



## Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*: A Grueling Insight into Nihilism

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### Abstract

Akira Kurosawa's narrative techniques and excellent directive abilities are well portrayed in his movie, "Rashomon". With the inculcation of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophies on nihilism-in particular, moral nihilism, Kurosawa's languid existentialism is compared subpar to the author, Ryunosuke Akutagawa's nihilistic perspectives. This paper aims at showcasing the inherent selfishness of human beings, and the nihilistic nature of man, through the characters of the movie, "Rashomon". The character of the bystander is relative to the nature of the common man, and the hypocrisy of each of the characters is brought out into the limelight, in accordance with their nihilistic attitudes. The ambiguity of morality is questioned through the unreliable narrations of the characters, and the investigation into the ultimate "truth" is depicted as something relative and that which can be personally interpreted according to convenience and assumptions. Kurosawa's brilliance is depicted through his mastery of portraying the unreliability of the narratives not just through one character – but through four. This paper will also look to investigate the subjectivity of perception, the naturalism of interpretation and the innate underlying notion of nihilism in human beings.

Keywords: nihilism, existentialism, perspectivism.

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### 1. Introduction

The term "nihilism" is often compared and contrasted with a loss of interest in multiple aspects of life. With regard to nineteenth-century philosophers, nihilism was often negatively associated with transcendental idealism and eventually deteriorated into an amalgamation of destruction, immorality and anarchy. Among this plethora of chaos, Friedrich Nietzsche, the German philosopher, who is often strongly associated with the field of nihilism, rose to be. Nietzsche focused on the theme of moral nihilism and often argued that life has no meaning by itself and that we must go through it, as frightening and lonely as that will be. However, in contrast to other philosophers of nihilism, Nietzsche encourages us to revel in the positive aspect of the reality of one's life, and to celebrate the little joys in our lives. In fact, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche makes it a point to paraphrase this concept:

It is only the artists, and especially the theatrical artists, who have furnished men with eyes and ears to hear and see with some pleasure what everyone is in himself, what he experiences and aims at: it is only they who have taught us how to estimate the hero that is concealed in each of these common-place men, and the art of looking at ourselves from a distance as heroes, and as it was simplified and transfigured, - the art of "putting ourselves on the stage" before ourselves. (78-79)

In accordance with Nietzsche's philosophy of moral nihilism, the famous Japanese author, Ryunosuke Akutagawa wrote the titular short story, *Rashomon*. While Nietzsche proclaimed the existence of the meaning of life as nil, wherein one must search for their own sense of purpose by going through personal trials and tribulations, Akutagawa associated his belief in nihilism with a more moral sense of purpose, in which man is sometimes forced to make self-centric choices for justifiable purposes. He was more focused on the perspectives of different human beings, and was known for "taking trivial objects or events and enlarging on their significance to create a moral lesson or make a comment on humanity".

By absorbing the basic title, named after the setting- the infamous remains of the Rashomon Gate, situated in Kyoto, Japan, and the plot characteristics of Akutagawa's short stories – *Rashomon* and *In a Grove*, Akira Kurosawa weaves the plot of the 1950 Jidaigeki psychological crime/thriller movie, *Rashomon*. Kurosawa's direction and the usage of camera and rain add to the thrill and bring out the complexities of multiple points of view of human beings. Though Kurosawa's works are inherently dark and portray the vices of the real world in detail, *Rashomon* stands to be one of the finest works of all time to investigate the philosophy of justice.

Kurosawa's language in the film is not of his heritage, but of his art. Metaphors and motifs speak more truth than the characters do. Sunlight and shadows, summer heat and torrential rain interpret elements central to the film. The forest where the woodcutter stumbles upon the scene of the crime, with its thick foliage, is in itself symbolic of the truth shrouded by the jungles of the mind. Good and evil are told through a reflection of subjective and objective truth. (28-33)

Following Nietzsche's trail of nihilistic perspectives, we see the character of the bystander in the movie, who has come to seek shelter from the sudden downpour, under the porch of the Rashomon Gate, and ends up bearing witness to the tale of a bride's rape and her husband's murder, from the perspectives of a woodcutter and a priest. The bystander remains apathetic throughout, and hints directly at the priest on occasional intervals that he merely wishes to pass his time while waiting for the rain to subside, and that he has no interest in listening to sermons. When he is initially informed that the duo bore witness to a young samurai's murder, the bystander retaliates with a mere "Just one? So what?".

