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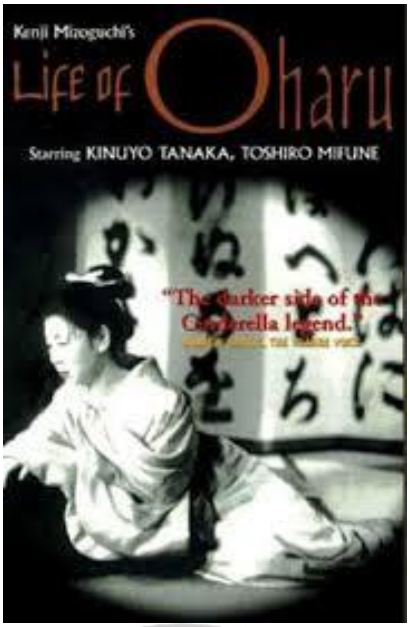

Japanese film-maker Mizoguchi Kenji (1898-1956) through an analysis of key film texts in their social, cultural and industrial contexts. Since coming to international prominence in the 1950s, Mizoguchi has been placed in western accounts of Japanese cinema, alongside Kurosawa and Ozu, as one of that country's most celebrated auteurs. As we shall see, this positioning has tended to cast Mizoguchi in a certain critical light which has subsequently been challenged from different perspectives. Mizoguchi's film career, which began in 1923, spanned the silent era and sound films, continued under Imperialist rule (1930-1945) and the American occupation (1945-1952), but gained world attention only in the last four years of his life. His life and films have since been the subject of academic studies, festival retrospectives and television documentaries, both in Japan and in the west (notably the United States).

Mizoguchi won Western praise earlier than Ozu. His "Ugetsu Monogatari" (1953) won the Venice Film Festival, and twice appeared on Sight & Sound magazine's ten-yearly poll of the greatest films of all time, which pointed me to him in the

early 1970s. But it was "Life of Oharu" that he considered his best film, perhaps because it drew from roots in his own life.

The Life of Oharu (1952)

In 1952 Kenji Mizoguchi released Life of Oharu one of his most personal films. The film based on the Ihara novel The Woman Who Loved Love, is also one of the great director's greatest achievements. With its formal style and long tracking shots the film takes some getting used to before being fully appreciated by Western audiences of today. The film takes attention and patience to reveal its intricacies.

Mizoguchi deftly examines the place of women in Japanese society in this film. In fact it was a theme that ran through much of his filmmaking from Osaka Elegy onward. Oharu, beautifully acted by Kinuyo Tanaka, moves in an ever downward spiral for the crime of falling in love with a person below her class. At the opening of the film she is forced to reflect on her life as she stares at statues in a Buddist temple. She began life as a lady in waiting at the Imperial Palace of Kyoto. A youthful indescretion with a court page, Katsunosuke (Toshiro Mifune) leads to the exile of her entire family. She becomes the concubine of Lord Matsudaira (Toshiaki Konoe) but only for the purpose of bearing him a male heir. After giving birth she is sent away from the palace. She becomes a maid and then as she ages finds short lived hapiness as the wife of a fan maker. His untimely death leads her into a life of prostitution in order to survive.
The story is told with great dignity and never attempts to judge Oharu for her actions. Oharu is simply a part of the society in which she lives.

As Kenji Mizoguchi’s tragic heroine, Kinuyo Tanaka’s eponymous fallen woman from a respectable family, is shunted from one misfortune to the next in this masterpiece from 1952, we could be forgiven for thinking that the film-maker’s protagonist is one hell of an unlucky soul. But, unfortunately for Oharu, the old

adage 'you make your own luck' rarely applied to a female in 17th century Japan, in the face of the social barriers of economic hardship and patriarchal prejudice – even Oharu's relatively privileged upbringing conspires against her here. These are, of course, themes that Mizoguchi was to explore repeatedly throughout his film-making career, and they are brought to starkly uncompromising life here via the director and co-writer Yoshikata Yoda's engaging and perceptive screenplay, which does not flag during the film's 130-minute running time.

From the outset, we're left in no doubt as to the narrative trajectory of Mizoguchi and Yoda's heroine as the film-makers skilfully top and tail Oharu's story with the (now fifty something) world-weary prostitute reflecting back on the course of events that have brought her to a position of virtual destitution. These bookends to Mizoguchi's film also serve to illustrate another theme here, namely that Oharu finds (meaningful) camaraderie only in female company – either the ironically comical banter of her fellow veteran whores or her sympathetic mother. Men are either out of reach socially to Oharu (Toshiro Mifune's lower class Katsunosuke, who shares Oharu's seemingly rare desire for 'sincere love'), subject to misfortune terminating possible relationships or (in the vast majority of cases) simply wishing to use women either for sexual, social or pecuniary advantage.

