that every woman is, to a certain degree, trapped in a societal space made by and for the patriarchally envisioned men supporting each other in their endeavour of restricting their actions, rights and identities and owning female corporality and sexuality.

Intensifying the significance of this perpetual cycle of abuse and violence, as well as Tomie's conditions of *kegare*, is the fact that the men responsible for torturing and killing Tomie are always said to be taken by a maddening urge to dismember her because of the unapparelled love they feel for her³⁹. The idea that Tomie is loved by the ones who kill her – who swear to be in love with her to the point of being unable to stop themselves from taking away, theoretically forever, their most prized obsession – and the implications such bond creates between the involved parties exponentially increases the severity and the consequences of murdering her in such brutal ways. To also represents the neglect, voluntary or otherwise, of the duties implicit in an amorous relationship, as well as the failure to honour agreements and promises of respect, protection and personal self-abnegation. This conception is introduced from an early point and is then recovered in several other stories, whether Ito makes the protagonist reciprocate the affections or not. In "Tomie Part 2: Morita Hospital" and "Basement" (pp. 65-116), continuing the diegetic line triggered by the ending of the 1987 manga, she is attacked and killed by both her romantic interests. After stating to love Tadashi, he

³⁹ I will neither address in detail questions related with the truthfulness of these emotions, nor deal with the common entanglement between disturbing feelings of ownership and selfless love, since it does not directly align with the scope of this dissertation

stabs her with a small knife, disfiguring her face in the process. On the other hand, Dr. Tamura also slaps and cuts Tomie after having helped her escape from the hospital basement, hiding her in his apartment. He did so due to the fascination her immense beauty provoked in him, inciting the establishment of a romantically toned bond between them. He kills her after she destroys another Tomie specimen, which the doctor was using to study her unparalleled regenerative capabilities, a topic I will analyse in the next subchapter. Similar events occur in “Revenge” (pp. 277-308), where Tomie is killed by her boyfriend and dumped into pieces in a snowy mountain. In “Moromi” (pp. 559-590) the protagonist is killed, mangled and then crushed by her male partner until becoming nothing more than an amorphous mass.

During the process that leads and encloses Tomie within the circle of painful annihilation and multiple regrowth, creating the problem of the impossibility to discern which of those events occurred first, the construction of the narratives makes the responsible for her demise seem to be as trapped into committing murderer as she is in becoming the victim. In this sense, regardless of Tomie’s degree of awareness of her influence in the unfolding of events, her *modus operandi* converges with that of a *yūrei* spiritually possessing and manipulating the emotional dimension of her targets even if not originally wronged by them. The *kegare* passes and accumulates from one demise to the other in a continuous and unbreakable manner, intensifying Tomie’s thirst for revenge and her desire to magnify the rhythm and scale of her hauntings by multiplying her most useful weapon: her beautiful corporeal dimension. At least metaphorically, she is the eternally



Figure 14 – Manga page from “Photo” depicting a photograph of Tomie with two monstrous heads. From *Tomie* (Ito, 2023, p. 145)

manifesting *yūrei*, who does not need to be neither entirely dead nor completely alive to pursue those who made or are able to make her a victim, distorting the balance of the societal power-structure by confusing those inscribed within it regarding her ambiguous position, intentions and identity. It makes her destined to always come back to inhabit new interchangeable bodies, whose attributes are both passionately esteemed by Tomie and her aggressors, thus effectively working as the most compelling and persuasive method of using the systemically reproduced ideals and preconceptions regarding women against those passively and actively perpetrating it. Additionally, the main character is only rendered monstrous by two means: she is either irredeemably disfigured because of her beauty, or her inner turmoil reaches such intense levels that her hidden inhuman form, capable of being captured in other moments by electronic devices such as cameras (“Photo”, pp. 117-180) or by the artistic gaze (“Painter”, pp. 333-372), escapes beyond its physical boundaries. This is clearly explained in “Mansion” (pp. 243-276), where a man disguised as the protagonist’s father (Mr. Takagi in disguise) tells her high school colleague Tsukiko that “(...) when faced with enough psychological trauma, Tomie begins to split of her own accord. The double will emerge from the cranium.” (p. 255). This idea that trauma allows her to actively unfold into a monstrous self is integrated in several stories. In this sense, she can be categorised as a creature which, much like a *yūrei*, reacquires her power of agency by the effects that being systematically deprived of *harae* entail, turning an otherwise perfect *shōjo* into a vicious spectral entity extending beyond the shackles of death, and veiling within the physically unsuspecting vessel defiled by her wrongdoers. Moreover, Mr. Takagi is responsible for shedding light into another important topic by developing the possibility of looking at Tomie as an ailment – a question I will address in the following subchapter – for which it is necessary to discover a cure, since this perspective encloses the idea of her as someone who can be ridden of her *kegare* and restored to a state where her existence is according with *wa*. Likewise, it is hinted that no one, not even Tomie, knows how to achieve it, particularly because she is the one who most viciously rejects her monstrous side after completing her full healing.