The bystander's indifference and pertaining nihilistic attitudes toward human life are highlighted from the initial point of the movie and become shockingly apathetic as the plot progresses. However, unlike Akutagawa's apparent nihilism, Kurosawa aims to bring out an existentialist perspective as well. This is excellently portrayed through the characters of the lumberjack and the priest, especially when the latter exclaims, "This time, I may finally lose my faith in the human soul". The priest resembles closely, what one might call, "the humanistic representative", while the bystander is the closest to a nihilistic and transcendental representative. Kurosawa's nihilism narrows down yet again to Nietzsche's philosophy of the ultimate truth – the bystander, being the viewer of "absolute truth".

This self-centric and gloating attitude that Kurosawa tries to portray through his perspectivism, is brought out by the characters of the bride, the dacoit and the dead Samurai's spirit. Through each of the characters, we see how they remain the victim or the "last man standing", as they weave and twist their perspectives based on their own subconscious egos where they are the textbook protagonist. From a noble samurai fighting for his wife's honour

to a damsel in distress who had to be rescued by a man, to a disgruntled robber who fought valiantly – all three perspectives put each of them on a high pedestal of their own.

While Tajomaru, the dacoit, proclaimed his bravery and his grandeur fight with the samurai, and his apparent seduction of the bride, the woman claimed to have been raped and that she was frightened not just by the situation, but also by her husband's apparent indifference after being tied up and forced to watch the horror unveil. The bride's mortification and shame are highlighted and the disgusting patriarchal mindset of the Showa era of Japan is brought out through the samurai's blank stare, despite being tied to a boulder, at the reality that his wife was "claimed" by another man. Through the dead Samurai's spirit, we get another perspective, of how the vixen-like bride tried to elope with the dacoit after falling prey to his charms, and asked for the murder of her husband, for she could not bear to live with the shame.

Here, we can see how Kurosawa employs supernatural elements in an otherwise inquisitive and realistic film. However, though there is the inclusion of a spirit, the narration merely adds to the existing realism and highlights the emotions necessary for the scene.

Kurosawa's direction and excellent narrative techniques are applied through the character of the woodcutter, whose perspective ultimately does not go hand in hand with the statement he gave to the police when he claimed that he came upon the corpse of a man. In retrospect, he had merely tried to stay away from the difficult situation by claiming to have merely seen a dead man, when in reality he had witnessed the entirety of the murder, by the dacoit, Tajomaru. When the woodcutter chastises the bystander for stealing a *Kimono* that was used to cover an abandoned baby on the porch in order to keep it warm, the latter refutes by mocking him that he had evaded a difficult situation and lied to the police in order to save his own skin, does not have the right to question him. Moreover, the woodcutter's description of the three characters is far from what they had narrated. The dacoit, Tajomaru appeared more cowardly and menacing than he had portrayed himself to be. The Samurai was more selfish and ridiculous and was not at all as gallant or tragic as he portrayed himself to be. Finally, the bride, who had portrayed herself as a damsel in distress was, in fact, a cunning and shrewd woman, who was smart enough to use her opportunities.

Impressively enough, Kurosawa makes sure to slip in some strangely interesting viewpoints. One of them is the scene of the magistrate's office, where the trial takes place. Though the scene is built around the tension of the revelation of the ultimate "truth", we do not see any character particular to the title of the magistrate. In fact, when the trial takes place, it seems more like the trial takes place in front of the viewers directly. Rather than a third perspective, we are introduced through a second perspective, where it is us, as the audience, looking directly at the trial in front of us. It puts us in a position of judging, and suddenly, Kurosawa makes it seem as though we are the "magistrate" in question. Kurosawa makes sure to involve the audience through his direction and highlight the fact that *Rashomon* is not merely a movie, with nihilistic or dark characters and plot, but rather that it is a movie that makes us open our eyes and judge the situation for ourselves.

