

Article

Subversion of Yamamba: Mirroring Women

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Abstract: This paper argues that the evolving literary image of the Japanese yamamba (mountain witch) serves as a revealing mirror for the status, expectations, and struggles experienced by women across different stages of Japanese history. By examining representative narratives from the Edo period through modern reinterpretations by writers such as Ōba Minako, the study highlights how transformations in the yamamba topos—from a menacing and otherworldly demon to a self-sacrificing maternal figure and, eventually, to a seemingly ordinary yet psychologically complex woman—reflect broader social changes regarding femininity, labor roles, moral conduct, and personal agency. These shifting portrayals illuminate how women's identities were continuously shaped by cultural norms that emphasized obedience, domestic responsibility, and emotional endurance, even as new historical contexts introduced opportunities for self-expression and subtle forms of resistance. Through tracing the symbolic evolution of the yamamba, the paper demonstrates that her literary presence has functioned not merely as a supernatural motif but as a cultural device for negotiating questions of gender, autonomy, and societal expectation. The analysis ultimately reveals that although the outward form of the yamamba has changed across eras, the underlying tensions surrounding women's autonomy, self-definition, and negotiation of restrictive social frameworks persist, making the figure an enduring lens through which to understand the complexities of female experience in Japanese literature.

Keywords: yamamba; Japanese literature; gender identity; cultural symbolism; female representation; narrative transformation

1. Introduction

"Perhaps all women are yamamba at heart." This statement encapsulates the central insight of Ōba Minako, whose portrayal of the mountain witch in *The Smile of the Mountain Witch* reshapes the figure into one that is accessible, humanized, and deeply reflective of everyday female experience. Throughout different historical periods, women have often been viewed from the outside—misunderstood, feared, or idealized in ways that resemble the treatment of the yamamba. In Ōba's narrative world, the yamamba ceases to function solely as a supernatural threat and instead becomes a symbolic figure capable of illuminating the emotional textures, social pressures, and lived realities of ordinary women. By transforming the traditional image from one dominated by demonic qualities into a more demotic representation, Ōba suggests that the yamamba's evolution parallels the shifting expectations placed on women and the recurring challenges they encounter. Each variation of the yamamba topos reveals a different dimension of the constraints experienced by Japanese women, from social marginality to unspoken psychological burdens.

This essay adopts Viswanathan's "mirror methodology" to examine how literary representations of the yamamba function as reflective surfaces, capturing and refracting dominant cultural attitudes toward women. Through this approach, the discussion engages not only with Ōba's modern reinterpretations but also with earlier formulations by writers such as Kyoka and Kobo, whose works contribute to the long genealogy of the

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yamamba motif. The focus is placed on the multiple transformations of the mountain witch across time, demonstrating that her changing form consistently mirrors the evolving yet persistent tensions surrounding female autonomy, identity, and social expectation in Japan.

In its earliest manifestations, the yamamba topos embodies male anxieties regarding female independence and unpredictability. The classic depiction of the mountain witch as a solitary, man-eating being who inhabits remote landscapes clearly evokes fear among wandering male travelers. Many scholars interpret this threatening image through a psychoanalytic lens, connecting it to the idea of fear directed toward the feminine, sometimes linked to theories that describe such fear as arising from perceptions of bodily difference [1]. Viswanathan, however, critiques these interpretations for their focus on a one-sided male perspective and suggests the necessity of acknowledging a more balanced framework that accounts for both masculine and feminine responses within the symbolic system [1]. Although the association between the yamamba and psychoanalytic fear is often presented abruptly, Ōba re-engages with these themes in *Candlefish*, where she depicts a scene of symbolic loss through unsettling imagery: "But what she finds in the young man's waist girdle when she tears it away from him is something difficult to describe-it resembles the candle fish that have washed up on the moonlit shore, limp and shriveled" [2]. Here, the physical object is neither powerful nor gratifying; instead, it is portrayed as tasteless and insubstantial, emphasizing the hollowness and fragility embedded in the encounter.

