

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

How to Cite: Thelen, T. (2021) Real Mermaid vs. Nuclear Power Plant: Ecofeminist Vengeance and *Ama Divers* in Japanese Horror. *Gothic Nature*. 2, pp. 175-201. Available from: <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/>.

Published: March 2021.

Peer Review:

All articles that appear in the *Gothic Nature* journal have been peer reviewed through a fully anonymised process.

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Open Access:

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COVER CREDIT:

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**Real Mermaid vs. Nuclear Power Plant:
Ecofeminist Vengeance and *Ama* Divers in Japanese Horror**

Timo Thelen

ABSTRACT

This essay draws on ecofeminist theory to investigate cultural images of Japanese *ama* divers (professional free-diving women) in the twentieth century and their relationship with Nature through the examination of Japanese horror movies, with a particular focus on Toshiharu Ikeda's *Mermaid Legend* (1984). Japanese folklore traditions lack an obvious equivalent to the Western mermaid. With no clear counterpart for this seductive and potentially dangerous female of the ocean, I argue that *ama* divers serve as the 'real mermaids' of Japan: mysterious and increasingly exoticised figures who were interpreted in similar veins to the mythical mermaid throughout the twentieth century. Much like mermaids, they are imagined in both foreign and Japanese media texts from the 1950s/60s as female 'Others' that are closely linked to the seas. They are envisioned as sexualised and 'conquerable'—echoing anthropocentric fantasies of dominating and defeating a much-feminised construction of 'Nature'. The 1984 horror movie *Mermaid Legend*, however, stands out in opposition, refreshingly subverting this trope through its innovative and violent story of ecofeminist vengeance. The movie centres on an *ama* diver allied with Nature, who seeks revenge for her own violation as well as that of the oceanic environment which is menaced by the construction of a nuclear power plant. By telling this story, *Mermaid Legend* provides a strong ecofeminist message thoroughly unique for a media text of its time—and invites us to reconsider these 'real mermaids' in contemporary times in the context of Gothic Nature.

The ocean is not only Earth's largest ecosystem but also a rich habitat of horror tropes. Emily Alder (2017), who coined the term 'nautical Gothic' for horror/Gothic texts centring on the ocean

or oceanic themes, suggests a reading that ‘requires recognition of the sea as environment and medium as well as metaphorical device, and, in doing so, shifts us towards an oceanic critical perspective’ (p. 5). In other words, it is fruitful to bring together the different but often conflated meanings that the ocean—as well as Nature—possesses, both as an actual environment and the coincidental product of cultural imagination. I propose that the ecofeminist lens can offer a suitable approach here, because it examines the mechanisms of oppression for both women and Nature that emerge in media texts as well as in human society and the environment.

When looking for an oceanic trope clearly linked to femininity, the mermaid is an obvious choice. Jon Hackett and Séan Harrington (2018) give three arguments for why ocean creatures in popular culture provide valuable research objects: (1) they offer ‘an evident mythical resource’ for re-interpretations and re-imaginings; (2) they can be used as a ‘figure for the unrepresentable, the sublime or the ineffable’; and (3) they ‘provide tropes for representing social or cultural concerns’ including environmental issues and gender (pp. 2-3). All these arguments are very applicable to the mermaid with its countless portrayals from different times and cultures, its impossible human-fish hybrid body, and last but not least its sexualisation in the (stereotypically) male gaze.

In the last decade, however, many Western media texts, for instance the TV series *Siren* (2018–20) or the movie *The Lure* (2015),¹ depict mermaids from a progressive feminist and environmentalist perspective (Angierski, 2019: pp. 300–303). This essay will analyse another such movie, *Mermaid Legend* (1984), which contains a strong ecofeminist message and which is, moreover, three decades older and from Japan, a culture with no folklore tradition of mermaids. Thus, maybe the most paradoxical aspect of this movie is that it does not even feature a mystical mermaid but a so-called ‘real mermaid’: an *ama* diver (professional free-diving woman). Yet, scavenging this curious and—from the Western perspective—‘exotic’ relic will exemplify that the idea of ecofeminist retribution also exists in non-Western cultures, here Japan, and that the media depiction of this idea is not exclusively to be found in recent times. Furthermore, this movie deals with ecoterrorist resistance against nuclear power in Japan—and let us not forget this is arguably the origin of ‘ecohorror’—a country where the general acceptance of nuclear energy in politics and mainstream media remains solid, even after the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi incident.

¹ See Issue I of *Gothic Nature* for Kristen Angierski’s discussion of ‘siren sisters’ and review of *The Lure*.

This essay starts with a short introduction to some broad ecofeminist ideas, namely the construction of both women and Nature as objects of male domination and violation, provoking female rage and vengeance. I assemble these theories with the trope of the mermaid as an illustrative allegory of feminised nature, then discuss the absence of Western-like mermaids in Japanese folklore traditions. In the second part, I introduce my theory that *ama* divers can be regarded as substitutes for the mermaid trope. I analyse the cultural history of *ama* divers' depictions, recalling their sexualisation and exoticisation, which was firmly influenced by Western spectators. I briefly discuss two *ama* diver horror movies from the 1950s as examples of how these women were conventionally constructed as female 'Others' close to Nature. In the third part, I then compare these observations with the 1980s movie *Mermaid Legend*, where the *ama* diver takes merciless revenge for the violation of both herself and the oceanic environment. In the conclusion, I summarise and draw connections between these ideas, making clear that *Mermaid Legend* provides an ecofeminist—and ecohorror—critique that was quite ahead of its time.