The multiple perspectives merely add to the statement being made, that one cannot base a situation purely based on one's narration. This unreliable narrative, which is again, a trademark characteristic of Akira Kurosawa's films, makes the audience truly question if they can base their judgement on the multiple perspectives of the various characters involved. We

also see how the woodcutter's perspective, which was supposed to be the final and unblemished perspective, owing to the fact that he was merely an eye-witness and not at all involved in the situation, is still twisted according to his convenience. When questioned by the bystander regarding some loopholes in his narration, he confesses that he stole the miniature jewelled dagger of the bride, and planned to sell it to get some money. He also twists his discovery of the corpse, as in reality, he had not merely stumbled upon a dead body but had witnessed the whole murder. As critics have mentioned, "Rashomon is not a film that answers questions, but one that questions answers."

Kurosawa's portrayal of the three characters through the eyes of the woodcutter, was yet another portrayal of human's inherent nihilistic belief, as all of them acted upon their own self-centric needs, and decidedly believed that they were the ones who were wronged. In fact, when the priest exclaimed that he refused to believe that man could be so vile and horrendous, the bystander replied with a vicious, "Is there anyone who is really good? Maybe goodness is just make-believe. Man, just wants to forget the bad stuff, and believe in the made-up good stuff. It's easier that way." As the story progresses, we see the aspect of dishonesty being assessed time and again. Even during Tajomaru's trial, we see the bystander commenting, "It's human to lie. Most of the time, we can't even be honest to ourselves. It is because they are weak that men lie-even to themselves". Yet, despite this assessment, we also see the nihilism centred around his beliefs, as he proclaims that he does not care if it was a lie, as long as it was entertaining.

One might argue that Kurosawa portrayed the inherent nihilism of human beings through his direction. However, it is a wide contrast between the nihilistic nature of Akutagawa's original works, and the plot acquisition of the film, and the story evolves from a purely nihilistic ethos to a slightly transcendental one. In fact, one might find that Kurosawa's direction was more focused on existentialism rather than pure nihilism, especially through the portrayal of the characters of the priest and the woodcutter. Towards the end, when confronted with shame and humiliation, after the woodcutter is chastised by the bystander, who leaves with the stolen *Kimono*, the former quietly hangs his head down in repentance. He knows that his act of stealing the bride's pearl dagger and selling it is in no way a decent act. However, we, as the audience, sympathize with the old man, as he does so to feed his family. Kurosawa employs his perspectivism to induce catharsis in the audience.

Kurosawa's directive abilities are brought out into the limelight yet again, as the character does not mention doing so directly, but in fact, offers to take the child home, and mutters, "I already have five children at home. Another mouth wouldn't make much of a difference." The priest who suspected his actions is immediately overcome with guilt and apologizes profusely, handing over the child to him. Kurosawa brings out the good in humans at the very end, with the portrayal of the priest thanking the woodcutter, and claiming that his belief in humanity had not completely faded away that evening, solely because of the woodcutter.

The hypocrisy of each of the characters is woven with a nihilistic after-taste, in order to achieve the catharsis that Kurosawa aims to bring about. In fact, his directive techniques in *Rashomon* and their excellence have led to the creation of the phenomenon and way of storytelling, termed the "Rashomon effect". Though the Rashomon effect has been associated with the unreliability of the narration by the characters and has been described by the general public as a term that "addresses the motives, mechanism, and occurrences of the reporting on

the circumstance and addresses contested interpretations of events, the existence of disagreements regarding the evidence of events, and subjectivity versus objectivity in human perception, memory, and reporting”, it is widely used in movies to build up the thrill and suspense and to create a sense of chaos and confusion among the viewers. Despite the myriad of human perspectives, there is no absolute unity – no absolute truth. This brings us back to the philosophy of Nietzsche wherein he states that life has no inherent meaning to it, and it is our sense of duty to search for that meaning. In accordance with this belief, Kurosawa’s existentialism is more transcendental, unlike Akutagawa’s predominant nihilistic background. Thus, Akira Kurosawa’s existential precedence over Akutagawa’s absolute nihilism is vocal throughout the entirety of the film. While Kurosawa’s nihilistic beliefs aim at inherently understanding the underlying nature of man and the reason why man self-destructs and destroys the very morals, which he built his shaky ground upon, Akutagawa’s nihilism is more rampant, as he focuses on bringing out the hypocrisy and darkness tinging the hearts of human beings.