Although Ōba does not entirely abandon the darker aspects of the traditional yamamba image-retaining elements of cannibalistic horror in dream sequences-she simultaneously reconstructs the figure into a modern topos capable of embodying the struggles and emotional landscapes of contemporary women. Through these narrative choices, she repositions the mountain witch as a symbolic framework rather than merely a monstrous presence, allowing the yamamba to serve as a literary device for revealing the complexities, contradictions, and silent endurance that shape women's lives in different historical contexts. In this way, Ōba's modern yamamba becomes a powerful interpretive lens for understanding how women negotiate societal expectations, personal agency, and the boundaries imposed upon them.

2. Origin and Development

The narrative origins of the yamamba are closely tied to the symbolic structure of early Japanese mythology, particularly those myths that reflect hierarchical gender relations. Scholars observe that the stories surrounding the yamamba consciously echo elements of the patriarchal creation narratives found in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi*. Hulvey notes that "striking similarities between the yamamba and the female deities indicate that the inspiration for the yamamba topos originated in the creation myths recorded in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi*" [3]. This connection becomes particularly visible when comparing motifs across these texts. For example, in Ōba's *Candlefish*, the demonic yamamba chases a young man who repeatedly removes layers of clothing to slow her pursuit. This scene recalls the episode in the *Kojiki* in which Izanami pursues Izanagi, and Izanagi, attempting to stall her, throws food behind him. Hulvey provides multiple examples demonstrating that the yamamba tradition consistently invokes the structure of this primordial chase narrative, emphasizing that the original myths themselves are grounded in a worldview where authority is asymmetrically attributed to men. In the creation myth, when the female deity Izanami speaks first, their child is malformed; when the male deity Izanagi speaks first, their union produces revered deities and fertile land. This narrative arrangement reinforces a hierarchy in which the voice and agency of the male figure are considered primary and decisive.

Although the yamamba has often been interpreted as a manifestation of male fear or anxiety toward women, the traditional monster figure still remains embedded within the

constraints of this mythological framework. In many early yamamba tales, the young male protagonist either escapes through cleverness, echoing Izanagi's successful evasion of Izanami, or defeats the yamamba, thereby reaffirming a narrative pattern in which male authority prevails. Through tracing the lineage of these stories back to their mythic foundations, it becomes clear that the traditional yamamba mirrors the subordinate position assigned to women at a macro-cultural level, reflecting a worldview in which female figures, even when portrayed as powerful or threatening, ultimately exist within a structure that privileges male success and dominance.

The transformation of the yamamba motif in the 15th-century Noh play *Yamamba* further illustrates how shifts in the topos correspond to the evolving social position of women. The Noh version of the mountain witch marks the first significant attempt to explore the interiority of the yamamba as a character. Viswanathan observes that the play questions the very origin and nature of the mountain witch, asking whether she is a demon or a human woman who merely lives in the mountains [1]. This uncertainty surrounding her identity parallels the lived experiences of many women in the 15th century, who faced limited avenues for self-definition and were often constrained by rigid social roles. During this turbulent period, entertainers-such as the performer who impersonates the yamamba within the play-continued to rely on male patrons for support. Meanwhile, women of the upper classes frequently found their roles reduced to that of attendants or companions whose primary purpose was to satisfy social expectations rather than to pursue personal fulfillment.

The Noh *Yamamba* thus becomes a significant literary site for expressing the muted or overlooked emotions of women. In the play, the mountain witch's lamentations and her desire to be understood reflect a broader yearning for recognition among women of the era. Like the yamamba, they struggled with the lack of identity and purpose defined autonomously rather than through association with others. The emotional depth attributed to the mountain witch in this adaptation symbolizes the emerging need to acknowledge women's voices and inner lives. In this sense, the Noh representation of the yamamba offers a profound metaphor for women in 15th-century Japan-figures who sought relief from the burdens imposed upon them and longed for a form of recognition that had long been denied.