This helps introducing another aspect, relating with the creation of Tomie as demonstrating unrivalled obsession with her own beauty and youth. Tomie's regenerative capabilities allow her to quickly erase any superficial damage made to her flawless skin. The injuries are only irredeemable when sufficiently severe as to provoke her demise and any proof of their existence is completely eradicated in each of Tomie's new bodies. She is as immune to scarring as she is to ageing. Her youth remains untouched in each of the stories, even if it is somewhat hard to discern her exact age or if it changes between narratives. As an endless creature, Tomie comes back time and again to prove the readers she is paradoxically unchangeable, since, for as much as she is portrayed as able to regrow and reconstruct, subjecting her corporeal pieces to the most utter transformations cyclically, she always aims and achieves to look the same as in the alleged beginning. This egomaniacal compulsion to constantly confront agonizing annihilation, leading to lengthily and patient reconstruction of the perceived as perfect physical vessel, concurs with the idea that the core of Tomie's identity resides, precisely, in her fundamental, unparalleled and unmistakable beauty. In fact, as proved in "Photo" (pp. 117-180), "Painter" (pp. 333-372) and "Top Model" (pp. 679-710), Ito shows us that what most distresses Tomie is the idea of not being as alluring as she believes herself to be, her elegant, gracious and refined physical attributes constituting her most distinctive characteristics, as well as her most empowering possessions. Accordingly, the stages of greatest emotional turmoil – a necessary factor for the creation of *yūrei* – are generated whenever she is confronted with proof of her hidden monstrous side or with insults to her appearance. In "Photo", she gathers her brain-washed male bodyguards to hunt down Tsukiko for spreading around school photos showing Tomie's demonic head. In "Painter", after the artist states he has concluded a work perfectly mimicking his model's face – "At last, I've captured it. This... is your beauty. A perfect likeness." (p. 367) – he shows Tomie what he believes to be his masterpiece: a painting of her double-headed, severed and bleeding neck, one face more horribly melting into an amorphous and infectious-looking mass than the other. In his work, he captures the ethereal reality to where Tomie's obscure form belongs too, evoking it into the physical world through his artistic gaze and representation. He accepts it, arguing it pictures Tomie's real image,

but she rejects it deeply, insulting his work and stating that he is calling her a monster (p. 368).

Ito is able to make his character take any deviant representation of her uncapturable immense beauty as an affront to her self-image and self-identification. This helps understand that her conditions of *harae* are not exclusively linked with the behaviour of others (especially men) towards her, but also with self-acceptance as a defiant being who desperately tries to protect and reconstruct her physical form as the most poignant representative of her alignment with the pressure-inducing social ideal of the dazzling but concomitantly disposable woman to be used by men to fulfil their repressed amorous, sexual and violent desires. To question her beauty is to destroy her constructed and continuously redeveloped identity, forcing her to gaze into the ominous possibility of the breaking of the cycle and into her own finiteness as a character inconsistent with the previously explained ideal. Moreover, if the author allowed Tomie to openly welcome and display her haunting side, it would force her to relinquish her unceasing revenge and her capability to reverse the power dynamics. This does not mean that Tomie will be able to finally and eternally die simply by renouncing her need to expose potential abusers and criminals while accepting the role of submissive and compliant object, but rather that it is fundamental that a simultaneous outer and inner recognition of her beauty as something that should never be perceived as an irreplaceable and immutable tool occurs – be it for the fulfilment of corporeal and sexual desires of ownership or for its potential to become the most effective weapon against those who try to do so. If it does not, she becomes enclosed within the perpetuation of her fragmentary existence and identity as a character who can neither be regarded as valuable nor attain love, be it as pernicious as it may, if not for her perfectly coherent corporeal dimension. Ito makes Tomie's need for revenge indissociable of the feeling that her most resourceful ammunition is also her most obvious fragility, increasing her seemingly contradictory and dangerous placement within the diegetic universe. In this sense, Tomie's conditions of *harae*, despite being very difficult to discover, gather and execute, cannot be achieved as long as the first step towards the acknowledgement of

her status as a victim and of her acceptance as an inherently valuable and imperfect subject is not taken.

Before concluding this subchapter, it is also important to pay attention to stories where the protagonist more bluntly evokes the spectral mythologic figures central to this dissertation, as well as some of the most well-known legends associated with them. One of the most paradigmatic examples is “Revenge”. In this narrative, a naked Tomie is found by a group of male hikers lying on the snow as if she was being expelled by it, in an event reminiscent of childbirth (p. 281). When tries to touch her body, she turns her head around, displaying vacant white eyes covered by her long, loose black hair. He gets scared and slides down to his demise. The two remaining hikers decide to help her. Later, she states to be unable to walk any further, and Hamaguchi offers to carry her, but she sows discord among the two men by choosing Tanimura, who, at this point, still does not trust her. The other hiker’s malevolent feelings lead him to strike the protagonist in the arm, in an attempt to “(...) split her down in the middle.” (p. 293), running away after the fact and later appearing dead in the snow. Only after his body is found are Tanimura and Tomie able to catch a glimpse of a nearby cabin, where she tells him her story: her boyfriend killed and cut her to pieces, spreading them throughout the mountain, where she stood a whole month before being found. She explains how she was able to abandon death as follows: “I willed myself back to life. I told myself that I was going to take revenge on him. (...). Will he think I’m a ghost?” (p. 300). The story ends after she is stabbed by Tanimura, her boyfriend’s brother, who later finds the cadaver of his sibling from where a new Tomie is regrowing and feeding. The last panel shows how, behind his back, the stabbed Tomie stands with her hair hiding her face and her lifeless hands dandling beside her body (p. 308).