Nihilism by itself is a stain upon the human heart – one that is weary of the world and is exhausted by the existing notions and beliefs it is surrounded with; one that is profoundly filled with the urge to escape into the far beyond; one that yearns to remove itself from the world it knows of, and place itself in a world that suits it better. Nihilism, though called and treated as a disease of the heart, by Nietzsche, is a state of existence that is so inherently and deeply etched into the souls of the mundane – an existence that they do not approve of, yet do not know how to escape. It is a state of the mind that is tired of the filth that surrounds the world, and knows not how to focus on the tiny little things that make this world a better place to live in. Akutagawa and many other Japanese writers like Osamu Dazai, focus on the intrinsic horrors of the nihilistic heart and mind, which Kurosawa has brilliantly directed and showcased through the character of the passerby, who remains apathetic and borderline inhumane towards the sufferings of others. Murder does not faze him, nor does rape. All he has to react to is the story, to understand the plot and ask the woodcutter to narrate the story as he is curious. He is merely acting as his role in the scenario – one that is of a passerby, who merely listens and does not trifle himself with the concerns of the others. The priest and the woodcutter are all surprised at his indifference and apathy, but accept it quickly enough – an indicator that this is not the only nihilist that they have come across.

It hints at a world which is mostly apathetic and indifferent, even to the cries of a baby, as we see in the case of the passerby exiting the scene after stealing the blanket of the baby. No remorse or guilt is portrayed as the passerby merely did what he had to, in the best of his personal interests. It hints at a world whose cogs run on the belief that nothing in this world truly matters. Thus, when the woodcutter decides to adopt the infant, and when the priest exclaims that he might finally have faith in humanity, it brings about a collective feeling of relief – relief at the fact that all hope has not yet been abandoned. Kurosawa, despite portraying deep onsets of hopelessness in a pathetic world, filled with selfishness and misery, chooses to end the movie on a note of solace. The woodcutter, whose perspective was not fixed and aroused suspicion among the audience, especially after he confessed to stealing the dagger of the bride, after witnessing the entire murder, was portrayed as a self-centred coward. However, he was the only one, even in sharp contrast to the priest, who was the most pious among the trio, to have actually adopted the wailing infant at the very end. With not

enough means and five other children to feed, the woodcutter would have likely been the last person for the audience to have expected to adopt the child. However, Kurosawa's distinction between a person's nature and a person's situation shines through, as the audience is clearly moved by the woodcutter's actions.

Suddenly, an understanding is developed. The woodcutter was extremely poor and any attempt to interfere in a fight between a noble samurai and an infamous samurai, or to help a noble lady and protect her honour, would end up in him becoming the scapegoat in the situation. He might be put through multiple rounds of questioning by the police and the magistrate's office, and in a world portrayed to be corrupt, it was fairly easy for the entire weight of the murder to fall upon the woodcutter. All these problems would arise only if the woodcutter survived the situation in the first place – which was highly unlikely as he was a mere commoner who did not have any experience in a fight. Politics would play a major role as well, since the woman in question, who needed help, was a noble lady in a patriarchal setting. All these notions make us understand why the woodcutter could not have possibly interfered in the fight. As for the dagger, the woodcutter could have easily sold it to earn some money and feed his family. After all, being a woodcutter does not entail you to an amount more than pennies – just enough to barely fill your family's stomachs.

## 2. Conclusion

While Kurosawa portrays solid nihilism and the permanent notion of someone who cannot find value or meaning in anything, and merely exists to mind their own lives, through the character of the passerby, he also portrays the cure for the nihilistic heart, according to Nietzsche- which is to find reasons to live and celebrate the little joys in life. He does this through the character of the woodcutter, who despite the cruelty and apathy he is surrounded with, chooses to celebrate the birth of a new life, by adopting the infant, and also resolves to remain true to his heart – a heart that has not been conditioned or frozen by the filthy murk of darkness surrounding the world. While Kurosawa chooses to portray the exhausted heart, filled with pain after witnessing the plight of the real world, through the character of the priest, the woodcutter acts as a beacon of light shining through, watering the priest's heart with drops of hope, that mankind has not lost all hope and goodness in them, after all. There is also a slight portrayal of irony, as the priest who is supposed to be the actual harbinger of hope and solace, is merely a passive character. Perhaps, this is also an example of Kurosawa's brilliance, as we see the twines of nihilism, existentialism, beauty and pain, all interweaving into a single thick rope, we call humanity.

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