3. Holy Man of Mountain Koya

Kyoka's writing about women in the Holy Man of Mountain Koya follows the topos of yamamba in the Edo period. According to Viswanathan, *Yamamba* topos in the Edo period transformed from demonic to erotic and associated with mother. In Chikamatsu's *Jururi* play, yamamba becomes a mother figure, and she must sacrifice herself and subsidiary to her husband [4]. Born in the early Meiji period, Kyoka's writing of the woman in the forest parallels the image of yamamba in the Edo period. First of all, she has the magic power to cure people of pain and turn people into animals. Secondly, she is beautiful, erotic, and only interested in males. Thirdly, she has an idiot husband, but more like her son; she shows maternity by taking care of the idiot. If readers assert the woman as a yamamba, Kyoka depicts women's social status, role, and ideological image in the Edo era through the later waterfall images. Kyoka's yamamba is not intrinsic to being demonic. In the first part of her story, she is a buddha-like figure who goes around and cures people with her magic touch. Not until she lives in the mountain with her idiot husband, she evokes her demonic nature and turns males into animals after seducing them. More importantly, is the maternity of Kyoka's yamamba. She is good at taking care of people; not only does she take care of her child-like husband, but she also takes care of the holy man and almost makes the holy man lose his faith in Buddhism. Kyoka's yamamba is precisely the image that women should have at that time. Women live because of their children and husbands, and they must sacrifice themselves to cling to men. Kyoka's yamamba mirrors women in the Edo period and early Meiji period that

women as an outsider can only choose to constantly sacrifice themselves for the sake of their families in their lives. The transformation of yamamba from demon to mother figure embodies the bondage of women by family and society in the Edo and early Meiji periods.

4. The Smile of the Mountain Witch

In *The Smile of the Mountain Witch*, Ohba uses yamamba to mirror women's problems in the 1970s in three aspects. First of all, mother and daughter relationships. Ohba's yamamba constantly troubled her mother because she could read her mind when she was a child. Ohba tirelessly describes the mother's psychological activities and regards yamamba as a burden to her mother's life. At the end of the story, yamamba again becomes a burden to her daughter, dying in the hospital bed. In the last time, yamamba uses her mind-reading ability, and her death becomes her daughter's relief. In the first aspect, Ohba uses the yamamba figure from an outsider's perspective to reflect on how an ordinary Japanese woman lacks communication with her mother. Mothers should be respected by their daughters, rather than empathizing with their mothers at the last moment of life. Secondly, women keep sacrificing themselves for others. With the ability to read minds, yamamba always knows what others want. But in Yamamba's life, from childhood, because she hoped that everyone around her would like her, she seems to live her life for others. In this regard, Ohba's yamamba and the Edo period yamamba topoi explain the same problem. As human beings, women should not be outsiders to society. Women have their own thoughts and need to be voiced and valorized. Last but not least, social pressures for women. Yamamba is expected to get married, raise the children, and take care of her husband when he has a bad day. Ohba associates yamamba and women as nurses to take care of people around them. Although women's status in society has dramatically changed in the 1970s, traditional thinking has not been erased. Women are expected to behave well from Confucianism mindset. Like the waterfall depicted by Kyoka, women can only be clinging to men not to get social condemnation. Insofar, Ohba's subversion of yamamba in *The Smile of the Mountain Witch* mirrors the life of ordinary women in the 1970s; She did not criticize the existence of these problems; on the contrary, she showed them through the external image of yamamba.