Assembling Ecofeminism and the Vengeful Mermaid

Many cultures—especially in the Western world, but not exclusively—have a long tradition of gendering Nature and the environment. The most prominent example is of course the trope of Mother Nature, which still persists in modern popular culture (Roach, 2003). The logic of gendering Nature implies a quasi-naturalised binary and thus becomes a powerful ideology for the domination and oppression of both women and Nature. As Karen J. Warren (1997) notes: 'The exploitation of nature and animals is justified by feminizing them; the exploitation of women is justified by naturalizing them' (p. 12). Ecofeminist scholars aim at deconstructing and overcoming these issues as well as the exploitative systems based on them. Gerta Gaard (1993a) notes: 'ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature' (p. 1). The tendency to feminise Nature can be traced back to seventeenth-century European philosophy (Merchant, 2009); yet, as Simon C. Estok (2018) has noted, environmental concerns in twenty-first-century media continue to present a sexist ecophobia 'simply perpetuating the idea that nature (and women) should be controlled' (p. 54). In

addition to gender biased media representations of Nature, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (2014) argue that ‘the impact on women of ecological disasters and deterioration was harder than on men, and also, that everywhere, women were the first to protest against environmental destruction’ (pp. 2–3), drawing on nuclear power plant incidents and anti-nuclear movements as one example.

Val Plumwood (1993) claims that ‘the association of women with nature and men with culture or reason can still be seen as providing much of the basis of the cultural elaboration of women’s oppression’ (p. 11). She notes that this ‘master story of western culture [...] has spoken mainly of conquest and control, of capture and use, of destruction and incorporation’ (p. 196). This ‘conquest’ is often illustrated by images of sexual violence. Gaard (1993b) observes that ‘[i]n Western culture, to feminize nature is to sexualize nature. Phrases like “virgin forest” and “rape of the land” suggest various “uses” and “potentials” for nature. In these constructions, rape is something that simply “happens” to nature and to women’ (p. 304). Rape here, however, is more than a mere expression of domination, as Susan Griffin (1997) notes, ‘it describes the desire to conquer and violate woman and nature, and a less evident fear of both’ (p. 225).

This aspect of fear is crucial for the genre of horror. Fred Botting (2014) notes, in relation to the role of female heroines and male villains in classic Gothic texts, that ‘[h]er vulnerability and his violence play out the lawlessness and insecurity manifested in settings and landscapes’ (p. 5). Likewise, the oppression and vulnerability of the female subject is commonly presented in ecoGothic/ecohorror texts and reflected in their environments. Estok (2018) argues that an adverse perception of nature is essential to provoke the fear of Nature/the environment, which he calls ‘ecophobia’: ‘Ecophobia is all about power. It is the something-other-than-humanness that is dangerous in the monster and the mad, and in order for this danger to have any potency, we need a fairly hostile conception of the natural world’ (p. 124). He draws on witchcraft and hysteria as an example for this madness: ‘Such deformity [witchcraft/hysteria] is an environmental issue not only because of the sexist association of women (as a general category) with the natural world but also because of the many links imagined specifically between witches and the natural environment’ (p. 127).

Madness or chaos not only stands in opposition to the idea of reason, which is primarily attributed to men in Western tradition/philosophy (Plumwood, 1993), but can lead to vengeful violence against the dominating forces. Estok (2019) describes that '[t]he imagining of nature as a menacing threat is central to ecoGothic texts. The menace can (and often does) involve the idea of nature as an agent bent on vengeance. An agential nature is menacing in itself; a vengeful one is truly horrifying' (p. 39). Looking at Western horror films from a feminist viewpoint, Isabel Cristina Pinedo (1997) argues that '[t]he horror film speaks both *to* women and *about* them, often by articulating the legitimacy of female rage in the face of male aggression' (p. 95, italics in original). This female rage, that is the reaction to male oppression, can coincide with environmental/ecological themes. Elizabeth Parker (2020) observes this tendency in analysing contemporary horror movies including elements of ecoGothic/ecohorror: '[W]omen and nature are portrayed as in dark sympathy with one another. Allied by a shared history of being subjugated, backgrounded, and silenced, they promise ecofeminist revenge' (p. 114). For this trope of women allied with a dark and vengeful nature, she proposes the term 'she-devil in the wilderness' (p. 117). In the case of dark and Gothic water-related narratives, the mermaid may thus become the 'she-devil in the ocean'. Boria Sax (2000) states that '[m]any tales record of terrible revenge taken by mermaids on those who harmed or offended them' (p. 49) and much academic attention has been devoted to mermaids, sirens, or similar merfolk (e.g., Fryers, 2018; Hayward, 2018, etc.). In pre-modern narratives, mermaids were commonly depicted as potentially dangerous and seductive supernatural female human-fish hybrids, who lured men—mostly sailors—into tragedy.² Following from the legacy of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Little Mermaid* (2004 [1837]), which employed a more sentimental and romantic approach to the motif, popular mainstream movies at end of the twentieth century like Disney's *Little Mermaid* (1989) or *Splash* (1984) established a bright and cheerful image of mermaids that approached kitsch and was translated into consumerism (e.g., Starbuck's mermaid brand logo) (Sax, 2000: p. 53). However, in the last decades, more progressive and dark narratives of mermaids have emerged that depict the motif from critical feminist perspectives, like the Russian movie *Mermaid* (2007) or the Polish movie *The Lure* (2015) (Doubivko, 2011; Angierski, 2019). For instance, Kirsten Angierski (2019) argues that '*The Lure* rewrites the anti-feminist messaging of the Danish original by giving the