This narrative clearly evokes the figure and the story of the *Yuki Onna*. She claims to have been scattered throughout the mountain, hinting that her specific apparition before a group of men constituted by her wrongdoer’s brother was premeditated. She hastily brings death to the first of the disposable elements, and then proceeds to use her charming appearance and her emotional manipulation capabilities to lead the second to his demise, reinforcing her role as a victim at Tanimura’s eyes throughout his

gradual descent towards madness. Similarly to what happens in one of the most common versions of the *Yuki Onna* myth, inside the cabin, she reveals her identity as a creature graced with supernatural abilities, capable of the most impossible deeds to the man of her choice. She talks about an unfulfilled promise – “He said he loved me more than anything... but then he wanted to get rid of me.” (p. 299) – and how she wishes to get revenge. Her state of emotional exacerbation and her attachment to the earthly realm seem to be developed by the author as what is behind her ability to reconstruct her body and keep on living. By stating Tanimura reminds her of his brother, she tries to repeat the cycle and, possibly, to close it by gaining his affection. However, he also stabs her, leading again to her demise. Despite asking for forgiveness, Tomie denies it bluntly, implying that he, as his brother before, has broken the subliminal arrangement between the two, which can only drive him to a destiny identical to that of his sibling.

In the case of the story “Moromi”, Tomie is depicted as a spectral-looking figure in most instances. In it, Tomies’ heads acquire a form resemblant of a *hitodama*, flying wildly through the air and provoking generalised fear among the present (p. 584). While these continue floating around, other Tomies start pouring from *sake* vats, attaching themselves to the ground and forming a fluidly looking mass which repeats the interjection “*kya*”, representing an acute shriek (p. 586). Finally, a giant liquid, white-coloured Tomie rises from the vat and smiles at Ishizuka, the protagonist. The hauntings are abruptly ended when the readers turn the page to discover the men believing it was all a hallucination. Nevertheless, in Ishizuka’s mixture, a diabolical grim resembling that of giant Tomie persists.

To conclude the present subchapter, I will present a last essential factor for the analysis of Tomie’s embodiment of traditional *yūrei* characteristics, suggested in “Mansion” (pp. 243-276), which helps summarizing the ideas described until now. In it, Tsukiko is tricked by Tomie into coming to her place. Inside a room, she finds an old man in a cage, who tells her that Tomie and Mr. Takagi have used his daughter in their experiments. The running *shōjo* is eventually found and, during the chase, a distorted

monster composed by multiple Tomie-resembling faces goes berserk and attacks everyone in its path. At the bottom of the stairs, Tsukiko once again finds Tomie, telling her the following: “Tomie... your true essence is on its way down.” (p. 273). Tsukiko is eventually able to reach for her camera and, while the demon-turned daughter of the old man attacks Mr. Takagi, she starts taking several shots of Tomie, who shrinks back and orders her to stop. What comes out of the group of photographs is deeply significant: “There was one picture, taken by the stairs – it depicted neither Tomie nor the monster. Rather, the image of a sad young woman fading into shadow” (p. 276). It is not possible to be sure whether this woman is Tomie or the



Figure 15 – Manga page from “Mansion” depicting Tsukiko explaining that the photograph she took by the stairs represents a woman she does not recognise. From *Tomie* (Ito, 2023, p. 270)

prisoner’s daughter, since the side of her face where the protagonist’s mole should be is hidden. According to her position, she is probably the latter. For this argument, what matters is the idea that Tomie’s “true essence”, as Tsukiko called it, concealed from the naked eye and resting within a world inaccessible without the proper artistic tools, is captured in a photograph as the stereotypical image of a *yūrei*. As I have explained before, I do not aim to prove that Tomie is supposed to be discovered as a *yūrei*, as several other moments and events contradict this simplistic approach. Notwithstanding, the fact that, in at least one of her stories, a link is created between the hidden and real nature of Tomie’s being and the concept of these ethereal creatures strengthens the hypothesis developed in this subchapter. Her metaphysical and spiritual dimension is as important as her physical beauty and, concomitantly, as her monstrous side. To understand her character, it is necessary to look at her as a composite and layered

individual, able to summon ancient myths and pictorial frameworks, exploring them in the most diverse ways to find subliminal meanings and traits buried progressively deeper but remaining powerfully haunting.

3.2. Monstrosity Beyond the Spectral: Innovative Attributes in Tomie's Character

Tomie's embodiment of her mythological and ethereal heritage has been studied to show how the character establishes strong connections with *yūrei*. However, it is undeniable how much she differs from the traditionally produced creatures, especially regarding her healing and multiplication abilities, as well as her necessity to reconstruct and make use of various corporeal receptacles. Questions related with these innovative characteristics will now be addressed to demonstrate how the narrative is able to develop upon a long-established framework and turn the character into a perfectly fitting contemporary monster, simultaneously removed from the typical intangible image and characteristics expressed before and able to state and reproduce them through an inseverable link between her will to be continually reborn and her biological proclivity to relentlessly attain an identical reconfiguration.

