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Excess and Otherness: Fat, Queer, and Neurodivergent Bodies under Ethnonationalism in Postwar Studio Ghibli

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Abstract

This study examines intersectional representation in animated films through the characters of the Witch of the Waste (*Howl's Moving Castle*) and Yubaba (*Spirited Away*), positioning them within discourses on fatness, queerness, and the reimagining of witchcraft as a metaphor for neurodivergence. Both characters reify camp aesthetics (a style characterised by excess, artifice, and a self-aware sense of extravagance) through exaggerated mannerisms, grandiose expressions, and theatrical speech, a feat made possible by the medium of animation, which enhances these characteristics beyond what live-action film can achieve. They are perceived as 'Other' because their bodies are rendered disruptive to dominant social norms. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, this study explores how these witches evoke fear, disgust and discomfort, mainly through their unruly corporeality and deviation from socially sanctioned expression. Fatness, neurodivergence, and queerness, like the abject, exist on the threshold of the acceptable, simultaneously provoking fascination and repulsion. These traits are further entangled with the logic of ethnonationalism, which upholds idealised bodily forms as markers of morality, and national superiority. This study reveals how Studio Ghibli's witches challenge dominant norms while also reflecting broader cultural anxieties about bodies that refuse to conform. The witches also channel the contradictions of the postwar maternal body, tasked with care, burdened with trauma, and shaped by national expectations of productivity and restraint. Ultimately, they offer a lens into how animated media navigates the politics of the body, excess, and deviance, contributing to broader discussions of intersectional representation in film and television.

Keywords

Fatness, Ethnonationalism, Camp Aesthetics, Studio Ghibli, *Spirited Away*, *Howl's Moving Castle*, Intersectionality, Neurodivergence, Animated Media Representation.

Introduction

What happens when bodies too unconventional and non-normative for the screen refuse to shrink into oblivion: when witches unsettle the very foundations of what we consider normal? In the lush, enchanted worlds of Studio Ghibli's animation films *Spirited Away*[1] and *Howl's*

[1] Hayao Miyazaki, Director, *Spirited Away* (Studio Ghibli, 2001), 2hr 5 min.

Moving Castle,[2] the witches, Yubaba and the Witch of the Waste, emerge not simply as villains but as unruly embodiments of fatness, queerness, and neurodivergence. As a genre, animation has long captivated both children and adults, offering a space where fantasy and reality intersect. Under the direction of Hayao Miyazaki, Studio Ghibli carves out an alternative vision of the world and presents layered, complex characters. Studio Ghibli's films are celebrated for their eco-calm aesthetic, spectacular domesticity,[3] rich philosophical themes, and captivating visuals. They explore a wide range of themes, including the scars of war, fragile memories, ecological interdependence, and technological progress, creating a space where diverse identities and perspectives coexist. In turn, they offer rich opportunities to investigate how various forms of Otherness are represented within the narrative.

This study employs a visual and textual analysis of *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle*, drawing on interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks to examine the politics of the body, the construction of 'Otherness' around certain identities, and the ongoing negotiation such bodies undertake in their attempt to construct a coherent sense of self within systems that label them as misfits. The witches, Yubaba and the Witch of the Waste, go beyond being supernatural figures to reflect the social forces and expectations that shape their place in the world. Yubaba is depicted as a money-driven businesswoman who owns a bathhouse and exercises control over her workers, while the Witch of the Waste is characterised as an egotistical and easily angered sorceress. Fatness, in these films, is portrayed as both a visual marker of excess and an act of rebellion against prescribed norms of beauty and productivity. The queerness of these characters manifests through camp aesthetics and their performativity outside heterosexual and binary gendered structures. Neurodivergence, in this context, is read symbolically and behaviourally, emerging through the witches' non-normative ways of thinking, moving, and relating to others. Through these characters, we gain an insight into how fat, queer, and neurodivergent bodies are frequently marginalised and pathologised in visual culture.

Apart from examining the intersectional dimensions of these witches, in this paper we seek to situate their portrayals within broader discourses of nationalism, and the politics of bodily regulation. We also explore how postwar trauma and maternal care are inscribed onto the figure of the witch, rendering her an abject presence exiled from normative meaning, and plagued by a kind of psychic homelessness that mirrors the condition of nations grappling with the aftermath of war.[4] While the paper focuses on two iconic characters from the Ghibli universe, it also acknowledges the limitations of cultural and linguistic distance. As researchers situated outside the Japanese cultural context, we remain mindful that certain nuances may be lost in translation. Ultimately, in this essay, we propose that witches are not merely magical or fantastical beings but complex figures through whom we can explore questions of embodiment, marginality, and resistance.

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[2] Hayao Miyazaki, Director, *Howl's Moving Castle* (Studio Ghibli, 2004), 1hr 59min.

[3] Zoe Crombie, 'Spectacular Mundane in the Films of Studio Ghibli,' *The Journal of Anime and Manga Studies* 2, no. 2 (2021), https://doi.org/10.21900/j.jams.v2.507.

[4] Julia Kristeva, 'Approaching Abjection,' *Oxford Literary Review* 5, nos 1–2 (1982), https://doi.org/10.3366/olr.1982.009.

