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Conflict Between Morality and Survival Represented in Ryonuske Akutagawa's *"Rashōmon"*

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Abstract:

This paper examines how Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's short story "Rashōmon" reiterates the conflict between moral values and survival instincts in lethal situations. Set in a socially decaying Kyoto, the story centres on a destitute former samurai servant who has to decide whether to preserve his moral integrity at the cost of survival, a dilemma intensified by his encounter with an old woman who rationalises her own immoral acts as necessary for survival. This paper effectively illustrates how Akutagawa deconstructs social norms and offers insight into the fragility of moral values when survival takes precedence over ethics.

The study analyses the narrative structure, characterisation, and ethical choices presented in the short story. Both characters provide explanations for their immoral actions. In conversations between the servant and an elderly woman, the latter admits: "making wigs out of the hair of the dead may seem a great evil…If she hadn't [cheated others to survive], she would have starved to death…There was no other choice" (Rashōmon, pg.42, line 20). Faced with her logic, the servant concedes: "Then it's right if I rob you. I'd starve if I didn't." (Rashōmon, Page no. 43). This conversation and set of dialogues show that absolute poverty can hinder moral judgements. The analysis shows that in conclusion "Rashōmon" offers a blunt insight on human nature: when society fails and hunger takes over, individuals abandon their ethical norms, thereby offering a stark insight into human behaviour when survival outweighs ethical considerations.

Keywords: Morality, Survival, Ethics, Destitution, Decay, Humanity, Symbolism, Cultural Decay.

Introduction:

The gloomy short story "Rashōmon" by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (1915) takes place in twelfth-century Kyoto after years of starvation, fire, and plague. The once grand Rashōmon Gate, at the southern edge of the city, has fallen into ruin, animals and outcasts now dwell among its decaying structure. The story opens on a stormy night at this monstrous gate, where a discharged samurai servant, having lost his livelihood, broods over a desperate choice. As one commentator notes, the abandoned gate itself symbolizes the distraught and confusion in society. Indeed, the rubbles of the historic gate works as a symbol of the social and moral decay of Japan in a historical context at the time. In this desolate setting the servant encounters an old woman scavenging hair from corpses. Both characters are starving and destitute. They proceed to justify each other's transgressions: the

woman defends her theft of corpses' hair as necessary to live, and the servant ultimately condones his own theft from her in return. This examination will explain how Akutagawa shows the blatant conflict between personal ethical values and the million year old survival instincts through the help of his characters in a perfectly controlled ruined setting. By citing dialogues and narratives it will show the sorrowful hardship shown in "Rashōmon" which leads individuals to throw away their conforming morals, supporting the story's core theme that survival can and will override virtue and ethics when social order collapses.

The Ravaged Setting and Symbolism:

The physical decay of Rashōmon Gate mirrors a moral collapse in society. Akutagawa describes how multiple calamities i.e. earthquakes, fire and plagues have devastated Kyoto, leaving relics of Buddhist imagery sold as firewood and the gate unrepaired. He observes that "*broken pieces of Buddhist images and other Buddhist objects were heaped up on roadsides to be sold as firewood.*" (Rashōmon, Page no. 34) This makes the reader feel both the literal hardships and the loss for spiritual respect, implicating a world where norms once kept sacred are discarded for survival. The story explicitly notes that corpses are abandoned at the gate after dark, rendering the area ghostly and feared. In this ruined environment, foxes dwell and "*thieves and robbers found a home there too.*" (Rashōmon, Page no. 36), illustrating moral decay.

An examination states that in "Rashōmon", the grand Rashōmon Gate symbolizes the disarray and frailty in society. The story thus uses Rashōmon as more than mere backdrop; it stands for a collapse of social order. As one study notes, the ruin of the historic gate works as a symbol of the social and moral decay of traditional Japanese civilization and culture. The servant sits "on the seventh step" of this crumbling gateway, highlighting his marginal status and the precarious footing of moral values. The desolate setting wakes up the narrative: even nature seems complicated, and the man's focus on a painful pimple suggests internal suffering mirroring external decay. Akutagawa must hence foreground the atmosphere as a strong metaphor: the ruined and defeated Rashōmon shows a world where "honour" and virtue have fallen into disrepair, just like the lacquered pillars chipped and fading.