² Sax (2000) identifies the frequent banning of women from ships as an important reason for the many mermaid legends and their sexualisation through the male gaze (pp. 48-49).

doomed mermaid a growling vampiric sister who takes ecohorrific revenge on the exploitative humans' (p. 300).

Looking at Japan, the trope of a Western-like mermaid was unknown until the late nineteenth century, although Japan's pre-modern culture is rich with monstrous water creatures like the *kappa*, an infamous river demon possessing visual features of ape and turtle. The creature most similar to a mermaid is the *ningyo* (human-fish, *Figure 1*),³ which appears for instance in Toriyama Sekien's⁴ (1712–1788) bestiaries of folklore creatures (third volume, 1780) (Toriyama, 2005: p. 140). A *ningyo* has human or ape-like features from its shoulders upwards and possibly an animalistic face, but its arms possess webbing between the fingers and its fish-like main body ends in a fin. Generally, a *ningyo* looks more obviously monstrous than its Western counterparts and is genderless. The heroine *Ponyo* of director Miyazaki Hayao's eponymous animation movie (2008) can be considered a 'cute' *ningyo*. Even though *ningyo* is often translated as 'mermaid'—for instance Andersen's tale is titled '*Ningyo hime*' (human-fish princess) in Japanese—the folklore backgrounds of both are quite different. In recent decades, the adopted foreign term *māmeido* ('mermaid' written in the Japanese syllabary alphabet katakana used for introducing or translating foreign words) is also sometimes used to refer to Western-like mermaids, whilst pop cultural narratives in anime and manga tend to mix up both terms and concepts (Hayward, 2018: pp. 55–58).

³ In his collections of Japanese folklore tales, Lafcadio Hearn (known as Koizumi Yakumo in Japan, 1850–1904) mentions one creature similar to the *ningyo*: the grotesque and genderless human-fish hybrid *samebito* (shark man) (Ueda, 1975: pp. 37-43).

⁴ For Japanese names, the family comes first followed by the personal name.



Figure 1: Toriyama Sekien's *ningyo* (1780)

While clear mermaid equivalents may be missing, vengeful female ghosts are a popular trope with a long tradition in East Asian culture (Scherer, 2016). For instance, internationally known J-horror movies from late 1990s/early 2000s prominently featured avenging female ghosts potentially linked to Nature, and especially water. Elisabeth Scherer (2016) argues that Sadako from *Ring* (*Ringu*, 1998) ‘originates from the island Izu-Ōshima, that is to say from the exterior, the marginal—from a zone where nature is rough and uncontrollable [...] the idea of untamed nature [is] thus constructed as a source of the uncanny’ (p. 74). In addition, the movie vaguely suggests that Sadako’s true father might be sea demon (White, 2005: p. 40). The opening sequence of ocean waves fading into the blue screen of the ghostly videotape also underscores this connection. In *Dark Water* (*Honogurai mizu no soko kara*, 2002), the ghost of a woman drowned in a water tank terrorises an apartment complex and is allied with the wet element. However, both movies are mainly located in decaying technologised urban environments that generate the horrific atmosphere, and the vengeful female ghosts are linked to collapsing nuclear families, not to Nature (Scherer, 2016).

In other words, the watery creatures from pre-modern Japanese sources as well as the female ghosts from modern J-horror movies seemingly possess very little connection to the idea of a feminised Nature comparable to the trope of Western mermaids. However, I suspect that in Japan the absence of a seductive female ocean creature was at least in part filled by a similar trope, one grounded in reality: that of *ama* divers, the so-called ‘real mermaids’. In the following section, I will explain why and how these women became culturally mystified and constructed as sexualised female ‘Others’ intimately linked to Nature.

***Ama* Divers: The Real Mermaids of Japan?**

The term ‘*ama*’ in Japanese combines the characters of ‘ocean’ and ‘woman’. It refers to the profession of women diving for abalone, turban snails, sea urchins, and seaweed, which dates back to ancient times in Japan and Korea (there known as *haenyeo*). It can be estimated that there are still approximately 1,000 active *ama* divers in Japan, who are predominately but not exclusively women. Today, *ama* divers still use very limited modern equipment; they did not wear wetsuits until roughly the 1960s and reject the use of oxygen tanks. The common image of them being pearl divers traces back to the 1930s, when Mikimoto—the first company to cultivate pearl oysters—hired them as staff for placing and heaving oysters. Ironically, their jobs in the pearl industry have long been taken over by machines, although Mikimoto still employs them as ‘mascots’ and hosts ‘*ama* diving shows’ in their oyster theme park/museum Mikimoto Island. Many *ama* diving communities used to migrate within Japan during medieval times in search of new or better diving grounds. Consequently, *ama* divers were often meant to live in separate settlements and experienced social exclusion as outsiders, some groups even until the 1980s (Thelen, 2017: p. 13). Their ‘special’ and ‘low’ social status makes them perfect ‘monsters’ in horror narratives, as the ‘return of the repressed’ (Wood, 1978) is of course a common and popular trope of the genre.