First, it is crucial to analyse Tomie's ability to regrow from severed body parts, multiplying in the process, as well as her capacity to return from the dead (in the few occasions she is not dismembered). It will also be necessary to address her constant return to a dark or watery place, evoking the concept of the womb where she can spend the required incubation period until regaining all her strength. Tomie's cyclical process is not merely one of dying and becoming undead, but of being literally reincarnated in organically indistinguishable replicas sharing the same core memory, as explained previously. Portrayed as early as in the first narrative, the protagonist's ability to reconstruct, far from where her fleshy parts were disposed of, contributes the most for spreading the doubt regarding her identity and her categorisation as a supernatural creature. In *Tomie*, her friend Reiko takes what happened during and after the field trip as a collective hallucination, stating that she knows "(...) that Tomie wasn't a ghost." (p.

33). In the final panel, a regrowing Tomie is developing in a sea bench, sheltered from the sun by the top of a cave. The wrapping which contained her heart is found by the girl, who recognises it and, after being confronted with the horrifying event, says: "It seems that Tomie has found me again." (p. 34). For Tomie to reconstruct herself precisely where she would be able to find her only friend implies the power of agency necessary to persecute and haunt, with her tangible presence, her evildoers. It is also worth mentioning that, in the settlement where the crimes had happened, another Tomie had already led part of her revenge. Consequently, the one growing in the sea bench is not, from a physical point, the same responsible for leading Mr. Takagi and Yamamoto to madness; instead, a new corporeal Tomie develops from the old's organic tissue, while the collective will drives it to find the partakers and get retribution. Additionally, the organ chooses a recondite place to safely develop, embraced by the sea's biologically saturated water and secluded by the rock's opaque surface, creating a safe crater from where to depart after the process is complete. Her monstrous physical form is enough to instigate terror upon Reiko, whose awareness regarding her role in Tomie's death and in the crime's concealment only increases. She cannot escape her grasp, especially because her physical reconstruction works both to exhibit Tomie's incomprehensible, unfathomable and unpredictable power but also as a tangible memento of Reiko's guilt.

Tomie's conditions of regrowth as linked with watery and concealed places is also clearly portrayed in "Waterfall Basin" (pp. 309-332) and "Boy" (pp. 527-558). In the first of these stories, a salesman travels to a rural village to sell small bundles containing "(...) the essence of a girl..." (p. 312). The salesman is chased by the annoyed villagers, dropping every package into a waterfall basin. Several young men are inexplicably attracted to the place, throwing themselves down the cliff and into the water. The submerged Tomies are feasting over the men's bodies. They are attached to a rocky surface, highlighting the idea introduced in the first narrative that they need to establish and maintain a physical connection with their containment place to regenerate. Much like an umbilical cord, the pieces cannot grow severed from the womb in which they were thrown in. They also need its watery pouch to assure their protection, concealment

and sustenance. Moreover, the fact that they are all capable of intangibly influencing young men in order to consume their lives is utterly significant, since it helps strengthening the position that Tomie's healing and reconstruction is also part of her violent attitude against potential wrongdoers, the only viable nourishment being the men themselves. Recalling siren and mermaid related myths, a diving fisherman is surprised by a half-formed Tomie, who opens her arms towards him, physically and verbally urging him to embrace her (p. 327). This works as one of the most obvious representations of Tomie's corporeal dimension's liminal position as an utterly desirable and attractive possession to the heterosexual male gaze and as an unprecedentedly dangerous threat to those yielding to such impulses. She is able to physically grab him if he gets close enough, signifying her simultaneous ability to metaphysically allure, control and destroy as well as to corporeally charm, shackle and maim her targets, both of which she needs to perpetuate her existence, survival and identification as Tomie. The previously quoted description, made by the salesman, of the bundles as holding the "essence" of Tomie, contributes to emphasise her unknown, metaphysical provenance, linked with a realm unreachable and incomprehensible by the natural laws, which takes undeniably necessary corporeal forms easily recognisable and impossibly imitated by any other being. In this sense, Tomie's "essence" is not merely a spiritual one, but also a physical and biological attribute, entrenched in her flesh, fluids and cells.

Additionally, in "Boy", a small child finds a slashed Tomie floating within a red beach water pool, a place reminiscent of the Buddhist text *Blood Pool Sutra* (which I have addressed in the first Chapter of this dissertation). Gradually, Tomie starts leaving her bloody containment, her feet being the last part of her body to touch land. This fact, combined with the representation of Tomie reconstruction in stories such as "Revenge", "Assassins" or "Moromi", suggests that the process works from top to bottom, her face taking precedence over other components. The importance of the reconstruction of her physical vessel, especially that of her face, ties with the necessity to be easily recognisable as Tomie, a fundamental piece to the perpetuation of her manipulative and maddening conduct. In this narrative, Tomie will mesmerise the young boy by making use of her appearance to fulfil the role of the Oedipean mother, predatorily awakening

the boy's sexual feelings while entangling them with filial ones. By incrementally manipulating him, she gradually fulfils, through both her corporeally marked dimension as well as her initial position as a victim who he protects and cares, the place his mother compromised by ignoring her son's alarming signs of dissociation, as well as the place of the amorous and sexually desirable woman, which had not been occupied by anyone until Tomie propels its creation and vacancy. When the boy stabs a man amorously involved with her – literally and metaphorically eliminating his competitors and reinforcing his position as both son and lover – she finally rejects him, his utility having reached its end. This leads to Tomie stating the following: “You’re not thinking of cutting me up, are you? Heh heh heh. Wait about ten years, kid” (p. 552).