The Servant's Moral Dilemma:

The servant is introduced as a faithful retainer who has just lost his post due to economic decline. Realistically homeless, that too in a storm, he cannot decide upon his own survival. He has been dismissed because of the effects of Kyoto's economic decline and social destruction and decline. Akutagawa's narration portrays the crisis of the servant with crystal clear clarity. In his helplessness, "*he had little choice of means, whether fair or foul*" (Rashōmon, Page no. 37). The text declares that if the servant "*chose honest means, he would undoubtedly starve to death*" (Rashōmon, Page no. 37), whereas if he resorted to theft he "*would be a thief*" (Rashōmon, Page no. 37). This explicit framing shows that his options are mutually exclusive: honesty equals death, survival equals crime.

Initially, the servant resists such a grim calculus. He resolves that if he refused to do things that he thought were morally questionable, then he would only end up starving to death. When he arrives at Rashōmon's upper level and confronts the old woman, he first feels superior: he perceives her act as a "*great evil*"(Rashōmon, Page no. 42) that he himself would never commit. Indeed, he was furious with the woman upon

witnessing her at work. At that moment he still clings to traditional morality, despite his own desperate hunger.

Anyhow as the actual event unfolds, the perspective of the servant starts to shift. The woman finally started to explain her reasoning behind committing such an act when she was questioned at the top of the sword: "*making wigs out of the hair of the dead may seem a great evil* [but] *if she hadn't* [lived deceitfully] *she would have starved to death... There was no other choice*" (Rashōmon, Page no. 42). Her words triggered the servants' own questioning of self moral grounds. He recognises the lack of differences between his situation and her argument. At first, he mocks her, but soon he hesitates. Narrative commentary highlights his self-deception: the narrator reminds us that "His mind finally came to the conclusion that he would be a thief"(Rashōmon, Page no. 37) even before this meeting. In other words, he quickly forgets his own previous intention to steal. This irony underlines his moral collapse. The servant's guilt and desperation are symbolized by his persistent attention to the infected pimple on his cheek, a small physical affliction mirroring the rot in his conscience.

Finally, the servant abandons his last scruples. After the woman's explanation, he concedes with a chilling pragmatism: "*Then it's right if I rob you. I'd starve if I didn't*."(Rashōmon,Page no.43). This statement marks the servant's surrender of virtue. He rationalizes that, just as her actions were justified by need, his theft is similarly justified. The dialogue is stark: "*you must tell me what you're doing…*"(Rashōmon, Page no. 41)he had demanded earlier, and now he finds himself doing exactly what he condemned. His words echo the same logic. By the end, he flees into the night clutching the stolen garments, resolved to sell them and stave off hunger another day. The servant thus completes an entire tragic arc, he moves from moral saint to a predator of survival within moments of self contradiction and contemplation, showing that under extreme stress survival always trumps morality.

The Old Woman's Perspective:

The old woman's actions mirror the servant's dilemma. Initially presented as grotesque, she defends herself with earnest pragmatism. When the servant confronts her, she simply states: "*I pull the hair…to make a wig*."(Rashōmon, Page no. 42). She reveals she has no other means to live. Importantly, she justifies her theft as retribution: the woman she was robbing had herself lived unscrupulously by cheating people. The dead woman sold fake dried fish, so the old woman argues it is not wrong to take from her corpse.

Her speech further explains: "*Making wigs out of the hair of the dead may seem a great evil* [but] *these* [dead people] *deserve no better. This woman used to sell saying it was dried fish. She would be selling it right now if she hadn't perished from the disease. She would have starved to death if she hadn't done what she did, so it couldn't be wrong. There was no other choice. If she knew I had to do this in order to live, she probably wouldn't care*."(Rashōmon, Page no. 42). In this long sentence, she tries to make her act equal to survival necessity. By throwing the dead woman's own moral failings and desperation, the old hag assumes that everyone is doing whatever they can for survival. This dialogue is crucial since it articulates the story's theme core plainly, with "nothing else to do" as her key justification.