Embodied excess and disgust: Representations of fatness in Yubaba and the Witch of the Waste

As a cultural construct, fatness operates not only as a physical descriptor but also as a fluid, politicised identity.[5] It is shaped in relation to shifting social norms and moral judgements often tied to ideas of gluttony, indulgence, and a perceived failure of self-discipline. The discourse around fatness is deeply political, especially in a capitalist world where, as Fredric Jameson notes, every aspect of lifestyle is commodified and transformed into a cash-generating industry.[6] In this landscape, the global obesity epidemic has been provocatively framed as a government-enabled marketing scheme benefiting multinational weight-loss industries.[7] It reflects a larger, international discourse around fatphobia, where the 'war on obesity' (especially in the post-9/11 era) is mobilised by state and medical institutions to reinforce surveillance, and self-regulation.[8] In Japan, fatness is situated within a distinct cultural and historical framework that links bodily discipline to national identity. Claims such as 'obesity-related disorders occur at a much lower body mass index (BMI) in ethnic Asian populations than in ethnic Caucasian ones' contribute to the construction of a distinct Japanese existence.[9] This logic is institutionalised in policies such as the Metabo Law, implemented by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2008, mandating waist measurements for adults aged 40–74 employed in the companies.[10] Looking at the gendered aspect of it, since the Meiji period (1868–1912), the individual female body has been symbolically tied to the health and strength of the national body.[11] In an 1897 treatise, pioneering female educator Miwata Masako emphasised that maintaining a healthy body was essential for women, not only as a foundation for personal well-being and filial duty, but also as a means of producing healthy citizens who would contribute to the fate of the nation *(kokumin)*.[12] Here, health was implicitly defined through the absence of excess, aligning the ideal female body with moderation and national productivity. In contemporary Japan, the situation remains the same where Japanese media put especially strong pressure on women

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[5] Charlotte Cooper, 'Fat Studies: Mapping the Field,' *Sociology Compass* 4, no. 12 (2010), https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00336.x.

[6] Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and the Market,' in his *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1992), 260. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822378419-009.

[7] J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story behind America's Obesity Epidemic* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

[8] Meghna Mudaliar and Paromita Bhattacharyya, 'Populism, Mainstream Cinema, and Misogynistic Fatphobia,' in *Encyclopedia of New Populism and Responses in the 21st Century*, ed. Joseph Chennattuserry, Madhumati Deshpande, and Paul Hong (Springer Nature, 2024), 780, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-7802-1_438.

[9] Hidenari Sakuta and Takishi Suzuki, 'Overweight Male Personnel of the Japan Self-Defense Forces with Body Mass Indices of 23.0–24.9 and Obesity-Related Metabolic Disorders,' *Environmental Health and Preventive Medicine* 13 (2008), https://doi.org/10.1007/s12199-007-0010-0.

[10] Angelika Koch, Christopher Tso, and Brigitte Steger, eds, *Beyond Kawaii: Studying Japanese Femininities at Cambridge* (LIT Verlag, 2020).

[11] Sumiko Otsubo, 'The Female Body and Eugenic Thought in Meiji Japan,' in *Building a Modern Japan* (Springer, 2005), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403981110_4.

[12] Margaret Mehl, 'Women Educators and the Confucian Tradition in Meiji Japan (1868–1912): Miwada Masako and Atomi Kakei,' *Women's History Review* 10, no. 4 (2001): 600, https://doi.org/10.1080/09612020100200302.

to diet with dieting pills and salons that offers weight loss services. While some counter-media has emerged, such as the pop girl group Chubbiness and their song *Manmadeiya* (you are fine the way you are), these attempts at body positivity rely on infantilising language, describing bodies as soft, round, or squishy, which ultimately aligns with Japan's mainstream *kawaii* (cute) aesthetic.[13] Against this backdrop, the witches in the two Studio Ghibli's films under discussion stand as a departure from the *kawaii* ideal, embodying a form of surplus which is not considered desirable.

In the case of the Witch of the Waste, the significant double chin, the heavy folds of flesh cascading from her neck to her chest, particularly around the breast area, produce an uncanny effect at once disturbingly familiar and unsettlingly unfamiliar to the viewer.[14] Halfway through the film, when the Witch of the Waste is stripped of her magic and reduced to a powerless, aging, fat body, it invites us to consider how fatness, aging, and power intersect especially in the portrayal of Sophie against the witch. Although Sophie also becomes old and plump in the film, she remains active, working, cleaning, thus upholding the ideal of productivity and retaining the power to effect change within the narrative. In contrast the Witch of the Waste is depicted as an almost immobile, round and helpless figure who has no agency over the unfolding events. This comparison underscores how fatness and aging are only accepted and granted narrative power when they align with societal ideals of usefulness and productivity.

Like the Witch of the Waste, Yubaba's body resists containment: it spills out of elegant boundaries, suggesting a lack of self-control (a common fatphobic trope). Her big head and large waist together stage a body of unruliness, a body that manages others while defying management itself. In contrast, the protagonist Chihiro overperforms normative femininity, embodying expectations that require women to remain slim and maintain a controlled appetite as seen in her refusal to eat the food in which her parents indulge, which ultimately leads them to take on the form of pigs. Chihiro's struggle reflects the broader conflict women face with hunger, self-denial, and the pressure to conform to social ideals.[15] Yubaba, meanwhile, represents the antithesis of this struggle through unchecked appetite and materialism. Yet, it is crucial to recognise that Yubaba herself is ultimately a pawn within the larger patriarchal system: she becomes the medium through which conformity and control are enforced.

