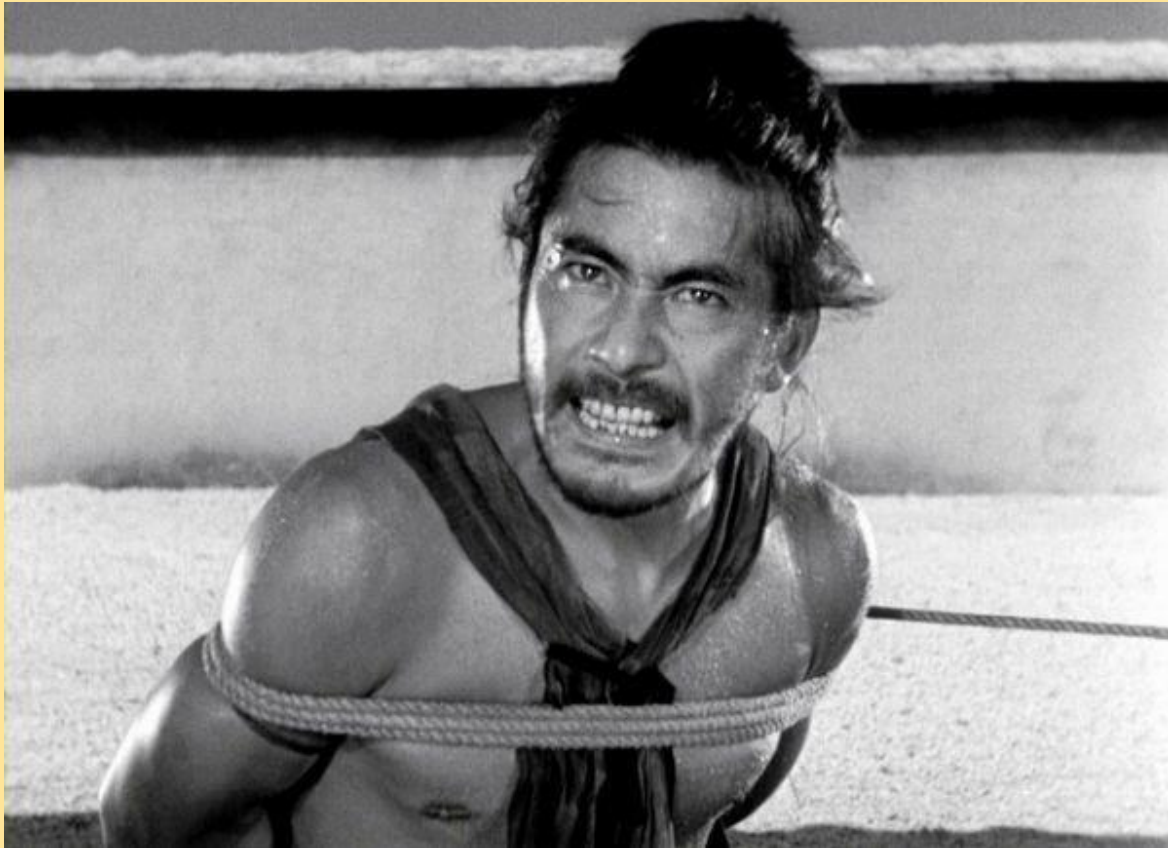


## Article

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### **The Architectonics of Rashomon -Part I**



*(This will be a two-part article. In Part I, I deal with Akutagawa's narratives and in Part II, I shall deal with Kurosawa's narrative)*

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*"I once asked Kurosawa which, of the three classical steps in film-making (scripting, shooting, editing) he considered most important. He answered: "Well, the editing is probably the most important, but if you don't have good script, all the editing in the world won't help."*

*(Donald Richie, The Films of Akira Kurosawa, pp. 239, Third edition, Tranquebar, 1998)*

The success of Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) in Venice Film Festival (1951) made Kurosawa; the Japanese Cinema and Akutagawa- the Japanese writer, from whose stories the film was created- well known outside Japan. The word *Rashomon* itself has grown to mean a philosophical paradigm in the perception of human reality. The film and its maker have been extensively written about in the past seven decades. What I am attempting in this essay is to study The Architectonics of Rashomon. In Part I, I will discuss how Akutagawa has structured his two stories and in Part II, I will deal with how Kurosawa creates his own authorship through his points of departure from the original work.