The mystification of *ama* divers can be traced back to the pre-modern era. In the Edo period (1600–1868), Dolores P. Martinez (2004) perceives an opposition between two figures of Japanese femininity: the *geisha* and the *ama* (pp. 35–36). While the *geisha* belongs to the so-called ‘floating world’ which is characterised by a cultivated femininity and sexual constraint, the *ama* divers work in the *real* ‘floating world’, representing pure and uncivilised femininity as well as sexual freedom.

In other words, they came to reflect an untamed female nature, somehow similar to that imagined in the West—a nature which was something to be conquered, controlled, and violated. Following this train of thought, it is no surprise that *ama* divers were depicted in many historical woodcut prints (*ukiyo-e*) belonging to the category of *shunga* (erotic art). The most famous example is Hokusai Katsushika's *Tako to ama* (octopus and *ama* diver,⁵ 1814), which is commonly translated as 'The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife'. This artwork depicts sexual intercourse between a woman and two octopuses, and has been countlessly referenced in modern pop culture (Carbone, 2018). Despite the possible interpretation that Hokusai aimed to parody and vulgarise the folktale of Princess Tamatori and the Dragon King (Talerico, 2001), the picture nonetheless reflects the cultural tendency to sexualise *ama* divers at that time, as well as imagining them in a position more 'natural' than human, having intercourse with ocean creatures. Other woodcut prints of that time depict them similarly, for instance being raped by *kappa* (river demons).

Even though it might sound paradoxical, the academic discussion on *ama* divers in the mid-twentieth century fostered their image as a mysterious Other. Segawa Kiyoko (1895–1984), one of the leading Japanese folklore scholars of her time, studied *ama* diving communities between the 1920s and 1950s. Her research describes *ama* women as strong and individualistic, in contrast to urban middle-class women (Martinez, 2004: p. 40). During the 1950s, Japanese humanities scholars were unable to go abroad in the aftermath of the war. Thus many of them conducted extensive fieldwork in remote and supposedly exotic areas inside of Japan including *ama* diving villages. In response to this development, some *ama* divers opened inns for the travelling researchers and began engaging in tourism. Later on, they started attracting visitors coming on holiday trips, and their stereotype of being 'sexy women' proved to be especially alluring (Martinez, 2004: p. 149).

The conflation of Western mermaid images with Japanese *ama* divers also occurred during this time. Hungarian photographer Francis Haar's book of *ama* in Mie Prefecture titled *Mermaid of Japan* (1954) was the first—and today relatively forgotten—combination of mermaid imagery

⁵ It is unclear whether the depicted woman is an *ama* diver or the wife of a fisherman, as a minor meaning of the term *ama* is 'fisherman's wife', but considering how widespread erotic woodcut prints of *ama* divers were in that era, it is more reasonable to think of the depicted woman as an *ama* diver.

with *ama* divers. Haar employs the term mermaid as a synonym for *ama* divers throughout his book, which is full of photos of bare-breasted *ama* divers. A few years after Haar, the Italian ethnographer Fosco Maraini (1962) went in search of the ‘real *ama*’ (p. 19), since many *ama* divers in Mie were actually hired by the pearl company Mikimoto and, in Maraini’s nostalgic view, were thus spoiled and distanced from their roots. Eventually, he found the ‘real *ama*’ on Hegura Island, a remote small isle in Ishikawa Prefecture. The *ama* divers there were still diving quasi-naked, wearing only loincloths at the time of Maraini’s visit in 1954. In his well-known photo book and travelogue *Hekura* [sic]: *The Diving Girls’ Island* (1962), he calls *ama* divers ‘sea goddesses’ (p. 19) and ‘children of Neptune’ (p. 37). The women here appear as a kind of female Asian ‘noble savage’ yet unspoiled by civilisation and primordially connected to Nature, captured through the male gaze of Maraini’s camera lens, which objectified their bodies. Some video footage filmed by Maraini was later used in the Italian-Japanese-American sexploitation movie *Violated Paradise* (1963), which tells the story of a young *ama* diver who goes to Tokyo to become a *geisha* but is eventually disappointed by urban society, remembers her roots, and moves back to her *ama* divers’ island. As the movie’s title alludes, the rather Western idea of a ‘violated’ feminised Nature was transferred to a Japanese context here, and more precisely to the case of *ama* divers. Maraini’s work strongly influenced Ian Fleming’s James Bond novel *You Only Live Twice* (1964). The *ama* diver Kissy Suzuki (played by Hama Mie in the 1967 movie adaptation) is both conquered and saved by James Bond. The *ama* divers—here possibly a *pars pro toto* for all Japanese women—are portrayed as being close to Nature. The movie in particular established the image of ‘sexy’ *ama* divers in the Western world,⁶ which even led to cultural appropriations of ‘blond, blue-eyed divers [being] billed as “Japanese *ama*, or Pearl-Divers”’ in California and Florida at that time (Martinez, 2004: p. 37).