Figure 16 – Manga page from “Boy” representing Tomie leaving the natural pool, her feet still submerged in the water. From *Tomie* (Ito, 2023, p. 536)

Besides providing additional support to the questions analysed before, this story also helps introduce another essential question related with the importance of the corporeal dimension: Tomie as metaphor and as simulacrum, the latter association proposed by Rachel Dumas in *The Monstrous Feminine in Contemporary Japanese Popular Culture* (2018). According with this work, Tomie embodies Gilles Deleuze's concept of the simulacrum by “(...) lacking a concrete identity: appropriating the measure enacted to subdue the pleasure she promises for her own proliferation (...)” (2018, p. 25). In fact, Tomie's lack of identity is precisely what paradoxically constructs her identification as a collective metaphor. By being a constant repetition of a source image intimately connected with that image's corporeal appearance while,

concomitantly, lacking and dismissing the existence of an originally generated authentic, the physically multiple and metaphysically single Tomie is able to use her human presence to shape her role according with her target's horizon of expectations, turning herself into the friend, the lover, the mother or the daughter, sometimes synchronously. She manipulates the socially constructed ideals associated with the former terms, as well as the personal desirable archetypes, to use the same indistinguishable body to enact their representation and subvert the result into a horrific nightmare, which takes the culprit into a similar pit of pain the victim is thrown in. Thus, she is not merely the sum of her parts (or of her multiples), but something more complex, capable of representing wronged but also vindictive women by taking ownership of culturally and socially charged concepts when turning into a menace to those same concepts, as well as to those consciously or unconsciously protecting them. Tomie is neither exclusively a favourable nor an opposite metaphor for those abstractions, but rather she is both at the same time, reinforcing and denying them in her collective breaths.

Her definition as a contemporary monster intrinsically linked with traditional *yūrei* is reinforced, turning the character into a representation of the fears and anxieties lived by Japanese society during the turn from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, while evoking an ominous retribution demanded by women systematically abused by a socioeconomic model that, at the time, was showing signs of failing in its promise to guarantee the perpetuation of Japan's rising development. What most obviously enables Tomie to work as an embodiment of the metaphors previously mentioned, as well as of the country's recently surfacing problems is, precisely, her physical equivalence with *shōjo*. This characteristic is preserved intact throughout the stories due to her inevitable deaths. As I have explained in the preceding subchapter when analysing "Hair", murdering and dismembering Tomie works as the ultimate and apparently irremediable possession of her body and, analogously, of her identity as the perfect object for the male gaze. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that she is constructed moved by the desire to reassert her position as the incomparably and maddening ideal of beauty, which leads her to search for and hasten situations in which this reassertion can be conducted. As someone who operates her vengeance by constantly being

reconstructed as an entity untouched by ugliness and ageing, Tomie is constructed by Ito as having as much necessity to be annihilated as she has to regrow. Ito makes her hauntings depend on the preservation of her unblemished corporeal form, allowing her to play the part most suitable to her purpose. In this sense, it is possible to argue that Tomie's cyclical killings are not exclusively an essential and desirable part of her vindication, but also a fundamental means to ensure what is most precious and useful to her, abruptly halting the natural course of ageing. Additionally, it is proven impossible to irremediably mangle her aspect without leading to her demise, granting that she is never condemned to walk the earth as a visibly deformed creature. Although neither the readers nor the characters can exactly ascertain the protagonist's real age, her repetitive resemblance with the never-ending ideal of the *shōjo* is enough to sustain that her apparent physical attributes and demographic characteristics are tremendously important to her performance, identification and successful conduct.

Accordingly, the story "Old and Ugly" (pp. 711-742) develops this idea of her as being defeasible through the preservation of her life. Subverting the compulsion to eradicate Tomie, the story follows the ambiguous unfolding of Ryo's plan – a central character in the previous stories "Passing Demon" (pp. 647-678) and "Top Model" – after injecting Tomie's blood into three different babies. The children gradually turned into the perfect image of Tomie, losing all their distinctive characteristics in the process, a topic which shall be explored later. After being subjected to continuous bullying and exploitation, Yasuko, the sister of the only child (Ayaka) who survived adulthood as Tomie⁴⁰, is seduced by the desire to see Ayaka/Tomie suffering. When, after tying her down, Yasuko confesses her intentions – "And you'll go on suffering... As you get older and older..." (p. 733) – Tomie begins multiplying, once again proving that to Ito's protagonist, the most deeply traumatic event is the possibility, often more elusive than real, of losing her illusory identity as the physically and demographically defined *shōjo*. Whenever she feels threatened, she tries to escape by ending the former vessel's life and generating reconstruction from the beginning. This beginning is linked with Tomie's

⁴⁰ The others were killed by proxies manipulated by the other injected Tomie.

reconstructive necessities and capabilities, portraying how short her useful lifespan is when compared to other anthropomorphic creatures. In this sense, from the moment she attains the peak of her youthful beauty, Tomie's murderers become painfully beneficial, since they not only allow for her cyclical vendetta to continue, as has been addressed before, but also and especially because they safeguard the preservation of her self-enforced identity and her ability to unstoppably and identically spread. Paradoxically, the destruction of her body is what perpetuates its existence and integrality, suggesting that the only way to diminish her power, and initiate the path towards *harae* is to confront her with an image unfavourable to the performance of the simulacrum.

