

Article
Anil Zankar

The Architectonics of Rashomon -Part II



RASHOMON

“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)

I repeat the quote here for reference as I proceed with part II, which deals with Kurosawa’s scripting and mise en scene that formed his narrative.

Formation of the proto-cinematic images

Kurosawa in his autobiography provides the insight into the process that can be termed as the pre-scripting process. The following salient details from the long account are significant in this context.

When he had finished his film *Scandal*, Daiei Motion Picture Company wanted Kurosawa to make a film for them and he recalled a script written by Shibun Hashimoto that was based on Akutagawa’s story *In A Grove*. Although he had liked the script; he had told the writer that it wasn’t long enough to make a feature film out of it and more was needed. Then he recalled another Akutagawa story - *Rashomon* and he was convinced that joining that story to this narrative would solve the problem as both the stories were set in the Heian period. Kurosawa came to respect

Hashimoto through several discussions he had with him. Since the story was set in the eleventh century the classical architecture that he saw around Kyoto and Nara began to impact him and the images of the large setting (Rasho Gate) and the action therein began to form in his mind. Then the desire to restore the powerful imagery of the silent films (especially the French avant garde films that he had seen in his formative years) that he felt were lost in the sound era, took over. Those films were not easy to get at that time in Japan; so he had to forage for them and also depend upon his memory. As the settings for the two proto-stories formed in the mind, the thoughts regarding nature of imagery to be employed began to be formed more concretely. The action was to be split in two principal locations - the forest around Kyoto and Nara; and the large Rashomon set. The action in the forest was to be dominated by contrast of bright sunlight and shadows and the bleak looking, grey, rainy atmosphere was to prevail at the Rasho Gate.

Ref- (Something Like An Autobiography, Akira Kurosawa, pp. 180-189, First Vintage Books Edition, May 1983)

Scripting - creation of a frame story and a rondo form

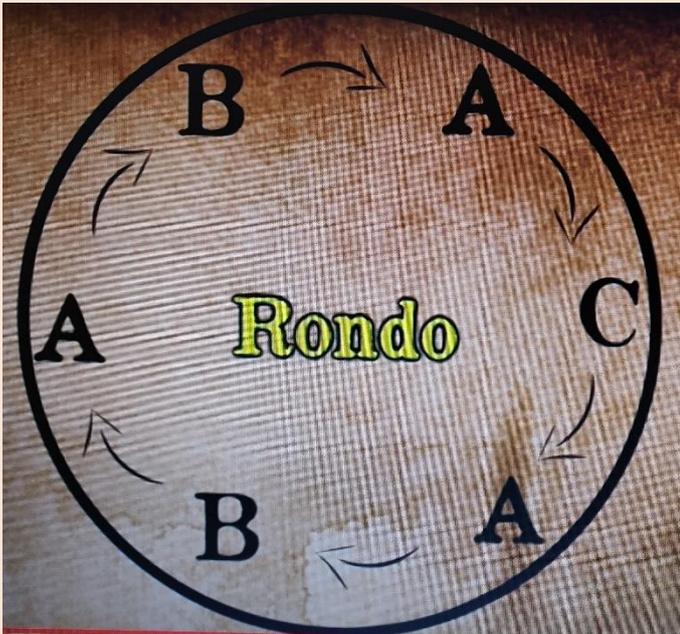
Kurosawa-Hashimoto have dealt with the two stories differently. While dealing with In A Grove, they have maintained the chronology of events as well as the details of the original stories intact. The only change that they have made is the deletion of the account told by the Samurai's mother in law. But, they have made significant changes to the second story Rashomon.

The image of the Rasho Gate had already begun to loom large in Kurosawa's mind. He made that as the main setting where the three characters seeking shelter from the rain recall and discuss the events in the other story. Kurosawa took a decision to part with all the horrific details such as the dead and semi-dead people being abandoned and left to die on the upper storey of the Gate. He has also done away with the original characters of Akutagawa - the dismissed servant of the samurai, who is contemplating on becoming a thief and the old lady, whom he encounters; and who is stealing without any qualms.