## Part I - The stories of Akutagawa-

Kurosawa chose two stories – In the Grove and Rashomon - by Akutagawa and fused them into one script. These stories are completely independent of each other.

### In The Grove

It is hard to synopsise this story because of its peculiar construction and content. The event that is most discussed and forms the core of the story is a crime involving rape and murder. Three character- two men and a woman are involved in this chain of events. There are no eyewitnesses and out of the three characters involved in the event, the (Samurai/husband) is dead, the bandit is arrested and the violated woman is missing. What we read or rather 'hear' are the various versions. Rape and murder are mentioned as facts in all the narratives, but the other details in different narratives do not tally.

Akutagawa does not use any of the familiar literary viewpoints like that of the omniscient author or that of the first person singular, or of the witness. He also eschews the linear flow of events and a continuous plot. He gives the story the form of a police file containing seven versions of the same episode with discordant details. This is a factual record of the investigation conducted by the high ranking police official. Akutagawa employs unique stylistic devices to make these testimonies more intriguing. He omits all the questions that were asked; he labels the first four versions as testimonies and the next three as confessions and the answers are numbered serially from the beginning to the end i.e. the first testimony finishes after six

questions and the answer to the first question asked of the second person is numbered seven. Thus, we end up reading thirty nine answers given by seven persons *as if they were in a flow*; for that is how they are arranged by numbering them continuously.

### The testimonies

The testimonies and confessions follow a certain order. The first four testimonies are of the people, who were not involved in the event. These are followed by the confessions of the three people involved in the event.

The first testimony is that of a woodcutter, who finds and reports the dead body of the Samurai. He finds the corpse in an out-of-the-way grove of bamboo and cedars, when he is out to cut his daily quota of cedars. The body lying flat on ground is dressed in a bluish silk kimono and has a headgear of the Kyoto style. A single sword-stroke had pierced the breast and the wound had dried up. He mentions finding a rope at the root of a cedar nearby and a comb. His observation is that the samurai apparently fought before he was murdered, because the grass and fallen bamboo-blades had been trampled upon all around. He did not find any horse close by.

The second testimony is that of a traveling Buddhist Priest, who by chance has passed the Samurai and his wife on the road, on the day of the event. It was around Noon, when the Samurai was walking toward Sekiyama with a woman accompanying him on horseback, who he learns later was his wife. Her face was hidden by a scarf and she wore a lilac

coloured suit. She didn't appear to be tall. Her horse was a sorrel with a fine mane. That's all he noticed about her, since he is a priest, he does not look at women closely. The man was armed with a sword as well as a bow and about twenty odd arrows in his quiver. He concludes his testimony by saying that he least suspected that the man would end up like this and human life indeed is as evanescent as the morning dew or a flash of lightning. He feels deep sympathy for the departed soul.

The third testimony is that of the Police officer, who arrested Tajomaru the bandit. He calls Tajomaru a notorious brigand and describes the circumstances of his arrest. According to him Tajomaru had fallen off his horse and was groaning on the bridge at Awataguchi around late evening. He recalls that Tajomaru was wearing a dark blue silk kimono and a large plain sword. The bow wound with leather strips, the black lacquered quiver, and the seventeen arrows with hawk feathers—were all in his possession. Since, they looked like the ones owned by the dead man he, therefore, believes that Tajomaru must be the murderer. The horse- a sorrel with a fine mane was found grazing by the roadside. He remarks that Tajomaru being thrown by the horse that he stole is indeed an act of providence. He also narrates that for the record that he had previously tried to arrest Tajomaru, but could not.

He remarks that of all the robbers prowling around Kyoto, Tajomaru has given the most grief to the women in town. He suspects that in the cases of women disappearing and turning up dead around that area the needle of suspicion points to him. He also adds that it is quite predictable what this criminal could have done to the

wife of the man he murdered. This he suggests should be recorded as an additional crime.