These narrative contradictions, where a fat female figure enforces control while symbolising its failure, are reinforced by the affective economies that shape how fat bodies are perceived. One of the most powerful of these is disgust, which does not arise from fatness itself but from the unstable and culturally specific associations attached to it. In Japanese, the word *fuketsu-na (fu-keh-tsu-nah),* meaning unclean, defiled, or impure, is often used to

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[13] Angelika Koch, Christopher Tso, and Brigitte Steger, 'Introduction: Beyond Kawaii,' in *Beyond Kawaii: Studying Japanese Femininities at Cambridge,* edited by Angelika Koch, Christopher Tso, and Brigitte Steger (LIT Verlag, 2020) 25.

[14] Sigmund Freud, James Strachey, Helene Cixous, and Robert Dennome, 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche (the 'Uncanny'),' *New Literary History* 7, no. 3 (1976): 525, https://doi.org/10.2307/468561.

[15] Gitte Marianne Hansen, 'Exposing embedded storylines Battling appetite, desire and a harmless monster,' in *Femininity, Self-Harm and Eating Disorders in Japan: Navigating Contradiction in Narrative and Visual Culture* (Routledge, 2017), 157.

associate body weight with smell, sweat, and lack of hygiene.[16] This is vividly illustrated in *Howl's Moving Castle*, when the Witch of the Waste struggles to go up the stairs of the royal palace. Her body sweats profusely, her double chin and folds of flesh are more visibly present between her neck and chest, and her physical exhaustion is foregrounded (Figure 1). Similarly, in *Spirited Away*, Yubaba's oversized face, especially the large wart between her eyebrows function as visual cues that evoke revulsion (Figure 2). Here, disgust emerges with the very contingency of the association between fatness and qualities like being smelly, filthy, unproductive, or lazy. By combining these concepts, disgust enables the subject to recoil—as if from an object—despite the absence of any inherent quality in the object itself.[17] When audiences perceive bodies like Yubaba or the Witch of the Waste as disgusting, it does more than isolate the figure; it produces a community bound by shared condemnation. Yet these characters do more than reproduce disgust; they also stage discomfort in a way that invites recognition of bodies inhabiting spaces that do not take or extend their shape.[18] These films make such bodily shapes visible and, in doing so, create a space for them to be recognised and validated.

Figure 1. The Witch of the Waste struggles to climb the stairs, sweating profusely.
Source. Hayao, *Howl's Moving Castle,* 57:36.

[16] Cindi Sturtz-Sreetharan, Sarah Trainer, and Alexandra Brewis, 'The Harm Inflicted by Polite Concern: Language, Fat, and Stigma,' *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 46, no. 4 (2021): 685, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-021-09742-5.

[17] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Routledge, 2015), 90.

[18] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* 97.

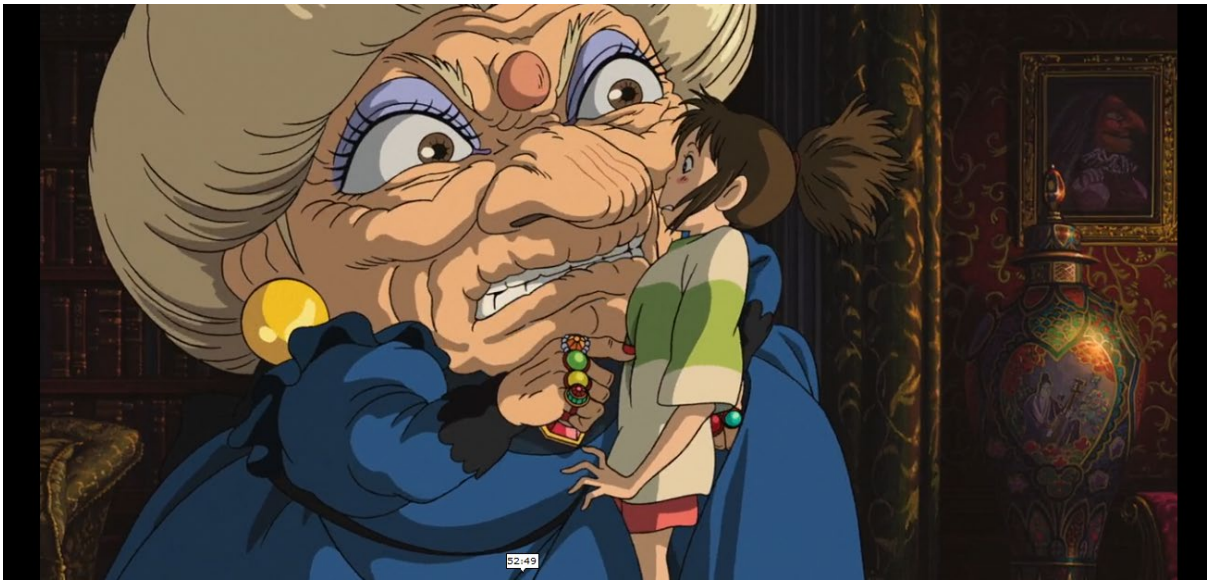

Figure 2. Yubaba's oversized face, with a wart between her brows, starkly contrasts Chihiro's slim, neat frame. Source. Hayao, *Spirited Away,* 37:51.