They have transplanted the priest and the woodcutter from the story In A Grove into Rasho Gate – the frame story- and given them additional dimensions as characters. They have added a passer-by, who joins them as another person seeking shelter from rain under the Gate. He is an unashamedly cynical and amoral character like the old woman and the discharged servant in Akutagawa's story. Also, he has no stake in the truth or reality of the versions of the rape and murder account story. And as Donald Richie points out, he is actually the one, who through persistent questioning moves the narrative forward. So the duo- Priest and Woodcutter- are turned into narrators, who recall the various versions for his benefit. This radical change is astounding for, by doing this he has negated all the action and characters of Akutagawa's story and yet has succeeded in distilling the essence of the original story in a new form.

Hashimoto and Kurosawa has converted their version of the story Rasho Gate into frame story of the film. This has made the crucial difference to the form and content of the film. Frame story is an ancient device belonging to the oral tradition of story-telling that we see deployed in Jataka stories, Panchtantra, Decameron, Arabian Nights and others. Scheherzade of Arabian Nights telling a new story each night to the King till dawn and still keeping it going to win another day in her life- is the frame story from which all individual stories of Arabian Nights emanate. Frame story is "*a preliminary narrative within which one or more of the characters proceeds to tell a series of short stories*" And "*Within this frame-plot, each story constitutes a complete and rounded narrative, yet functions also both as a means of characterizing the teller and as a vehicle for the quarrels and topics of argument en route.*" (A Glossary of Literary Terms, Sixth Edition, M. H. Abrams, A Prism Indian Edition, 1993, pp 195).

Rasho Gate in its modified form as the frame story becomes the central reference point to which the narrative returns again and again; thus, the focus shifts from *what* actually happened to *why* the various versions emerging. This is a master stroke.



The way in which the events are structured in the script has lent the Rondo form to the film narrative. Broadly speaking, in Western Classical Music the Rondo form is recognized as A B A C A B A meaning that the musical segments in the composition are arranged in the order A B A C A B A. (Sometimes there are variations to this in music, but it's not necessary to go into those details here). A is called the Theme and the other parts as Episodes. The theme is a refrain trying to form a central meaning and the episodes are the digressions. In Kurosawa-Hashimoto scheme Rasho Gate is the theme and the other stories are the episodes. The structure of Rashomon in Rondo form can be written as follows –

A: <i>Statement of Theme</i>	Rain. Rasho Gate. Priest and Woodcutter are discussing the episode and are perplexed. They are joined by the stranger (Cynic), who runs in seeking taking shelter from the rain.
B: <i>Episode narrated in continuity immediately after one another in the court</i>	Woodcutter's story, Priest's story, the police official's story, Tajomaru's story
A: <i>Return to the Theme</i>	Rain. Rasho Gate. Discussion between the three. Priest mentions the woman's story.
C: <i>Episode narrated in continuity immediately after one another in the court</i>	Woman's story, Husband's story.
A: <i>Return to the Theme</i>	Rain. Rasho Gate. Discussion.
B: <i>Episode- Woodcutter's story but a different version than the earlier one</i>	He claims to be an eyewitness and a different version emerges. Variation.
A: <i>Theme - recapitulation and a conclusion</i>	The three are unable to decide which is the true story; the abandoned baby is discovered; Woodcutter's act restores Priest's faith in humanity.

Mise en scene

Kurosawa's mise en scene has all the rich diversity of a classical musical composition. He has treated the two principal theatres of action differently.

Rasho Gate

Rasho Gate becomes the discussion forum for the what-happened-in-the-grove stories as the film advances. In Akutagawa it is depicted as an anarchic

space; within which we see the most selfishly bestial human behaviour for the survival in the face of severe natural calamities. It is a cruel space denuded of civilization. In the film, Rasho Gate remains imposing due to its height although it has reached a very dilapidated state. The large empty space beneath the roof looks stark and neutral. The diffuse grey light of the rainy day accentuates the flatness of the meeting place. The presence of the three characters is what infuses life in that space. Kurosawa's well-

placed long shots act as leit motif underlining the quiet spaciousness of this space encircled by rain. Kurosawa bestows upon it the form of a proscenium stage through some frontal views. This space filled with the presence of Priest, Woodcutter and Cynic, becomes the launching pad for the other stories.