Related with the topic of multiplication is the association between the protagonist's character and the concept of a virulent disease, a link commonly established in other horror works from the *Ushinawareta Nijūnen* displaying a *yūrei* as a central figure. In many narratives, Tomie seems to be able to physically infect other characters through organic tissue and fluids. In fact, as it happens in "Passing Demon" as well as in "Mansion", the insertion of her biological material into a new (female) living body is enough to trigger a gradual but unstoppable transformation, engulfing and suffocating the host in her own powerful characteristics until nothing more is left than an exact copy of the parasitical entity. By consuming the physical forms of her hosts, Tomie eradicates their identities and replaces them with her own ideal image, manipulating their will to subdue to her intrusive but deeply desirable beauty. She allows them to get closer to her own image, but immediately eliminates their personalities, occupying the place of the former individual once the transformation is complete. Like a violent epidemic that cannot yet be cured, Tomie wields her violently cannibalistic organic material to eradicate any possible competition by either metaphorically taking their place – such as in "Painter", "Boy", or "Adopted Daughter" (pp. 453-492) – or literally exhausting their individuality to aggregate them into the indistinguishable mass of Tomie's specimens. Additionally, she makes them die twice: first, by the mutation she triggers; secondly, when she is killed at the hands of a murdering man. Besides multiplying whenever she is cut to pieces, spreading as a virus

preparing to subdue any area it is able to infect, Tomie is likewise dangerous by her ability to possess other girls and women, since she is able to take the place of any form of individuality in detriment of the desire to attain the pre-conditioned ideal she embodies.

In a reminiscent manner of the later literary work *Parasite Eve* (Sena, 1995), the story “Basement” follows Yukiko’s mutation after Tomie’s kidney is transplanted into her body. The girl notices a fast transformation in her physical aspect, quickly turning taller and experiencing unbelievably fast recovery. Yukiko gradually began to desire for her appearance to change and to obtain greater beauty, a prize she is able to win when she starts mutating. She now cares for her newly acquired beauty more than for anything else, repudiating any opinion contrary to her own perception and perspective. While the hospital is burning down, Fumihito (Yukiko’s friend) finds her completely transfigured into a new *shōjo*, but he still tries to save her from the fire by saying “Yukiko! There’s a fire! Come on...” (p. 113), to what she replies “Thank you for your kindness... But... My name isn’t Yukiko. I’m Tomie... Remember that.” (p. 114). The fact that Yukiko’s identity is completely substituted, both psychologically and physically, by Tomie testifies to her power as a prolifically viral danger, as it portrays the notion that no other female character will ever be able to possess Tomie’s attributes without perishing – as happens in “Hair” – or transforming into her. In this sense, the transformation is not exclusively triggered by Tomie’s will to take control of the host’s body, but also by the inculcated desires of her perceived competition to surpass her beauty, something which is as impossible to achieve as it is to sustain without losing individuality in detriment of the metaphor of the ideally objectifiable woman of which Tomie serves as the perfect embodiment.

This embodiment is only possible because of the strength residing in Tomie’s biological components, both able to ensure her total and perfect physical recuperation regardless of how much her body was damaged, as well as of supplanting any personal and genetic traits, tendencies and features of the person she infects. Recovering another important element in *yūrei*’s framework and granting additional innovative significance, the manga collection emphasises Tomie’s blood as a preferential channel through which

to expand her action range and through which to dominate and transform other pre-existing vessels. Additionally, blood's association with genetic and family bonds, linked with heritage and with the conception of an undying name, memory and legacy – as long as there is at least one member alive – is also very important to Tomie's narrative and characterisation. Tomie is never once killed without the presence of this fluid being prominent. It appears as a fundamental element in her demise because it emphasises the horror and brutality of the situation, but also because it plays a major role in her subsequent redevelopment and multiplication. The elements which then give rise to other Tomies – be it the integral cadaver or, more frequently, mangled members or dissected organs – are never properly buried or sanitised. Even when her kidney is used to replace Yukiko's, it is impossible to remove the blood vessels connected to it, as well as every cellular remnant of the fluids ingrained. Contrarily, it is possible for Tomie to regrow and heal without anything more than her blood, as it is shown in "Kiss" (pp. 181-242), where Tomie regrows from a puddle of blood. After being stabbed, the flow of blood becomes so intense that, in mere seconds, Tomie is no more (p. 222-223), showing how she did not have the necessary time to corporeally develop since she was killed, less than one day before. Nonetheless, the narrative portrays how well she is able to manipulate the only material element no one is ever able to completely eradicate to gain advantage over her targets even when she is not fully recovered. In this sense, her blood, traditionally perceived as the mean through which human psychological but, especially, physical characteristics and traits are passed on, works to ensure her existence as what she is, be it through self-healing, multiplication and regrowth or infection.