Queering the witch: Camp, fear, and unfulfilled desire

When performance becomes reality, the very idea of a stable gender structure and desire crumbles into ashes. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, drag performance does not merely symbolise gender fluidity but operates as an 'idiom' or primary language through which the heteronormative gender and sexuality systems express themselves and simultaneously reveal their own instability.[19] Japan, too, has a long and rich tradition of cross-gender performance and private cross-dressing that predates both Western drag culture and the emergence of explicitly queer or gay identities. One of the earliest instances of what might be considered proto-drag dates back to the mid-Edo period, when *tekomai*—female festival dancers resembling drag kings—performed in public spaces, energising crowds during religious holidays.[20] In contemporary Japanese media, there has been a notable rise in sapphic representation within the *maho shojo* or *majokko* (magical girl) anime genre. These stories often centre around ordinary girls whose lives are radically transformed by magical powers.[21] However, despite their supernatural elements, the genre largely adheres to idealised norms of femininity with petite bodies and delicate features. By contrast, the witches in *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Spirited Away* create narrative and visual spaces through which gender nonconformity and camp aesthetics can be explored.

The Witch of the Waste's first full appearance inside Sophie's shop immediately engages with themes of performance and subversion. She enters as a seductive figure with her dark red lipstick, sensual smile, and sleek black dress only to destabilise this image through

[19] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity: Henry James's the Art of the Novel,' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 1 (1993), https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-1-1.

[20] Kat Joplin, 'Drag Domination: Japan's Drag Scene Is Bursting at the Seams,' *GAY TIMES*, April 16, 2024, https://www.gaytimes.com/originals/drag-domination-japans-drag-scene-is-bursting-at-the-seams/.

[21] Katerina Karavodin, 'Transforming and Queering Identity: The Influence of Magical Girl Anime on Queer-Inclusive Western Animation,' *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture* 7, no. 1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1386/qsmpc_00071_1.

her unexpectedly deep, masculine voice (Figure 3). Her presentation evokes Susan Sontag's notion of camp where everything is seen in quotation marks, where 'Being-as-Playing-a-Role' relates to the performative aspect of the object or person.[22] Her arrival, seated within a cabinet-like palanquin, can be read as a metaphor for the concealed or coded nature of queer identity. It taps into the trope of the 'closet,' with her eventual emergence paralleling a kind of flamboyant 'coming out.' The palanquin itself, luxurious and isolated, aligns her queerness with both mystique and marginalisation. Yubaba's razor-sharp nails, towering hairstyle, and lavish clothing construct a hyper-feminine image pushed to absurdity, a prominent feature of camp aesthetics. Her grotesqueness is a departure from attractive femininity, putting her outside any romantic or erotic narrative. Her intense, theatrical emotions, such as rage, delight, and anxiety, are performed at a pitch that aligns camp's notion of failed seriousness. In addition to appearance, these figures also experience time differently, a phenomenon that aligns with what Jack Halberstam describes as queer temporality, where individuals live outside the linear, heteronormative timelines of reproduction, growth, and success.[23] For instance, Yubaba occupies the role of a mother despite her visibly advanced age, while the Witch of the Waste undergoes rapid aging in a matter of seconds after losing her magical powers. Their timelines are nonlinear, discontinuous, and resistant to normative expectations of how time should unfold across the course of a life.

Figure 3. The Witch of the Waste with dark red lipstick and her sensual smile.
Source. Hayao, *Howl's Moving Castle,* 10:36.

The witches' distinct identities and their deviation from conventional roles highlight the impossibility of resolution within their narrative arcs. They are fundamentally denied the

[22] Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp,' *Partisan Review*, 1964, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780823283637-003.

[23] Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005).

narrative privileges granted to heteronormative characters. This brings us to the question of desire and its inevitable failure within these figures. Neither Yubaba nor the Witch of the Waste can fulfil their desires: The Witch of the Waste fails to win Howl's heart, while Yubaba loses control over both her child and her workers. This lack of resolution illustrates that neither character finds transformation through love, highlighting how queer desire is dramatised yet ultimately unconsummated.[24]

Figure 4. Yubaba in bird form, soaring over her domain.
Source. Hayao, *Spirited Away,* 15:59.

Their physical transformations into bird-like forms visually extend this sense of unresolved queer embodiment. The metamorphoses do not grant them freedom or control; instead, they heighten their visibility as 'Other.' Yubaba, who often soars over her domain (Figure 4), and the Witch of the Waste, who glides ominously toward Sophie in her shop, both take on avian shapes that visually represent their distance from human identity. This imagery draws on the historical use of animals, particularly birds, to represent marginalised sexualities. In many cultures, especially in the Americas and Europe, metaphors like (*pájaro/pájara* or bird, *pato/pata* or duck) have been weaponised to stigmatise and diminish those who diverge from heteronormative expectations.[25]

These metaphoric and visual codings do more than merely signal difference or evoke the supernatural, they also provoke affective responses, particularly fear. This fear attaches itself to bodies (and to the bodies of so-called rogue states) through the imagined potential of 'what could be'—defined by pre-existing stereotypes—which extend the authority to

[24] Line Pouchard, 'Queer Desire in the Well of Loneliness,' *The Feminist Reader*, no. 1 (1997), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-25621-1_5.