The Prelude

The film opens with the rain-soaked image of the board at the top of the structure that reads Rashomon. It is used for the film title. While rain continues to pour over the various external parts of the structure, the other titles are superimposed. This title sequence is accompanied by music that comprises of the high pitched flutes, cymbals and drums. These instruments playing intermittently and in contrasting pitches create a rough texture of sound that is uneven in volume. After this prelude, we see dazed faces of Woodcutter and Priest, who seem to be mumbling about some event that they cannot come to terms with. They sit in silence staring at the ground in front of them. The third person- a passer by seeking shelter from the rain- runs in to join them under the roof. Their interaction interspersed with the long views of the structure are mostly presented using mostly frontal compositions, using profile views for variation at times. In all the sections of this theme, camera is usually static and moves minimally just to follow the characters. However, in the final segment of the film, we see a different pattern of the mise en scene leading to the denouement.

The Jungle

In sharp contrast to this, the jungle is presented as throbbing space, replete with violent human action as well as the drama of the light and shade. It appears as an uneven and unknown terrain that is difficult to navigate. Woodcutter's first story depicts his foray into the jungle. It leads not only to the unexpected and shocking discovery of the dead body but also to the intriguing density of the jungle. Kurosawa choreographs the camera around Woodcutter's walk giving it a spatial dynamism through rapidly varying viewpoints, such as low, high, close and distant. The use of Ravel's Bolero as the background music

alternating with pauses and a few discordant chords heighten the impact. The shocked Woodcutter running back to report the dead body ends the sequence with a wipe that takes us to the Court scene.

The Court Scenes

The uniqueness of the Court scenes comprises of the three stylistic devices Kurosawa uses. Firstly, he dispenses with the physical presence of the Judge, who is neither seen nor heard. The presence of his authority is conveyed by a high angle viewpoint of the camera to which all the people presented in the court address their submissions. Secondly, the person, who deposes before the Court is found to be sitting in the background in the same frame, when the next one is deposing. Thirdly, the camera remains mostly static with the same viewpoint throughout the sequence.



By removing the physicality of the judge and making the characters face the camera directly, Kurosawa establishes a frontal address to the audience from the characters and also translates the seamless nature of the original Akutagawa story, where he has serially numbered the statements of all those who depose. After his submission to the Court, Woodcutter is seen quietly sitting in the background and listening to Priest deposing. After that is the turn of the police official, who has arrested Tajomaru. He is in tandem with Tajomaru, who is bound by ropes and Woodcutter and Priest can be seen sitting together in the background in the same frame. In the next section of deposition, when we hear the woman and her dead

husband through a medium, these two are again present in the frame in the background.

Action in the four versions – Tajomaru, Wife, Husband and Woodcutter.

The triggers for the actions and their content in all these versions are presented differently. In Tajomaru's version it is a fair fight between two equal and matched opponents. Tajomaru actually rates him as the best opponent he has had ever. Accordingly, the fight is also presented as a vigorous exchange expressing their skills. Both of them are totally exhausted in the end. In Wife's version, there is no sword fight between the two, but an aftermath of the event takes form of intense hatred that the husband suddenly expresses towards her. Emotional violence that takes place after the exit of Tajomaru leads to the extreme stage of her fainting due to shock and after she recovers, she has another one to deal with; her husband lies dead with the dagger in his chest. Kurosawa uses strains of Bolero during the exchange between husband and wife. Samurai's version also does not contain any fight between Tajomaru and the Samurai, but Woodcutter's version does.



According to him, the woman precipitated the fight saying that she had been shamed before two men and therefore, rightly speaking only one of them should live. They should have a duel between them to decide the victor and she will then belong to that man. Tajomaru apparently has developed a fatal weakness for her and is willing to even reform himself, but the woman will have none of it, she wants her husband killed at his hands. The husband refuses to fight 'for

a woman like that'. Tajomaru after saying that women are weak; is about to walk off. It is at that crucial moment the woman goes hysteric fanning Tajomaru's male ego by praising him as her potential saviour and yet at the same time provoking both of them as being the real weak ones, men who are incapable of fighting. Thus, ensues a peculiar fight between the two men. Unlike in Tajomaru's version, this one seems like a fight between two men, who are reluctant to fight and are listlessly going about it. Finally, when Tajomaru is set to deliver the lethal stroke, the Samurai pleads that he does not want to die. Tajomaru panting and nearly spent, mechanically thrusts the sword his in chest. The woman screams and leaves. Tajomaru is too tired to chase her and drops flat on the ground in a totally exhausted state. After some time, he recovers his breath a bit and limps off, as if almost in disbelief and horrified by his own action.