The fourth testimony is given by of an Old Woman, who is the mother in law of the Samurai and who identifies his dead body. She says that this twenty-six years old Samurai by the name Takehiko was of a gentle disposition, and she is sure that he would not have done anything to provoke the anger of others. She describes Masago her daughter as a spirited, fun-loving girl of nineteen, who has a small, oval, dark complected face with a mole at the corner of her left eye. She insists that, Takehiko is the only man she has ever known. She confirms that Takehiko and Masago left for Wakasa yesterday. And while she is resigned to the fate of her son in law, she is worried sick about her daughter, who has been missing. She implores them to leave no stone unturned to find her. She says she hates that robber and then breaks down...

#### The confessions

Tajomaru's Confession is the first of the three. He begins by saying that he killed the man but not the woman. He says with a swagger that he will tell the truth plainly as he knows what fate awaits him. He says that his encounter with the couple happened by chance. As they were passing him, a puff of wind blew, and raised the woman's hanging scarf, allowing him to catch a

glimpse of her face. That was enough to inflame a desire in him to possess her at whatever cost. And by that he means that even if he has to kill her husband. He says quite matter-of-factly that killing is a part of his usual game plan and usually he executes people with his sword. In the same breath he says to the Officer. “You, you don't use your swords. You kill people with your power, with your money. Sometimes you kill them on the pretext of working for their good. It's true they don't bleed. They are in the best of health, but all the same you've killed them. It's hard to say who is a greater sinner, you or me. (An ironical smile.)”

However, he says that he did not intend to kill the Samurai, but instead planned to use deceit. So he told them he had discovered hidden treasure containing many mirrors and swords. He has them hidden in a grove behind the mountain, and that he'd like to sell them at a low price to them. He says that greed made them trust him and follow him to the mountain as he had wanted. Using the ploy that the path ahead into the thick grove would be a difficult one, he succeeds in making the woman wait and carries on with her husband. On reaching the intended spot, he managed to overpower him, tied him with a rope and also gagged him with fallen bamboo leaves. Then he tricked her to come to that secluded spot by saying that her husband has suddenly taken ill. She rushes to the spot after him but on finding her husband gagged, she takes out her small sword and attempts to slash Tajomaru, many times. But he knocks it off and then overpowers her and satisfies his desire. After that he wanted to leave, but the woman while frantically clinging to his arm, tells him in a crying voice that she could not bear the fact that her shame was

known to two men, was unbearable for her. She said only one of them can live and she will live as his wife, whoever between the two of them would that be. She appeared so charged at that point that he says it produced a furious desire in him to kill her husband and also to make her his wife. But, he says he is always fair in his fights, so he untied him. Furious with anger, the samurai fought to exchange twenty-three strokes with him. He says that the man had great skill as he was the first one ever to do so with him. And when the samurai fell, he turned towards her, but to his great astonishment she was gone. He ends his confession with a defiant attitude by telling the officer to give him the maximum penalty.

The woman's confession. The woman's version is that after her ordeal, when she came to her senses, she thought of her husband and how difficult it must have been for him to watch the whole episode. And as she turned to him, she got a rude shock to see cold contempt in his eyes for her. The shock was intense enough for her to faint. On recovering her senses, she found that the bandit was gone and so she went up to her husband and said that since she was shamed, she must die and since he witnessed her shaming, she would not want him to leave with that feeling, so both of them should end their lives. He still remained full of despise and told her to kill him with her own hands. So, she stabbed him in the chest with the small sword that she had. After that she wanted to kill herself and has not found the strength to do so till date despite resolving to do so many times. And that has become her living agony.

The dead Samurai's confession. (Through a medium). After violating his

wife, the robber, sitting there, began to speak comforting words to her. He was seductive with his clever talk, moving smoothly from one subject to another to finally make his bold brazen proposal. "Once your virtue is stained, you won't get along well with your husband, so won't you be my wife instead? It's my love for you that made me be violent toward you." His words had a magical effect on her and she looked as if in a trance and at her most beautiful ever. She agrees to the bandit's proposal much to his own shame and jealousy. But, her worse crime came next, when she almost hysterically suggested to the bandit to kill him. That was the real mortal blow for him. Even the bandit was shaken by this and asked him as to what would he like to do with her- kill her or save her? For these words alone he would like to pardon his crime. And while he hesitated, she shrieked and made good her escape into the depth of the jungle. The robber could not catch her. After she ran away, he took up his sword, bow and arrows. Then the bandit cut one of his bonds with a single stroke and disappeared from the grove. The shining small sword which his wife had dropped lay there, so he picked it up and stabbed himself. His last memory is that while he was lying there, someone crept up to him and pulled out the small sword softly out of his breast. After that he sank down into the darkness of space for once and all.