The old woman's reasoning states that she, too, like the servant, has abandoned morality. As one may observe, she "scavenges the hair of dead bodies," an act considered as defiling in Shinto or Buddhist terms. Yet she defends it as

necessary, reflecting that poverty erodes ethical boundaries. Indeed, both characters abandon their moral and religious beliefs due to desperate situations. In her speech, religious concepts of purity or karma are twisted: she frames taking hair as repayment for life's debts ("taking back"), almost invoking karmic justice. Nevertheless, her hardened tone described in narration as the sharp red eyes of a bird of prey shows she has become predatory. In fact, both the servant and the old woman see themselves as animalistic survivors, forced by circumstances and situations to operate outside human ethics.

After the servant accepts her logic, the woman is finally stripped and abandoned, a reversal of roles. She endures his betrayal "groaning" as she crawls back downstairs. Her fate shows that neither she nor the servant retains the moral high ground anymore. Both have resorted to violence and theft. The story ends with darkness in the reader's heart and with her alone, under fading torchlight, a metaphor for the murky and ethical depths they have sunk into.

Imagery and Themes:

Akutagawa intensifies the morality-survival conflict through vivid imagery. Early descriptions compare the servant to animals – he sits like a "vacuously watching…creature," and is later likened to a "lizard" or "cat" creeping in the gate's shadow. The old woman's arms are "skin and bones" like chicken shanks, and her eyes become "bird of prey" hungry for sustenance. These animal metaphors suggest that both characters have surrendered their humanity to survive. One analysis explicitly notes that Akutagawa's imagery shows them as predators who have surrendered… humanity in a world where survival trumps morality. The servant's festering pimple, which he continually touches, symbolizes his festering guilt and ethical corruption. Thus the story's visual details reinforce its theme: human beings revert to base, animalistic behavior under extreme distress.

The narrative tone also conveys ambivalence about right and wrong. The third-person perspective closely follows the servant but occasionally steps back to comment on his thought process. For example, after the servant agrees with the woman, the narrator dryly observes that he had, of course, already forgotten that only a few minutes earlier he himself had made up his mind to become a thief. This ironic remark exposes his hypocrisy. Such commentary keeps the reader aware of the shifting moral ground: it is not a simple good-versus-evil clash, but a mirror held to human nature.

In the end, Akutagawa offers absolutely no resolution or a tad bit of moral endorsement. The closing image is bleak and blunt: the servant disappearing into the night with stolen goods, while the old woman is left among corpses in darkness. The story's final line shows only darkness… unknowing and unknown, suggests an empty space where moral certainties once stood. As a scholar and his mentor concludes, "*Rashōmon*" leaves readers questioning their own ethics: it "compels readers to question their own moral compasses, challenging the boundaries between survival and ethics".

Akutagawa's "*Rashōmon*" expertly portrays an important battle between ethical principles and the necessity of survival. By submerging the characters in a devastated city and forcing them into life-or-death decisions, the story illustrates that extreme conditions can and most probably will erode ethical norms. The core instinct of human nature is survival, we have survived the ice age, wars, famines and calamities. Our ultimate instinct is that of survival hence Akutagawa reinstates the importance of knowing when to be moral and when to live. The ruined gate itself symbolizes this breakdown of civilization's values. As analysis of imagery and

dialogue reveals, Akutagawa does not condone or condemn outright, but rather exposes a grim truth: in dire adversity, "survival instinct" often prevails over moral scruple. Ultimately, "*Rashōmon*" serves as a dark mirror for human nature. This story warns that when society falls apart, the sheer morality can and most probably will peel away, leaving a difficult choice. Akutagawa's narrative suggests that ethics are not at the top of the list if one's life is at stake; in the brutal calculation of starvation versus morality, morality could not by 99% win but then again it's nothing but a scholarly opinion. The story compels readers to confront the unsettling possibility that virtue may falter under pressure, underlining the theme that sometimes only life itself seems to matter, a question indeed to ask and introspect yourself on.

Conclusion:

In this way, an attempt has been made to explicate the conflict between morality and survival represented in Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's world famous short story *Rashōmon.*

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