[25] Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, 'Queer Ducks, Puerto Rican Patos, and Jewish American Feygelekh: Birds and the Cultural Representation of Homosexuality,' *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies*, (2007), https://www.academia.edu/2502449/Queer_Ducks_Puerto_Rican_Patos_and_Jewish_American_Feygelekh_Birds_and_the_Cultural_Representation_of_Homosexuality.

detain and regulate, while simultaneously generating a distinct category of the fearsome.[26] Importantly, this fear does not remain confined within the narrative; it can also stick to audiences, becoming attached to certain bodies or identities through repeated associations in discourse and visual representation such as the linkage of queerness, fatness or camp with evil, unruliness, or a perceived threat to social order. These different readings help us to map both figures as queer in the expansive sense offered by Sedgwick: 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically.'[27] In this way, camp, like queerness, overturns and reverses the expected meanings of the body; it brings into crisis the idea of a gendered behaviour.[28]

Split selves and stigmatised bodies: The witch as a site of neurodivergent possibility

In Japanese traditions, the concept of *oni* (ogre) served symbolically as the nonhuman entity (otherness), which was constructed to articulate humanness (sameness) and was narrated in folk tales throughout history.[29] This dichotomy plays out vividly in folklore through figures such as Yama-Uba, the mountain witch, who shares many similarities with Studio Ghibli's witches, Yubaba and the Witch of the Waste. Yama-Uba is shown as an old haggard woman who devours passing travellers and possesses the magical ability to shapeshift into a beautiful young woman. Many supernatural beings from folklore, especially *yōkai* (spirits and monsters) and oral tales are integrated into Japan's indigenous faith, Shintō. The concept of *kegare* meaning impurity or pollution or defilement can be seen as one of the main constituents of Shintō as we know it today.[30] In this moral-spiritual economy, *yōkai* and *oni,* with their associations with death, disorder, and bodily abnormality, are marked as impure and threatening to the collective good. *Yōkai* like the *Gashadokuro* (a rattling giant skeleton), *Yama-Uba* (isolated and deviant motherhood), *Yūrei* (ghosts driven by unresolved emotion), or *Tōfu-kozō* (a spirit obsessed with offering tofu)[31] exhibit traits that might today be understood through the lens of neurodivergence—such as sensory intensity, emotional dysregulation, social withdrawal, or obsessive fixations. Their narrative framing, as dangerous or pitiable, reflects a broader social logic that views difference as deviant and impure. This logic finds its clearest expression in Japan's eugenic policies, such as the Eugenic Protection Law of 1948, which, until its repeal in 1996, legitimised sterilisation of those deemed unfit,

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[26] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 63.

[27] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Duke University Press, 1993).

[28] Max Fincher, 'The Gothic as Camp: Queer Aesthetics in the Monk,' *Romanticism on the Net* 44 (2006), https://doi.org/10.7202/013997ar.

[29]Noriko Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore: Oni from Ancient Times to the Present* (Utah State University Press, 2010).

[30]Bernhard Scheid, 'Death and Pollution as a Common Matrix of Japanese Buddhism and Shintō,' *Cultures of Eschatology* (2020): 528, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110597745-027.

[31] Joey Campbell, 'The 15 Deadliest Japanese Yokai - Owlcation,' *Owlcation*, July 20, 2025, https://owlcation.com/humanities/deadly-japanese-yokai.

including people with mental illness or disabilities.[32] When analysed alongside contemporary frameworks of neurodivergence and disability, the witches in *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle* can be seen as symbolic representations of non-normative and anti-hegemonic minds and bodies.