In fact, her ability to promote the replacement of a former identity with her own through a channel linked with blood is not a topic exclusive of "Basement" or "Mansion". It is especially and more obviously addressed in "Passing Demon" and "Old and Ugly", narratives which continue the same storyline related with Ryo's plan to get revenge from Tomie, previously addressed. It is precisely because three female babies are injected with the protagonist's blood that they gradually lose their individuality and identity to become Tomie's copies which, while not being part of the decontextualised Tomie

collective – they are the only individuals who were once normal humans which she did not choose to infect – resemble her in every way and are prone to eliminate each other and be persecuted by male lovers until none of them is left. Consequently, even when it is not the protagonist’s premediated intention to find, infect and dominate a host to perpetuate her hauntings, her blood holds the necessary biological material to enhance the success of individual elimination and replacement for the simulacrum. Both these stories help clarify the concept of an existing genealogy of Tomie, which does not sequentially develop from a point of origin to others, but is rather a self-containable, ever



Figure 17 – Manga page from “Babysitter” depicting Erita stabbing the Heart/Tomie. From *Tomie* (Ito, 2023, p. 613)

expanding rhizomatic representation of the connections between every Tomie entity and their relationship with each other and the collective core, composed both by the metaphysical memory they share, the unstoppable multiplication of the inherited *kegare* and their blood’s genetic properties. Stressing Tomie’s blood’s incomparable characteristics, “Babysitter” (pp. 590-614) follows Erita, who is locked inside a room with a creature resembling a heart with a face, – Tomie’s face – who cries indefinitely. Maddened by Tomie’s never ending cries and exploitation, Erita grabs a knife after she demands to be shown something red, cutting her own wrist in the process, to which Tomie says: “It’s not very interesting. Show me something brighter, prettier. Something burning red” (p. 612). The babysitter then uses the knife to slash the heart’s artery, becoming fascinated with the beauty of the fluid. A dying Tomie utters a set of last words: “It is... It sure is pretty. My blood...” (p. 614). “Babysitter” emphasises the distinction between the protagonist and other women as something which resides

within the depths of her fleshy form and which cannot be attained by anyone deprived of the same genetic material as her. That same material is always malignant to other bodies, either ending up killing them or eradicating any traces of former individuality. As in a transfusion or an operation, it is necessary to find a compatible donor to perform the surgical act, which otherwise will be greatly detrimental to the patient's life. It so happens that Tomie is only compatible with herself, and so, just like a blood-transmissible parasite, she either kills the infected people or transforms them into something suitable for her survival.

However, it is precisely the fact that some are able to be irremediably mutated that helps summarizing the importance her blood has in the construction of an encompassing, terrifying creature since, by doing so, Tomie willingly eradicates competition, as well as any alternative existences equitable with her physical status, enlarging her scope of operation and increasingly underlining that no female-coded individual is ever completely free from the societal pressure of perusing the unreachable ideal of the utmost beautiful, objectifiable, perfect woman, nor from the devastating consequences it entails, becoming another bulb in the pain-driven, cyclically renewable rhizomatic genealogy of the metaphoric and simulacrum-abiding Tomie.

*

In this chapter, the collection of the first nineteen *Tomie* stories, published between 1987 and 2000, was studied as one of the most prominent examples of a manga and fictional work in which a central female character evoking the concept of *yūrei* is used to address surfacing contemporary problems related with new and renewed anxieties, especially deriving from young girls and women regarding the sexually aggressive, restricting and exploitative Japanese patriarchal system in which they are still living.

Conclusion

This academic research aimed to study the reinvention of the mythological figure of *yūrei* in contemporary Japan, specifically through the work of *mangaka* Junji Ito in his *Tomie* (1987-2000) series. First, it was necessary to analyse the meaning, origins and evolution of the concept, for then to proceed with a general study of how it was recovered and adapted by several different works during the *Ushinawareta Nijūnen* (1990-2010).

Yūrei are complex mythological creatures derived from ancient Japanese legends. They are intimately connected with the archipelago's popular folklore and religious doctrines. Consequently, their characterisation as beings typically associated with wrongful demises and painful, supernatural existences can neither be dissociated from the *Shintō* concepts of *wa* (harmony), *harae* (purification) and *kegare* (pollution), nor from the Buddhist idea of karma-based reincarnation. Despite having their roots in the Nara Period (710-794), narratives and pictorial representations regarding *yūrei* became popular during the Edo Period (1603-1868), when Kabuki performances and *ukiyo-e* pieces attained their quantitative and qualitative peak. They established the diegetic and visual canon for the entities, which became mostly associated with women and womanhood. The archetypical representation of *yūrei* is that of a young but monstrously deformed female spectre exhibiting long, loose and indomitable black hair. Her skin is usually very pale, displaying a translucid or transparent glow, and she wears a wide, white kimono concealing the absence of feet. *Yūrei* are associated with traditional religious, cultural and neo-Confucianist precepts of women as naturally polluted, both by their condition as perceived inferior members of society, and by the biological phenomena exclusive to the female sex, such as menstruation and childbirth. Both these conditions encompass the presence of blood, one of the fluids most associated with *kegare* and death. Their supernatural existence is often linked with seeking revenge or roaming in suffering due to a broken promise or unfulfilled romantic commitment. Nevertheless, some *yūrei* are also represented as men, depicted both as metaphysical entities and skeletons. There are also specific types of *yūrei*, such as the

ubume, related with death during pregnancy or childbirth, or the *Yuki Onna*, linked with cold weather and secluded areas.