#### Regarding the testimonies

The Woodcutter's account is an *ex post facto* account. His narrative depends upon the circumstantial signs as he saw them and his speculation fills up the gaps.

The Priest's testimony is limited in scope as it amounts just an incidental evidence that he actually saw the couple on that day

at that place and at that hour, before the tragic event.

The Police Official is the arresting officer, who has been looking out for this elusive criminal for some time and finally manages to grab him. In his mind Tajomaru is the criminal and his previous history also points to his being totally at fault. He also takes pride in his achievement in capturing Tajomaru.

Old Woman is the mother of the violated woman, and understandably her story is driven by the concern and anxiety for her daughter. She states that the couple was of gentle disposition and were quite unlikely to offend anyone.

So the first four testimonies create a story that it *is* a murder and consequently it *must* have been preceded by rape. Tajomaru is the bandit responsible for this. And so he has to be punished. Interestingly, the various clues that they gather are turned by them into the building blocks. They are independently building or confirming a small episode individually, but they are also using each other's accounts to build a coherent narrative. And they do so by depending upon purely circumstantial evidence and clues. They are not the witnesses *ipso facto* but *ex post facto*.

#### Regarding the confessions

Tajomaru's version fully expresses his rawness. He is what Erich Fromm called as the expression of the archaic "blood thirst". Fromm describes what he calls different forms of violence, and according to him the most extreme form of violence is: archaic blood thirst.

*"In the man who seeks an answer to life by regressing to the pre-individual state of existence, by becoming like an animal and*

*thus being freed from the burden of reason, blood becomes the essence of life; to shed blood is to feel alive, to be strong, to be unique, to be above all others. Killing becomes the great intoxication, the great self-affirmation on the most archaic level. Conversely, to be killed is the only logical alternative to killing. This is the balance of life in the archaic sense: to kill as many as one can, and when one's life is thus satiated with blood, one is ready to be killed." ... "It seems that at this level of regression blood is the equivalent of semen; earth is the equivalent, of mother-woman."*

(Erich Fromm, *The Heart of Man – Its Genius For Good And Evil*, pp.17, Chapter 2 Different Forms of Violence, Riverdale NY, 2010)

Fromm says that it is affirmation and transcendence of life on the level of deepest regression. He observes that this thirst for blood can be seen in individuals; expressing itself variously as fantasy, dream, severe mental sickness or murder. We can observe it in a minority when the normal social inhibitions have been removed like in times of war.

Tajomaru's confession disturbingly reflects his own dark reality as well as that of "the establishment" as he states that the difference between how he kills and how they kill is only a matter of method. Also, his own nonchalance towards his impending death (that he presumes), reflects Fromm's words "...thus satiated with blood, one is ready to be killed."

Tajomaru is actually the prime mover of the story; it was the overpowering, fatal attraction that he felt for this woman, which led to his taking her by force and precipitating the sequence of

events that followed. His confession expresses his megalomaniac ego; show that his instincts do not attain the status of human emotions, but remain that of a hunting animal for whom a prey is a prey. His version also spells that after the sexual violence there was another and a totally unexpected turn of events that followed. According to him the woman played a crucial role in precipitating that situation. Her fierce and unrelenting plea leads to the fight unto death that follows between him and her husband.



The Woman's version begins with the sequence of events after the act of rape. Her physical ordeal over, she turns to her husband with sympathy and also for support, but is utterly shaken to find nothing but a cold contempt in the scornful eyes of the husband. The bandit was gone from the scene by then and what followed took place between the two of them. Shocked by the contempt in his eyes, she proposed that they both of them should die for the shame was too much for them to bear while living together. However, this suggested redemption left him cold and he asked her to kill him with her own hands. She agreed and did likewise, but could not bring herself to kill herself in the same way and has been tormented by that reality ever since. It follows from her story that more

than the sexual violence visited upon her, it was the aftermath of it that became a greater problem for her. Her appearance and acts- in her version or of the others- hardly match her description as given by her mother. She can be fierce, if these versions are to be believed.