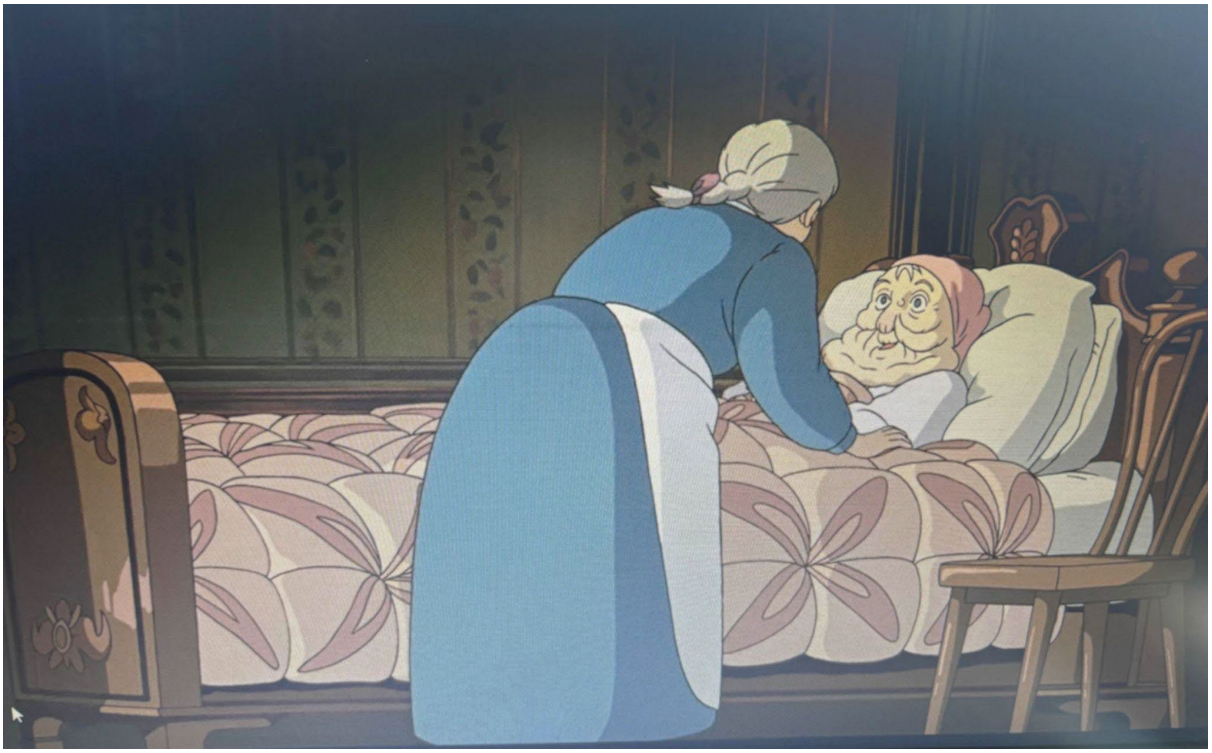

Figure 5. Sophie taking care of the Witch of the Waste.
Source. Hayao, *Howl's Moving Castle,* 1:26:10.

The Witch of the Waste can be seen as a formidable figure when she first appears on screen—powerful, seductive, and confident, yet also obsessively fixated on Howl. Her jealousy leads her to curse Sophie, whom she perceives as a romantic rival. This portrayal aligns with the trope of the *menhera* girl (a portmanteau of mental health), a figure that has permeated Japanese popular media.[33] Such female characters are often depicted as emotionally unstable, consumed by obsessive love, and prone to self-destructive or aggressive behaviours; traits also observed in *Witch of the Waste.* The Witch of the Waste is later revealed to be a once-magnificent woman hollowed out by her own obsessions, specifically with youth, beauty, and power. The King's magician, Suliman, describes her as someone who made a deal with the devil, leaving her body and soul to deteriorate. This deterioration can also be read through the lens of an obsessive-compulsive disorder, where an overwhelming need to achieve unattainable standards, often tied to productivity and control, leads to both physical and mental breakdown or collapse. Following her magical defeat and transformation into an old, weakened form, she begins to exhibit signs of

[32] Yoko Matsubara, 'The enactment of Japan's sterilization laws in the 1940s: a prelude to postwar eugenic policy,' *Historia Scientiarum* 8, no. 2 (1998).

[33] Yukari Seko and Minako Kikuchi, 'Mentally Ill and Cute as Hell: Menhera Girls and Portrayals of Self-Injury in Japanese Popular Culture,' *Frontiers in Communication* 7, no. 3 (2023), https://doi.org/10.32920/21950459.v1.

dementia, where her memory waxes and wanes. One moment she is commenting on politics and intercepting Suliman's magic, another moment she will be amazed with Calcifer, the fire demon, calling him pretty and thinking of eating young men's hearts. Her transformation into an old woman also parallels the folkloric figure of Yuma-Uba, traditionally portrayed as both maternal and monstrous. Ultimately, she is cared for by Sophie (Figure 5). This underscores how neurodivergent individuals are often infantilised and reduced to dependent roles once they no longer serve nationalist systems.

Yubaba, the capitalist matriarch of the bathhouse, represents another face of neurodivergence: one that functions under the weight of performance, discipline, and fear of disorder. Her labour, as both a ruthless and devoted boss, reflects what scholars such as Margaret Price describe as overcompensation, a common strategy among neurodivergent individuals to assert value in ableist or neurotypical spaces.[34] The duality between Yubaba and her twin sister Zeniba can be explored through the lens of a Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). The two are never seen together in the same space; instead, their alternating appearances suggest the presence of split, compartmentalised selves. The first time Zeniba appears, through the animated paper *shikigami,* her face is partially transparent, and ghostlike. She is 'seen through,' suggesting an unintegrated personality, hovering at the edge of consciousness, just as alters in DID may remain partially submerged. Interestingly, her initial behaviour mirrors Yubaba's aggression: she threatens Chihiro to keep her visit secret otherwise she will rip her mouth, transform Bōh into a mouse, and play the role of trickster. But once the *shikigami* is destroyed, she disappears, symbolic of one self-withdrawing so another can emerge. When Zeniba vanishes, Yubaba re-emerges in a heightened state of distress once she realises her son is missing. She becomes monstrous, breathing fire, her hair wild, her body inflamed (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Yubaba in her monstrous form after realising Boh is gone.
Source. Hayao, *Spirited Away*, 1:44:20.

[34] Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (University of Michigan Press, 2014).