5. The Woman in the Dunes

In *The Woman in the Dunes*, Kobo's woman parallels Ohba's yamamba in *The Smile of the Mountain Witch*, fitting the stereotypically submissive female image. Obedience is the primary image of the woman in the dunes. She doesn't know how to say no to everything around her. She didn't fiercely fight with the man when she was tied up, and she didn't even answer when the man scolded her. Ohba's yamamba also doesn't know how to refuse others because she wants everyone to like her. "Around that time, the woman became exceedingly fat, ... But on top of that, she had the pitiful characteristic of wanting to make others feel good; even if she did not like it, she would eat up whatever she was offered to her in order to not to disappoint the person" [5]. In order to make everyone around her like her, she put all the content of mind reading in her heart. She would act on what other people wanted. Submissiveness is considered one of the good qualities of women in Confucianism. However, Confucianism supports the patriarchal society. Women need to obey female virtues, cling to men, and do not need to have abilities. Ohba uses the image of a submissive yamamba living as an ordinary woman to highlight the status of women. Under the male gaze, women must meet the needs of men without conforming to their wishes. Kobo and Ohba's writing trigger thinking of women in modern society; women in the new era need to speak for themselves, authentic females need to be valorized.

6. Candlefish

Ohba's *Candlefish* results from a collision with foreign women's ideas, and Ohba's Yamamba chose to stick to her current life. *Candlefish* sets in dawn time and generates a hazy atmosphere when the narrator dreams of being a yamamba. The back and forth between dream and reality resembles Zhuangzi's stories of butterflies. It is not hard to tell that the narrator does not feel satisfied with her current life, "People always dream of things they can never realize. Dreams are things that do not exist in reality" [6]. Olga, as a Russian American, the narrator admires Olga, who pursued her love of the musician and the courage of Olga to divorce her husband, raising two children on her own. In Japan, not until the end of the 19th-century can women divorce their husbands; however, the husband can easily abandon the wife. An abandoned wife is considered a shame to the family. By seeing Olga live in a western way, the narrator also acknowledges her western feminist idea to be an independent woman. However, the narrator does not want the change, she dreams back to a yamamba, and Olga becomes Tsukiko in her dreams. Ohba, in an interview, does not hesitate to say that she was not part of the feminist. Yamamba being a fetishized figure, dreaming yamamba is the narrator seeking the authenticity of women. In *Candlefish*, yamamba mirrors the traditional image of Japanese women; the narrator still wants to hold back her Japanese traits.

7. Conclusion

Although yamamba topos reflect various problems in female resistance from a modern perspective, women in that era may not be aware of female issues. A survey for Japanese women on Ohba's *The Smile of the Mountain Witch* shows that most Japanese women would see the yamamba as an ideal image and ignore the irony. It is not exaggerated to say that the Confucianist ideal of men's work centers around outside, women's work centers around the home is the mainstream in East Asian countries. But in fact, the status of Japanese women has significantly been subverted in 100 years. Although media intermediaries always show that Japanese women are primarily housewives who do not have social positions, according to Xiaobo Wu, 31% of women are housewives in America and 36% in Japan. An article called "Matriarchal Society-Japan" was published on the website of Embassy of The People's Republic of China in Japan. The report demonstrates that homemakers in Japan could control the money at home, expel husbands who had an affair, and even female domestic violence has occurred. Despite being a housewife, female issues in the business field and many other aspects in Japan remain problematic. The wave of concern about Japanese feminism in the mid-1990s, using yamamba instrumentality reflecting on female resistance, was a success in English academia; Still, it did not directly impact females in Japan.

In conclusion, yamamba topo has changed several times from the 12th century to the 20th century; different yamamba topos mirror women and reflect contemporary women's issues. The original yamamba stories associated with the Japanese creation myth support the patriarchal society. The Noh play *Yamamba* raises the question of women's identity. Kyoka's women in the Mountain Koya resembles Edo Period Yamamba in Chikamatsu's Joruri play that women are restrained by family bondage and willingness to sacrifice. Ohba's *The Smile of the Mountain Witch* access yamamba in human settlement presents many women's issues to the public. Kobo's women in the dunes follow the Ohba's yamamba that Submissiveness was considered a feminine virtue in that era. In Ohba's *Candlefish*, the narrator wanders between dream and reality, seems to be looking for an answer through yamamba. All the yamamba topos historically reflected the problems of Japanese women in different periods. However, yamamba literature was not a window for women to vent at that time. Women and gender issues still exist in Japan and the world; literature will always be the most potent weapon of the feminist movement.

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