These new interpretations from a Western perspective conflated ideas of mermaids and a feminised Nature with older native traditions and so influenced the cultural reception of *ama* divers inside of Japan. Kogure Shūzō (2018) explains the popularity of *ama* depictions in Japanese movies in the post-war period by the fact that these female figures expose and represent ‘healthy

⁶ In another example of the contemporary cultural impact, the US-American *Playboy* of June 1967 featured a six-pages-long ‘Exotic Pictorial of the Oriental Beauties from *You Only Live Twice*’ with Hama Mie and other Japanese actresses from the movies posing, for instance, naked in nature and the ocean, recalling their roles as *ama* divers.

beauty' and 'wildness' (p. 23). He considers the commercially successful movie adaptation of Mishima Yukio's novel *Sound of the Waves* (*Shiosai*, both 1954)⁷ as the beginning of a long-standing trend for *ama* movies: between 1945 and 1974, at least 33 Japanese movies dealt with *ama* divers as a major topic. Though *Sound of the Waves* is an innocent love story between an *ama* diver and a fisherman, most later movies belong to the genre of erotica (*pinku eiga*).

The film company Shintōhō (1947–1961) released a series of five movies related to *ama* divers in the late 1950s. They were labelled as 'erotic grotesque' (*eroguro*) because they combine eroticised depictions of glamorous actresses with elements of crime, violence, and horror (Kogure, 2018: p. 23). Three of them fall under the category of horror movies: *Cannibal Ama* (*Hitogui ama*, 1958; considered lost), *Girl Diver of Spook Mansion* (*Ama no bakemono yashiki*, 1959), and *Ghost of the Girl Diver* (*Kaidan ama yūrei*, 1960). These three are the only horror movies centring on *ama* divers, besides the much later *Mermaid Legend* (1984).

Girl Diver of Spook Mansion and *Ghost of the Girl Diver* both follow a similar generic story. In a remote coastal village, a series of mysterious murders occur that seem related to the vengeful ghosts of *ama* divers. The horrific elements, however, are surprisingly absent in the oceanic motifs and visuals (*Ghost of the Girl Diver* at least shows one victim being pulled into the water, and another is stabbed underwater while diving). In the same vein, the ghosts look rather standard for Japanese horror media texts—pale deformed faces, ruffled hair, clad in white dresses with blood spots (Scherer, 2016: p. 62)—and were hardly marked as *ama* divers. In both movies, men from the city come to solve these problems, revealing that the ghostly menaces in each case can in fact be exposed and demasked as they are mere costumes adorned by the entirely human. Such a rational debunking of supernatural horror is typical of Japanese horror movies in the 1950s (Scherer, 2014). In other words, reason—which is likely associated with men and culture (Plumwood, 1993)—triumphs over Nature, women, and superstition.

In both movies, the *ama* divers and their families are shown as the marginalised and repressed 'Others' of the coastal countryside, living in archaic communities outside of modern

⁷ Curiously, the inspiration for *Sound of the Waves* came from Mishima's travel experience in Europe and the ancient Greek tale of *Daphnis and Chloe* (Kinkley, 2006: p. 55).

society. They are loud and impulsive, living near the shore in rustic hamlets, and they believe in the supernatural, as demonstrated for example in performed exorcism rituals against the seeming vengeful ghosts. Most ‘ordinary’ Japanese, in contrast, live in a civilised urban environment, wear Western clothes, and inhabit Western-style houses. They see the *ama* divers through a discriminating and eroticising lens. The *ama* divers here wear thoroughly inauthentic white bikinis, which sometimes even slip away in the diving scenes and turn transparent when leaving the water (*Figure 2*). Even though the female bodies were deliberately intended to appeal to voyeuristic male gazing, this kind of depiction managed to avoid censorship.



Figure 2: Ama women after diving (Girl Diver of Spook Mansion, 1959: 00:03:28).

In *Girl Diver of Spook Mansion* as well as in *Ghost of the Girl Diver*, *ama* divers are linked to Nature, depicted in healthy beauty, and associated with primordial wilderness. The two movies similarly contain extended fight scenes on the shore, which resemble mud wrestling, in which *ama* divers wallow in the wet sand and waves. Their rage and madness in these scenes presented not as a reaction against male oppression or misbehaviour, but rather as their archaic way of solving conflicts. The instances of *ama* women in water, in contrast, create a peaceful image, constructing them as imitate allies of nature. The diving scenes are very similar in the two movies—they even share ca. 90 seconds of the same footage (Kogure, 2018: p. 32). Accompanied by dreamy background music, the camera focuses on the female bodies joyfully swimming and diving around in clean, bright water, evoking the impression of an idyllic harmony between *ama* divers and

Nature. This aesthetic resembles the early twentieth-century ocean-themed fantasy movies starring professional swimmer Annette Kellerman (1887–1975), the ‘Australian mermaid’, like *Neptune’s Daughter* (1914) or *Venus of the South Seas* (1924), in which swimming/diving and romantic imagery were blended (Mortensen, 2018). Kogure (2018) argues that in *Girl Diver of Spook Mansion* and *Ghost of the Girl Diver*—like in all movies of Shintōhō’s *ama* movie series—*ama* divers were not necessary for the story but predominantly served promotional purposes (p. 33). Their depictions were meant to satisfy the male audience’s desire for naked skin and ‘natural’ femininity. Thus it also comes as no surprise that both movies contain sexual violence against *ama* divers, i.e. the symbolic simultaneous conquest of women and Nature. Roughly twenty-five years later in the history of Japanese cinema, however, the repressed female Other would seek revenge.