This transformation recalls the visual iconography of Yama-Uba, establishing a clear parallel. Moreover, Zeniba's home, nestled in a natural, flower-filled forest, is in stark contrast to Yubaba's glittering, jewel-laden, capitalist domain. Zeniba knits sweaters like a gentle grandmother; Yubaba writes contracts and counts money. These opposing settings visually externalise their inner psychic divides: one grounded in care and slowness, the other in control and accumulation. Despite their differences, both Yubaba and Zeniba show similar speech patterns and gestures, hinting at shared emotional residues and coping strategies.[35] When Chihiro arrives at their respective homes, both women greet her with nearly identical words—'Come in, I don't have all day'—but with dramatically different affect. Yubaba's door flies open violently, pulling Chihiro inside, while Zeniba opens her door gently, inviting her to tea. The contrast suggests divergent affective orientations, even within a shared psychic framework. In the end Chihiro calls both women Obaachan (grandmother), hinting at a possible reconciliation or merging of the fractured self. Viewed through this lens, the figure of the witch is not simply a site of magical power or villainy, but a complex psychic map of neurodivergent survival under capitalist and patriarchal pressures.

In Japan, where purity is highly valued, popular belief in the hereditary and constitutional nature of mental illness leads to a strong stigmatisation and exclusion from the public space. Here, spaces are not merely occupied by bodies that do things; rather, what bodies do shapes the kinds of spaces they are permitted to inhabit.[36] This is why figures such as Yubaba and the Witch of the Waste are confined to fantastical, unreal realms: spaces marked as otherworldly and detached from the 'normal' world. Furthermore, this stigma is converted into the logic of a shame culture where fat bodies, queer identities, and any form of difference become sites of collective shame. Reconsidering the role of shame in securing ethnonationalist normativity within narratives of mental illness demonstrates how national shame works as a tool to promote the ideal of eugenics, (re)productivity, and health where shame itself acts as a catalyst for an ideal nation-building.[37]

Ambivalent mothers: Witch figures and the contradictions of postwar motherhood

The myth of motherhood in Japan has evolved across historical periods, shaped by sociopolitical needs. From the 'breeding mother' (solely for reproduction) of the Edo era to the 'educating mother' (role of first educator of the child) of Meiji reforms, and later the ideal of the *Ryōsai Kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) following the Sino-Japanese War,[38] motherhood has been continually redefined to align with national interests. During the Taishō period in the early twentieth century, the image of the emotionally nurturing yet economically contributing mother emerged in response to women entering the paid workforce following the world wars. In postwar Japan, motherhood evolved into a powerful political symbol for

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[35] Martin Dorahy et al., 'Dissociative Identity Disorder: An Empirical Overview,' *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 48, no. 5 (2014), https://doi.org/10.1177/0004867414527523.

[36] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Duke University Press, 2006), 58, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822388074.

[37] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 105.

[38] Niwa Akiko and Tomiko Yoda, 'The Formation of the Myth of Motherhood in Japan,' *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal. English Supplement,* no. 4 (1993), http://www.jstor.org/stable/42772053.

peace, exemplified by Tokyo-based mothers who played a leading role in the anti-nuclear movement opposing the use of atomic and hydrogen bombs.[39] This image was further appropriated by the state to frame nuclear disasters as crises to be endured with maternal calm, thus obscuring systemic responsibility. The mother metaphor also made a significant impact in cinema, particularly through *hahamono* films—a subgenre of Japanese melodrama where maternal suffering serves as an emotional stand-in for Japan's war trauma, offering a means to humanise the nation in the aftermath of conflict.[40] Writers like Takeda Taijun used the imagery of a violated woman to represent Japan after its wartime defeat, and in this context, Seiko Yoshinaga—who analysed Taijun's work in her essay—questions why the nation is symbolised as a woman or motherland, violated by external forces, rather than as a fatherland.[41] This historical legacy reveals how motherhood has been used as a site onto which collective pain and trauma are projected, turning maternal bodies into emotional repositories of national failure. This function of the mother can also be seen in the ways the witches are shown in Studio Ghibli's films, where their methods of acting, and appearing are closely tied to how they take on or resist the role of a caregiver.

While fatness and queerness shape the visual and behavioural excesses of Studio Ghibli's witches, their roles as maternal caregivers in postwar contexts reveal another dimension of Otherness, one rooted in body politics and the biopolitical regulation of care, trauma, and subjectivity within structures of power. Both Yubaba and the Witch of the Waste are portrayed as mother figures, but in very different ways. As the capitalist matriarch of the bathhouse, Yubaba is a businesswoman and also a mother both to her son Boh and, symbolically, to the many workers under her control. This dual role places her within the complex nexus of postwar motherhood where women are expected to contribute to the economy but also to be loving mothers. She kisses Boh, listens to his whims and refuses to let him explore the world, marking her as a mother who uses care as a form of entrapment. This maternal figure is never constructed innocently; instead, she is intrusive and omnipresent. Her love is authoritarian, illustrating how maternal labour can blur into coercion, especially in a system where motherhood and control collapse into one. Conversely, the Witch of the Waste begins as a commanding femme fatale figure aligned with imperial power structures, summoned by the kingdom to contribute to its war effort. Yet, once her magic is no longer useful, she is stripped of her power and discarded. This mirrors how, in postwar Japan, married and older women were often recruited as a part-time labour force during times of need but remained easily expendable.[42] Reduced to an aging, dependent figure, the Witch of the Waste becomes entirely reliant on Sophie, who tucks her into bed like a child, feeds her, and offers gentle, motherly advice. This shift parallels the way postwar nations are often symbolically feminised, imagined as wounded maternal bodies that require care and are also

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[39] Rin Odawara, 'Anti-nuclear movement and mother-hood in post-war Japan: A feminist perspective,' *DEP,* (2020), https://www.unive.it/pag/fileadmin/user_upload/dipartimenti/DSLCC/documenti/DEP/numeri/n41-42/08_Odawara.pdf.