Most of these ideas were recovered and adapted by many artistic works from the 1990s and the 2000s. The tension felt after the burst of the economic bubble, the increased number of violent crimes and the uneasiness concerning the uncertain future gave rise to anxieties among Japanese society which prompted a reevaluation of the country's imperialistic past, unaddressed responsibility and official discourses of victimisation and Westernisation. During the *Ushinawareta Nijūnen* (1990-2010), the figure of the child was blended with that of the *yūrei*. This strategy made it able to express problems concerning generational confrontation, unclaimed duties towards the precarious situation of invisible, ostracised victims and the haunting fear left by the crisis of rigid, patriarchal, misogynistic structures both within and outside the domestic space. Films, books, videogames and manga turned their narratives to the urban landscape, now connoted with the danger of higher criminality rates, raging capitalism and occidentalised work and social environments, which the spectral creatures embodied. The fear of technology and of the constant contact it allows was also personified by *yūrei* which, establishing a clear parallel with a virus, infected the population with unstoppable death, multiplying their numbers in the process. Likewise, the overpopulated city was inversely associated with isolation and loneliness, prompting systematic suffering and even accidental, murderous or voluntary death, capable of leading to the creation of *yūrei* both derived from these factors and responsible for propelling them. Nonetheless, some manga visual representations influenced by *GeGeGe no Kitarō* (Shigeru, 1960-1969) present in horror and other genres, contributed to shed a different light on these folkloric beings, which were now capable of having a less menacing, sometimes even cute, appearance and behaviour. Questions regarding the written and visual representation of women *yūrei* were also crucial, focusing on addressing threats commonly most posed to them and the everlasting consequences that persist long after the victim's demise.

This and other questions will also feature in Junji Ito's *Tomie* (1987-2000). The *shōjo* protagonist, diegetically belonging to the same period in which the manga was

created, is part of a late-capitalist Japan marked by the problems previously described. Actively participating in relations within the framework of *enjō kosai* (compensated dating) and rendered utterly desired for her immense beauty and inoffensive for her categorisation within the *kawaii* culture and her status as an (underaged) woman, Ito's creation overturns the power dynamics by becoming monstrous in her cyclical deaths and rebirths. She portrays similar characteristics to those traditionally associated with *yūrei* and seems motivated by her desire to get retribution of those prone to objectify and murder her to attain predatory possession over the ideal female-coded body. Every romantic promise made to her is shattered by the menace of male violence and madness regarding her corporeal form, especially appealing to the male gaze but also desired by other female characters. Recovering the ideas of the virulent epidemic and of *kegare* as inherent to blood – and notably to women's blood – *Tomie* (Ito, 1987-2000) draws from *yūrei*'s traditional heritage and from the creatures' contemporary reevaluation and reconstruction to develop a villainous protagonist marked by the duality of being both the primarily and repeatedly wronged party and the unfathomable monster, satisfying her and society's necessity for utmost beauty, objectification and abuse, and attending the defying, tumultuous contemporary demands for vigorous change and subversion of traditional, patriarchal order. By constantly making her regrow identical to her previously deceased form, Ito makes her evoke Gilles Deleuze's concept of the simulacrum as described by Rachel Dumas (2018), pairing this innovative approach with her closeness to a supernatural being clearly linked with womanhood, as well as with the systemic violence and silencing culture non-normative members of Japanese society have been subjected to. Additionally, despite her undeniable obsession over her physical appearance and her unsurmountable necessity to reconstruct and make use of a tangible body, Tomie always acts by psychologically attacking or manipulating the men later responsible for killing her, influencing others to carry out her will. She is also weakened and rendered monstrous by the lenses of cameras and by artistic creation, hinting how her hidden, essential form is deeply concealed in a metaphysical realm which the naked eye cannot contemplate.

Naturally, the conclusions I now present are neither final nor totally encompassing. I tried to develop an analysis as comprehensive and complete as possible, but several questions regarding the core theme of this dissertation, as well as others intimately related to it, were not thoroughly addressed. Consequently, I would like to outline some study hypotheses for the future. Firstly, the analysis of the connection between *yūrei* and other *yokai*, as well as the differences between the concepts and their encompassing spheres, is greatly relevant for the field of Japanese folkloric studies in general, but also for the understanding of *yūrei* themselves by allowing to perceive them in opposition and complementarity with other mythological beings. On the other hand, it would also be important to establish parallels with ancient fictional creatures outside Japanese grounds. This could help trace common attributes of spectral-like creatures from geographically and culturally different places and mythologies, as well as to more clearly define what makes *yūrei* distinctive and particular manifestations of Japanese folklore. It would also be important to pay attention to works from different time periods, like the Meiji, Taishō and Shōwa eras, as well as to focus more on the visual component of those depictions. Paying attention to style, composition, colour and design could be as great a contribution as the close analysis of the narratives, since innovative approaches do not exclusively reside within the verbal components, but often also in visual elements. Regarding Junji Ito's *Tomie* (1987-2000), it would be deeply interesting to study the protagonist under other mythological perspectives, abandoning the *yūrei* lenses and trying to understand her attachments – if there are any – with other creatures from Japanese folklore, from contemporary urban legends or from Ito's own literary universe. An analysis of the work from the point of view of the ageing studies would also contribute to a greater understanding of the character and the work itself.

Regardless of the course of future investigations, *Tomie*'s construction as a multidimensional character remains one of the most powerful attributes of her fictional re-emergence. This idea highlights her potentiality to embody traditional concepts, like that of *yūrei*, but also her position, especially within Japanese culture, as a symbol of the haunted power of suffering, as well as a testimony to its academic and social relevance.

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