Violated Nature Strikes Back: *Mermaid Legend* (1984)

In comparison to the two movies from the late 1950s discussed above, *Mermaid Legend* (*Ningyo densetsu*, 1984, dir. Ikeda Toshiharu) offers a much more progressive approach to *ama* diving and ecohorror. The film’s story is loosely based on the two-volume manga *Ningyo densetsu*⁸ (1978) by Miyaya Kazuhito. The movie begins with a fisherman (Etō Jun), who gets assassinated offshore after accidentally witnessing a murder, while his wife, the *ama* diver Migiwa (Shirato Mari), is underwater. She too gets wounded by harpoon projectiles from above the surface but somehow seemingly survives the attack and washes up on shore at night. The police suspect her of murdering her husband. With the help of Shōhei (Shimizu Kentarō), a friend of her late husband, Migiwa finds refuge in a shady, brothel-like, night bar. Shōhei forces Migiwa to sleep with him, which she feels pressed to accept in her miserable situation. Through working at a business party in the night bar, Migiwa hopes to find information about the murder of her husband, and she suspects the local business mogul Miyamoto (Aoki Yoshirō), Shōhei’s father, is the culprit. Miyamoto had begun building an amusement park in the coastal seascape, but changed his plans to support the construction of a nuclear power plant, which promises more profit. One of the party guests rapes Migiwa and subsequently reveals to her that not only Miyamoto, but also his son Shōhei asked for

⁸ In the manga, Migiwa’s husband is also murdered for opposing the construction of a nuclear power plant, and after her apparent death, she turns into a mysterious powerful mermaid-like creature seeking revenge. However, the rest of the story is quite different; the manga’s prologue even takes place in an American Wild West setting.

the murder of her husband. After killing this informant, Migiwa seeks for revenge. She murders Miyamoto in his own swimming pool—on her own watery terms—but gets captured soon afterwards by Shohei, who continues his father’s business activities. His henchmen wrap her in a fishing net—treating her, significantly, as though she *is* a literal fish—and throw her in the ocean. Once again, it is unclear, whether she survives this deadly trap and returns as human, or as ghost. Migiwa then witnesses the opening speech for the nuclear power plant’s construction, which stirs her rage and determination to sabotage. She crashes the reception party and kills countless men including Shōhei. A sudden storm helps her escape from the police, and in a final scene we see her seem to become one with the ocean.

The *ama* diver’s profession in *Mermaid Legend* is from the start accurately depicted as physically exhausting and dangerous, in stark contrast to the leisurely diving in *Girl Diver of Spook Mansion* or *Ghost of the Girl Diver*. In the diving scenes in *Mermaid Legend*’s beginning, the camera does not fetishistically linger on Migiwa, but instead follows the currents, focusing in on seaweed and the rocky ground. Almost documentary-like in tone, the harvest of abalone is depicted in detail, while the melancholic background music⁹ does not obscure the sounds and efforts of her movements and breathing. When coming up to the surface, Migiwa complains between deep breaths that her husband on the boat did not help her on time with the safety rope. In the interview on the Japanese DVD version, actress Shirato Mari, who plays the heroine, remembers how hard she trained free-diving for her role, and that despite her efforts, real *ama* divers nonetheless still had to substitute as body doubles in many of the underwater scenes. It is evident that this movie attempts a much more realistic portrayal of *ama* diving than its predecessors, deliberately depicting authentic working practices—like co-working with a man/husband on the boat to assist—as well as the *ama* diver’s clothing covering the whole body and serving a practical purpose, beyond mere titillation.

The oceanic environment, where Migiwa dives, is shown as a blurry and sublime space, unwelcoming and potentially horrific. While in *Girl Diver of Spook Mansion* and *Ghost of the Girl Diver*, the oceanic space appears as domesticated Nature under human control, in *Mermaid Legend*

⁹ The soundtrack by Honda Toshiyuki intensely supports the dark atmosphere with its one reoccurring signature melody played on different instruments.

the Nature is far more akin to its likeness in classic Gothic narratives: ‘hostile, untamed and threatening’ (Botting, 2014: p. 4). When Migiwa’s husband is murdered, the dead body suddenly falls into the water and floats before her eyes. She struggles for minutes to survive, as the safety rope to heave her up is wrapped around the corpse, which pulls her down to the depths (see *Figure 3*). The horror of drowning is captured in her rapid movements and panicked facial expressions, desperately looking at the sinking corpse and the surface far above her. The movie leaves it open to interpretation, as to whether or when Migiwa drowns, but in any case the ocean turns out to be a deadly abyss that can even kill a professional *ama* diver like her. Alder describes such scenes of underwater horror as typical ‘nautical Gothic’: ‘the sea and its weather provide [...] locales for sublime and terrifying experiences; deep water is a useful metaphor for the interiority of the self; the ocean’s precarious surface interfaces between life and death, chaos and order, self and other’ (p. 1).



Figure 3: Migiwa struggles to survive underwater (*Mermaid Legend*, 1984: 00:19:55).