[40] Fanglin Wang and Michael S Macovski, 'Humanizing Japan after World War II: Motifs of Sentiment and Sensibility as Expressed by the Mother Figure in Kinoshita Keisuke's Hahamono Films,' (MA diss., Georgetown University, 2019), hdl.handle.net/10822/1054909.

[41] Seiko Yoshinaga, 'Masculinist Identifications with 'Woman': Gender Politics in Postwar Japanese Literary Debates.' *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal. English Supplement* 22 (2002), http://www.jstor.org/stable/42772181.

[42] Helen Macnaughtan, 'From 'post-war' to 'post-bubble': contemporary issues for Japanese working women.' *Perspectives on work, employment and society in Japan* (2006).

expected to provide it. Through Yubaba and the Witch of the Waste, Studio Ghibli presents a portrait of motherhood shaped by contradiction—one where mothers are expected to be both active and passive, depending on the needs of the time and the nation.

Building on this, both characters also challenge conventional models of motherhood and family through their queered, fat, non-biological maternal roles. Yubaba, as an older mother raising a son in a space of labour and capitalism, queers reproduction by suggesting the child might be adopted or magically created thus dislocating motherhood from the biological imperative. The Witch of the Waste, who has no children of her own but ultimately finds a chosen family, similarly reimagines maternal and familial roles beyond heteronormative frameworks. Drawing on Jack Halberstam's notion of 'queer failure,' where failure presents an opportunity rather than a dead end,[43] these witches challenge the success narratives embedded in ideal motherhood: they fail to nurture in expected ways, they resist self-sacrifice, and they inhabit excess rather than containment. In the same context, their fatness is not incidental, it amplifies this refusal of normative motherhood and womanhood. In Japan, where thinness is often idealised not only as an aesthetic but as a moral and national virtue, this disciplinary pressure has extended even to pregnant bodies. By 2006, low-birth-weight infants (under 2,500 grams) constituted 9.6 per cent of all births, nearly double the 5 per cent recorded in 1975, a rise attributed to expectant mothers deliberately restricting weight gain to conform to societal ideals.[44] Within this cultural landscape, the fat maternal bodies of Yubaba and the Witch of the Waste defy the normative expectations placed upon women to be thin and self-sacrificing.

Conclusion

The witches in Studio Ghibli's *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle* serve as powerful allegorical figures of postwar Japan's complex negotiations with identity, discipline, and deviance. Through their fat, queer, neurodivergent-coded, and maternal bodies, Yubaba and the Witch of the Waste unsettle idealised national narratives rooted in productivity, conformity, and purity. These figures expose how femininity and motherhood are not only moral expectations but also biopolitical tools mobilised by the state. In the aftermath of war and defeat, Japan's attempt to assert cultural autonomy took the form of ethnic nationalism and a rejection of perceived western values. This dynamic plays out in the nation's gendered and racialised body politics. The postwar state re-inscribed patriarchal norms through policies that valorised reproductive health and eugenic ideals, such as the promotion of *sanji hōkoku* (serving the nation through reproduction), the Metobo law and the official recognition of eugenically fit families. *Nihonjinron,* a body of discourse that emphasises the distinctiveness of Japanese society, culture, and national character,[45] has been used to promote cultural purity and uniqueness. It sustains an ethnonationalist imagination that positions the Japanese body—disciplined, thin, heterosexual, neurotypical—as the normative ideal. Within this tightly managed social landscape, witches can be seen as a counterpoint. They are too fat,

[43] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11sn283.8.

[44]Hiroko Kodama, 'Problems of underweight in young females and pregnant women in Japan,' *Japan Medical Association Journal* 53, no. 5 (2010).

[45] Kosaku Yoshino, 'Nihonjinron,' in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism,* ed. John Stone and Rutledge M. Dennis (Wiley, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118663202.wberen506.

too emotional, too undisciplined, too strange to fit into the national frame of usefulness. Yet rather than simply being rejected, they are repurposed, infantilised or rendered harmless by the narrative. Ultimately, the witches of Ghibli's films allow us to trace the contours of postwar Japanese society's evolving anxieties around gender, productivity, and identity. They become narrative spaces where fatness, queerness, neurodivergence, and maternal ambivalence are made visible highlighting the costs of normativity and the rich, if uneasy, potential of those who defy it. This analysis opens possibilities for examining fatness, queerness, and neurodivergence through an intersectional lens particularly within South Asian contexts, where such identities often remain stigmatised, overlooked, or woven subtly into the cultural fabric, making their forms of marginalisation harder to name yet deeply felt.

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