Thus, as Oharu's story unfolds, the themes recur. Following Oharu's family's social banishment (following their daughter's affair with Katsunosuke), our heroine is reduced to a functional (sexual) object to be used to produce an heir for the local lord, before being 'sold' by her cruel, mercenary father into prostitution. Women's objectification is again the focus as Oharu is taken in by a couple whose wife is hiding her baldness from her husband, before money rears its ugly head as the cause of further despair for our tragic heroine, leading to the death of her husband and being the underlying cause of Oharu's rape.

Throughout, Tanaka's turn here is beautifully judged, a mix of sombre subservience (head bowed, eyes averted) and bouts of feistiness, the latter eventually almost totally ground down in the face of oppressive social forces. The

denial of Oharu's motherhood is particularly moving, both at the time of her son's birth and later, as Oharu attempts to get closer (both physically and emotionally) to her offspring. If one were being hypercritical, it's fair to say that the 40ish-year old Tanaka is (visually) more convincing as a 50-year old (rather than a 20-year old), but this is a minor quibble. The film's predominantly melancholic mood is also enhanced by Ichiro Saito's sporadic score – there are particularly fine string-based and choral themes. Similarly, even though the film is arguably most memorable for its tragic, emotional content, it is also a visual treat. The black-and-white cinematography of Yoshimi Hirano provides many memorable shots and inventive set-pieces – for example, the morphing of the statue's face into that of Katsunosuke, the framing as Oharu's family sit awaiting judgement, plus many fine tracking shots, including that where Oharu's mother chases her daughter through a bamboo forest.

The women find a friend who has built a fire, and huddle around it. "I heard you served at the palace," another prostitute says. "What has led to your ruin?" Saying "do not ask about my past," she walks away from them and wanders into a Buddhist temple. One of the images of the Buddha dissolves into the face of a young man, and then a flashback begins that will tell Oharu's life from near the beginning.

Her life is the fate in microcosm of many Japanese women for centuries, in a society ruled by a male hierarchy. Kenji Mizoguchi, its director, was as sympathetic with women as any of his contemporaries, even Ozu, who whom he is often ranked. He made prostitutes a frequent subject, as in his "Street of Shame" (1956). He was known to frequent brothels, not simply to purchase favors, but to socialize with their workers; it made a great impression on him that his own sister, Suzo, who raised him, was sold by their father as a geisha. The same thing happens to Oharu in this film.

The character is played by Kinuyo Tanaka, who appeared in 14 of his films, and this one, made in 1952, helped redirect her career from early years as in ingénue toward more challenging roles. One of her strengths as Oharu is her success at playing the same character over a period of 30 years.

As Oharu's flashback begins, we learn she was born in respectable circles, and was a lady in waiting at the court when she and a young page (Toshiro Mifune) fell in love. This was forbidden, the page was condemned to death, and Oharu and his family were exiled. Her father never forgives her for this, and indeed after the scandal she becomes un marriagable in respectable circles. There is a brief respite when he is able to sell her as a concubine into the household of Lord Matsudaira. Her duty there is to bear him an heir, which she does, but then is coldly sent back into poverty and prostitution. Her father, who now considers her entirely in terms of her wage-earning ability, sells her as a courtesan, at which she balks, and finally sells her into service as a maid to a lady who uses elaborate wigs to conceal from her husband that she is half-bald. She loses this job because one of her employer's customers recognizes her from the shimabara (red-light district) and makes crude jokes which reveal her background.

Now comes a deceptive respite from her misery. She meets a nice man, a maker of fans, and settles in peacefully, but he is killed. She receives no legacy. In a convent, she tells the superior she wanted none: "All I want is to be a nun and be near to Buddha." In the convent, there is an ambiguous scene. A man who knew her comes to demand repayment for a gift of cloth she was given, and in a fury she strips off her clothing and hurls it at him. Her nudity is reflected only in the man's eye, but the discovery of this event leads to her banishment from the convent.

All of this time she dreams of seeing the son she gave birth to, but when this finally happens she is allowed only to get a glimpse of him sweeping past as a

grand man, oblivious to her existence. That brings us back to her current life, as a cold, hungry, unsuccessful prostitute.

Although a good deal of the film is shot in a straightforward way, some of it from Ozu's favourite the point of view of a person seated on a tatami mat, Oharu is often seen from a high-angle view well above eye level. In camera grammar this tends to diminish and objectify the subject, and Oharu increasingly comes to seem less like an autonomous character and more like a subject for study--and pity.

"As the story goes," the superior told her on arrival at the convent, "the morning's pretty face is a corpse by evening."

Here is the dejected film I have ever seen about the life of a woman. It begins on a chill dawn when the heroine wanders, her face behind a fan, until encountering some of her fellow prostitutes. "It's hard for a 50-year-old women to pass as 20," she observes. She says it has been a slow night: She was only picked up by an old man, who took her into a candlelit room filled with young men. "Look at this painted face!" he told them. "Do you still want to buy a woman?" To be held up as a moral spectacle is a cruel fate for a woman who has been treated immorally almost every day of her life, and who has always behaved as morally as it was within her power to do.

It is thus a film that works on pretty much every level – emotional engagement, acting, themes and as a (visual and aural) treat for the senses.

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