The Samurai's version reflects his damaged feelings, smashed masculine pride and future anxieties. A skilled warrior; he was defeated by a raw bandit, a man of prestige; he could not defend his wife from being violated in front of his eyes and the latent male anxieties buried deep within him surface at the prospect of a superior male being able to attract his wife. So he develops an instant cold contempt for his wife, accusing her of being a bigger offender than the bandit. So severe is her crime in his eyes, that he might consider forgiving the bandit but not her. The self-pity and despair that he feels (I am sinking in darkness, I am alone, helpless) is the obverse of his projected contempt for his wife.

The eyes become the leit motif of all these three stories. Tajomaru talks about the fierce look in her eyes that prevented him from leaving the scene and made him fight her husband till death. The feeling expressed in her eyes is so intense as to impact even a hardened, nihilistic bandit like him. The woman talks about the cold contempt in her husband's eyes that she realizes makes her life more difficult than surviving the ordeal of rape. The husband describes the impact the bandit's seductive words on his wife, as her face gazing at him closely and in a trance like state that is excruciatingly beautiful to look and bear.

These seem to be Akutagawa's luminous close ups and preludes.

### Rashomon

Rashomon as compared to In The Grove is a straightforward story. It takes place at one location and in a short space of time and between two characters. It is also far less ambiguous in comparison. Rashedo Gate is a historical icon of the Kyoto city that has of late fallen on bad times. There have been calamities such as earthquakes, whirlwinds and fires, leaving the city devastated and making life harder and harder for people even at the level of mere subsistence. There is no order, no hope and no morality left alive in the city. The city resembles a necropolis.

The Rashedo Gate once a pride of Kyoto has become a neglected place to such an extent that it has become opposite of what it once was. It has become a public place where people brazenly dump dead bodies and no one attends to them as they are left for the scavengers to feed upon. People are not above stealing even from the dead bodies. The premises of the gate have become dilapidated with no prospect of anyone mending them. Amidst such times, a servant of a samurai, who has just lost his job arrives at the Gate on one rainy evening. He is seeking temporary shelter there, but actually has nowhere else to go when the rain would stop. He is wondering about how to make his ends meet from tomorrow as he has no means of subsistence and he is likely to find none overnight so bad is the state of the city. After much pondering he visits and revisits the same thought that he would become a thief. But, he does not know as to how. Just as he is caught up in

these thoughts, he notices some movement upstairs and curiosity leads him there.

Upstairs, he encounters a horrific scene. Among the decomposing dead bodies and the unbearable stench, he notices an old woman bending over a dead body of a woman and pulling out her hair one by one. Recovering from his initial shock and horror he confronts her and interrogates her threateningly pointing the tip of his sword in front of her nose after knocking her down on the floor. Terrified, she tells him that she is doing it for making a wig. He is filled with contempt for her forgetting that a few moments ago he had planned on becoming a thief. The old woman defends her act by saying that the woman from whose body she is gathering the hair deserved to die as she was absolutely unethical in her dealings selling snake flesh as fish to soldiers and she had no compunction about doing what she is doing to her. Then she adds that probably if the dead woman had not done what she did she would have starved and so would she herself starve if she didn't steal. Using the same logic to justify his act, he tells her that he would also starve if he did not steal and hence he'd be stealing from her. So he robs her of her kimono leaving her naked amidst

the dead bodies in the cold, damp weather and disappears.

And this is how the story ends –

Shortly after that the hag raised up her body from the corpses. Grumbling and groaning, she crawled to the top stair by the still flickering torchlight, and through the gray hair which hung over her face, she peered down to the last stair in the torch light.

Beyond this was only darkness... unknowing and unknown.

And this is how *In The Grove* ends – (Samurai's testimony)

Then someone crept up to me. I tried to see who it was. But darkness had already been gathering round me. Someone . . . that someone drew the small sword softly out of my breast in its invisible hand. At the same time once more blood flowed into my mouth. And once and for all I sank down into the darkness of space.

Akutagawa is quite merciless in describing the human condition as he sees it. He offers no solace, no hope and no possibility of redeeming the human condition. Both these stories end with the characters sinking into a dark abyss.

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