Later in the movie, when Migiwa is wrapped in a fishing net and thrown into the water by the henchmen, there seems to be no escape from drowning. In dim dark blue colours, she once more struggles against sinking into the aquatic abyss, as her shaking movements and rising air bubbles

express her tremendous fear. In this moment, only a *deus ex machina* can save Migiwa: her husband's corpse floats above her and by catching the safety rope still wrapped around his body, she manages to release herself from the net. In an interesting, if gruesome coincidence, in December 2010, the corpse of the movie's director Ikeda Toshiharu would be found in the ocean at Shima, Mie Prefecture, where *Mermaid Legend* was filmed. The police investigation concluded suicide was the most likely cause of death.

Migiwa and her husband are shown as the innocent victims of the local business mogul Miyamoto and his son, who represent an oppressive and exploitative image of manhood, using mafia attitude and methods to conquer and violate the coastal landscape as well as Migiwa's body. Miyamoto's first building of the amusement park, already constructed at the beginning of the movie, is an offshore observation tower. This phallic architecture erected in the middle of the ocean crudely demonstrates his domination of Nature and those who 'belong' to it, including the local fisherfolk and *ama* divers. In a quite symbolic moment one-third of the way into the movie, Migiwa vomits after seeing an offshore construction platform. Miyamoto's later project of the nuclear power plant is heading in the same direction, harshly taming and transforming the landscape in order to maximise profits, while ignoring the consequences for the region's natural and human stakeholders. The provocative public speech by a representative of the electric power company illustrates this dominating viewpoint:

'The other day, I drank a glass of the water from a nuclear reactor. I couldn't believe how tasty it was! [Laughing] I was just joking. People tend to equate nuclear power plants with nuclear weapons. I frequently hear, 'The radiation, isn't it dangerous?' But these are the fears of the uninformed' (01:26:53-01:27:23).

In this scene, we observe the discrepancy between male-gendered reason/technology and female-gendered Nature, echoing Plumwood's (1993) sentiments. Male oppression results not only from the risky nuclear technology itself, that will be nonchalantly placed into the coastal environment, but also from the way such a venture is communicated, arguing from a seemingly naturalised superior position and discrediting critical voices as lacking knowledge.

Mermaid Legend touches on a controversial topic of its time. The construction of nuclear power plants in rural areas during the 1980s brought hopes of revitalisation for economically declining municipalities, although local anti-nuclear movements opposed and warned of the risks of radiation for humans and the environment (Dusinberre, 2012). Moreover, between the 1950s and 1970s, Japan experienced four major pollution diseases resulting from industrial sewage water and emissions; among these, the two outbreaks of Minamata disease affected fisherfolk in particular, polluted their coastal fishing grounds, and raised the public awareness for environmental issues caused by rapid industrialisation and irresponsible companies (Ui, 1994).

The second half of the movie centres on Migiwa's revenge. First, she sneaks into the garden of Miyamoto's residence and attacks him. Though the man initially appears stronger than the woman, they eventually fall into his swimming pool where Migiwa wins the upper hand: she pulls him underwater until he drowns. The poetic justice is striking: the corrupt businessman, who considered the ocean his playground to be exploited, is drowned in his own artificial swimming pool by the hands of an *ama* diver. The vengeful alliance of the oppressed—Migiwa as well as the violated nature—turned the man-made water reservoir into a deadly trap. This scene offers an ecofeminist take on the classic Gothic trope that one's own home/garden, the apparently safest location, becomes the place, where the 'monster' will find you (Halberstam, 1995: p. 13).

In the bloody finale, Migiwa wreaks havoc at the reception party for the nuclear power plant's construction. After coming out of the water clad in her white *ama* diving clothes, she sneaks into the party's location, Miyamoto's phallic observation tower. Armed with a fishing spear,¹⁰ Migiwa first encounters Shōhei. After stabbing him, she throws his dying body into the water, and the camera shows his dead face underwater. Like in the case of Miyamoto, his father, Migiwa and Nature have apparently collaborated in his killing and so both gained retaliation. She continues her rampage, assassinating the representatives of the electric company and other men in business suits by the dozens (and also at least one woman), while a large banner with the slogan 'Congratulation: Hama¹¹ Town's Nuclear Power Plant' is prominently captured several times. The blood of her

¹⁰ Besides the ecofeminist reading, Migiwa and her husband can also be interpreted as proxies for the marginalised fisherfolk struggling to continue their work as their fishing grounds are menaced by urbanisation projects and environmental pollution.

¹¹ This place name is fictional, but alludes to the filming location Shima and to the word *hama* (beach, shore).

victims not only dyes Migiwa's clothes and face completely red, even the signs of the nuclear power plant become blood-smeared (see *Figure 4*). Raped and enraged Nature, embodied by Migiwa, has struck back in explicit ecohorror—and importantly, we are on side. The heroine here does not feel like a chaotic, random 'monster'; her madness is reasoned and her victims are mostly deserving of their ecofeminist punishment.



Figure 4: Migiwa after her rampage; the blood-smeared sign in the background says 'nuclear power plant construction' (*Mermaid Legend*, 1984: 01:14:12).