All the confrontations between the three characters take a triangular form. These compositions express the tense and unstable equilibrium between the characters that emanate from the incidence. It is a motif. The little clearing in the jungle becomes the exclusive intimate space of the characters inaccessible to the others. This space is encircled by dense growth on all sides as depicted by the long shots from time to time. This space is full of strife, uncertainty, mental and physical violence producing extreme results.

Final recapitulation

The final segment begins with the usual negative remarks made by Cynic. He also questions and mocks Priest and Woodcutter. Cynic calls Woodcutter a liar like the rest. He is offended, but that has no impact on Cynic. When Priest remarks that if men don't trust each other earth would be hell. Cynic laughs saying that it is hell. In the end men are unknowable. He puts out the small fire that he has lit indicating that it's time for him to leave. Just then the unexpected happens, a baby's cry is heard. Startled, all of them rush to find where the sound is coming from. We see for the first time the middle or the interior section of the Rasho Gate. In one corner, they find the baby

comfortably wrapped in warm clothes and inside an open basket, but abandoned. Suddenly a lot of physical energy is injected into Rasho Gate. Cynic proceeds to strip the child of its expensive kimono leading to a verbal and then physical scuffle with Woodcutter, who objects. He is silenced by Cynic in his usual aggressive and countering manner, accusing him about the stealing the expensive dagger. Cynic walks off carrying the kimono and the amulet saying selfishness is entirely justified. The physical confrontation between Woodcutter and Cynic comes “out of the ring” and in the open as they move out and become rain-soaked and look more unkempt. Now, they themselves have unexpectedly become actors in a new drama that has sprung up suddenly.

The zone of comfortable, speculative dialogue ends suddenly and they are confronted by a real life situation; where their own acts and beliefs matter. The denouement is not about the others i.e. Wife, Husband and Tajomaru, but about their acts. Suddenly the temporary world that had formed between the three of them under the roof is unhinged. The limit of verbal argument is crossed. Kurosawa captures this change by moving his camera rigorously and by setting up a triangular composition between them with Cynic and Woodcutter fighting in the foreground and Priest holding the baby in the background. He has been carrying the question in his heart and now in his hand as he stands with the baby in the background. Will his faith in human beings be rewarded? Cynic chooses his choice along the expected lines, but it is Woodcutter, who enacts a major decision that is positive and humane.

Cynic leaves in the rain laughing deprecatingly at them and at everything almost like Tajomaru does. Woodcutter and Priest are left alone in that place as

before but now they have the baby on their hands. There is a long pause in which we see the two men standing still and wordless against the wooden wall and staring at the ground in front of them exactly as they did in the beginning of the film. Finally, the rain stops. A series of dissolves denote a long time has passed. The camera moves to a close view of the two men who are still immobile. The stasis is broken by the cry of the baby. Priest begins to move about slowly to comfort the baby, Woodcutter follows him and offers to take the baby from Priest, who recoils thinking that he intends to denude the baby further of his belongings. A teary eyed Woodcutter replies that he wants to adopt the child. He has six of his at home, one more will not be a burden is his reply. Priest apologises and then hands over the baby to him saying that because of him, his own faith in humanity is restored.

The two men part respectfully with Woodcutter carrying the baby in his arms. He walks slowly towards the camera in bright sunlight; his face is peaceful and affectionate as he looks at the baby in his hands. The theme music for the beginning segment reappears but is muted in tone and slower in tempo sans discords. The camera tilts up to the Rashomon board as in the beginning and on that image the film ends.

Akutagawa’s characters find nothing but morbidity at Rasho Gate, whereas Kurosawa’s Woodcutter accepts a new born form of life. Beginning with the scene of horror and disgust, Kurosawa chooses his point of departure and arrives at a world of compassion at the same venue. The keynote of Akutagawa’s stories is horror; Kurosawa has made peace and compassion his keynote as the denouement shows.

Mr. Anil Zankar, an alumnus of the Film & Television Institute of India, Pune is a recipient of two national awards, one for a film script and the other for a book on the history of cinema. He is a visiting faculty in Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune. He is a filmmaker, teacher and writer and has just completed a documentary film on Prof. Jayant V.Narlikar for Sahitya Akademi. He is based in Pune