After about ten minutes of excessive slaughter, police units arrive. In that very moment, a typhoon approaches from the sea, blowing away the heavily armoured policemen. Here again, Migiwa's alliance with Nature is obvious, which helps Migiwa escape from human justice. In some shots, a red filter makes the rising ocean waves look like blood. Migiwa triumphantly stands in the middle of the storm, watching its devastation, which also makes the signs of the nuclear power plant's construction on the shore collapse. Just before her rampage at the party, Migiwa had prayed to a Jizō¹² Buddha statue for this storm in advance to ensure her escape; this statue also appears in one

¹² Jizō Buddha statues can fulfil different spiritual purposes; the one depicted here is a guardian of the ocean, whom fisherfolk pray to for protection (Clark, 2007).

shot during the storm. As shown at the beginning of the movie, she always used to pray to this ocean-related deity before going to dive, but the statue had been displaced for the nuclear power plant's construction. She, moreover, performs several mourning rituals for her husband throughout the movie. Her strong spiritual connection to the supernatural further hints at the interpretation that Migiwa either is or became something more than human.



Figure 5: Migiwa ostensibly becoming a mermaid (*Mermaid Legend*, 1984: 01:47:07).

At the end of the movie, when the typhoon is over, Migiwa smilingly jumps back into the ocean, ostensibly her new or true home. In a dream-like sequence, she dives once again for abalone with her husband's help, like they used to do in the past. When she then turns around in the ocean's depths to rise up again, her body suddenly shapes into another form and she is naked. Taken by surprise, the viewer is likely captivated—in a moment perhaps deliberately derivative of the voyeuristic gazing in the *ama* movies of the 1950s. Migiwa rises up and fades away in the reflection of the sun on the surface. In one shot, just when her clothes disappear, her lower body blurs with the water, making it look like a mermaid's fishtail for a short moment (see *Figure 5*),

though she recovers a fully human body again afterwards.¹³ The movie closes with impressions of a fish swarm and the rocky ocean ground covered in seaweed during the ending credits. Migiwa has become one with Nature and finally, we are left not her female body to be gazed at, but the natural environment.

In contrast to *Girl Diver of Spook Mansion* and *Ghost of the Girl Diver*, where the supernatural was faked by humans and considered the relic of an archaic past, it is here rediscovered and re-established in *Mermaid Legend*. Likewise, the movie's title sounds magical and folkloric, although it depicts a modern story, largely rooted in a realistic world, referring to actual environmental concerns. In a contemporaneous review, Japanese film critic Satō Tadao (1984) discussed the movie's versatile play with coincidence and the supernatural, which he considers one of its major strengths: as the story proceeds, fantastic coincidences occur that save Migiwa from death, support her vengeance, and transform her into a mermaid. These events, however, do not seem out of place, because they slowly build until the movie's resolution, which somehow still feels realistic, despite its fantastic nature.

Conclusion

The Japanese folklore tradition lacks a supernatural aquatic female figure similar to the Western mermaid. In this essay I have argued that this 'absence' was at least in part filled by the image of *ama* divers, which similarly blended ideas of primeval women bound to the sea and served as objects of fantasy for the male gaze. In post-war Japan, this image was strongly influenced by the West's reception of *ama* divers. Horror movies from the late 1950s exemplify the sexualised view of *ama* divers, whose portrayal primarily served to provide exoticism and eroticism, in imagined nostalgic reminiscence of a lost archaic and 'wild' type of femininity living in harmony with the ocean.

In the 1980s *Mermaid Legend* shows a very different approach to this motif. The movie, for most parts, avoids male voyeurism and instead shows *ama* diving for what it is: a challenging,

¹³ This shot is also a reference to the original manga, where similar images of the naked heroine with her lower body as a fishtail frequently appear.

dangerous, and highly-skilled profession. A male-gendered environmental destruction is the central offence that elicits horror and revenge, as the heroine rages not only against her own violators but more importantly against the menace of a nuclear power plant for Nature's sake. Migiwa is indeed a 'she-devil in the ocean', an embodiment of female and natural rage. In some ways, the image of the original Japanese folklore creature *ningyo*, the grotesque and scary human-fish-hybrid that is sometimes conflated with the Western mermaid in popular media (Hayward, 2018), might be seen to have influenced the subversion of the dark mermaid trope seen in *Mermaid Legend*. Oscillating between realism and fantasy, the movie avoids the kitsch inherited by many modern mermaid narratives. Here, the *ama* diver is a solitary ecoterrorist who uses her supernatural abilities solely for vengeance. For the 1980s, the discussion of environmental concerns from the perspective of an *ama* diver as seen in *Mermaid Legend* is unique in its context and astoundingly ahead of its time.

In the new millennium, researchers began to link *ama* diving with environmental issues like climate change, which promises a threat to their sustainable diving practices and natural resources (Thelen, 2017). A similar interpretation for mermaids also evolved in the West in recent times, where 'real mermaids' (people posing or swimming with an artificial mermaid tail) like Hannah Mermaid or Raina the Halifax Mermaid have advocated eco-activism (Mellins, 2018). Taking into account the increasing consciousness worldwide for both environmental issues and women's rights, one can expect that more ecofeminist re-imaginings of mermaids—and maybe also *ama* divers—will be seen in media texts. As we, as a species, collectively fail to heed the warnings of eco-crisis—and continue to dangerously fill the sea with our chemicals and waste—it seems likely that ever darker 'mermaids' will emerge from the depths of our fears and our oceans.

BIOGRAPHY

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