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The Veiled Faces of Sadako Yamamura: Monstrosity and Gender in the Ring Franchise

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The Veiled Faces of Sadako Yamamura

Monstrosity and Gender in the Ring Franchise

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Thesis Master Asian Studies

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Acknowledgements

After I finish writing this section I can finally hand in this thesis and what a journey it has been. It took me a long time to settle on the topic of this research, but it is one I find truly fascinating and wished to do justice.

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Though perhaps unconventional, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Internet Archive for the amazing work they do. Some crucial sources would not have been available to me had it not been for their efforts to preserve information on the internet.

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Abstract

The Veiled Faces of Sadako Yamamura: Monstrosity and Gender in the Ring Franchise

Keywords: Monsters, Gender, Yūrei, Ringu, Japan

Sadako Yamamura is a fictional character originating from Kōji Suzuki's 1991 novel: *Ringu*.

This novel would be the start of the Ring franchise, and Sadako has since grown into a tremendously famous and distinct cultural icon. But Sadako as described in the novel is a different character from the Sadako seen in her films, let alone in other media forms. I explore the ways in which Sadako has changed throughout some of her incarnations - novel, film series, and presence in popular culture - and try to find meaning in that. I do this through the theoretical framework of monster studies: Sadako embodies fears and societal problems the analysis of which may deepen understanding of societal issues. Changes to Sadako's identities as a woman, as an intersex individual, and as a Monster are central issues.

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Note on Conventions

In principle, when first naming anyone I will do so with the personal name before the family name, and every mention after that only the family name. An exception to this is Sadako Yamamura, who shall be referred to as Sadako from the second mention onward because that is the name she is mostly known by. The characters Kazuyuki Asakawa and Reiko Asakawa will also be referred to by their personal name, to distinguish the two.

Titles of Japanese media are italicized and are followed by the title written in Japanese characters the first time they appear in the footnotes and reference list. Japanese authors will also have their name in Latin alphabet followed by the Japanese characters, in the same order, the first time they appear in the footnotes and reference list.

Introduction

It is the year 2002. A funeral is held at the LaForet museum in Harajuku for Sadako Yamamura, a girl who never actually existed.¹ Sadako is a fictional character originating from Kōji Suzuki's 1991 novel: *Ringu*.² Since her debut, she has appeared in many works part of what I would like to describe as the Ring franchise, and has grown into a tremendously famous and distinct cultural icon. But as the stories in these works change, so does Sadako. Indeed, Sadako as described in the novel is in many ways a different person from the Sadako seen in most of her films, let alone her appearances in other media forms. My goal in this thesis is to not only point out changes in Sadako's stories and character, but to analyse those through the theoretical framework of monster studies. Intentional or not, Sadako embodies fears and societal problems the analysis of which may deepen our understanding of societal issues and marginalized groups within and perhaps even outside of Japan. Beyond that I aim to explore the transformation Sadako underwent and formulate a hypothesis as to why she did, and the role that modern Japanese popular culture plays in it.

Being the face of a franchise that is known throughout the world, Sadako has seen no shortage of attention in the academic sphere.³ However, upon taking a closer look it becomes apparent that this attention is disproportionately directed at the films. The original Sadako as she appeared in the 1991 novel is vastly overshadowed by her other counterparts. The original novel's story and Sadako Yamamura offer unique and different interpretations from the films, and the scarcity of research into it is a gap in literature. The alterations made to Sadako Yamamura in her transition from novel to film are significant and vastly underexplored.

This thesis also pays attention to the early adaptations of Sadako in film as that is what ultimately lead to her fame and is what mostly defines her today. Lastly, although the role that Sadako is given in her story always seems to come down to that of a calamity

¹ J. Lopez, "THE RING EXHIBIT," www.theringworld.com, 13-10-2007 (accessed through [web.archive.org](https://web.archive.org/web/20071013065414/http://www.theringworld.com/exhibit.php), 29-06-2025.) <https://web.archive.org/web/20071013065414/http://www.theringworld.com/exhibit.php>. Jessica Balanzategui, "The Child and Japanese National Trauma," in *The Uncanny Child in Transnational Cinema*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 159, doi:10.1515/9789048537792-008.

² Kōji Suzuki 光司鈴木, *Ringu リング* (Tōkyō: Kadokawa shoten 東京: 角川書店, 1993).

Kōji Suzuki, *Ring*, trans. Rie Neehus (Utrecht, Bruna, 2005).

³ Balanzategui, "The Child," 157-160.

Michael Crandol, *Ghost in the Well: The Hidden History of Horror Films in Japan*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 200-207.

befalling the protagonists, her modern fame has come with a very different Sadako: an idol-like cute girl. Taking those three ‘stages’ as separate versions of Sadako, this thesis aims to uncover not only what changes Sadako Yamamura underwent, but also how these changes matter when it comes to the meaning of her character and why this change could have happened.

The Ring franchise has grown to be vast with official media ranging from films, books and games to social media posts, photoshoots, and a guest appearance for a baseball match.⁴ Exploring the entire franchise would be a task far greater than this thesis can accommodate and as such the scope shall be limited to a few specific works that each represent a ‘stage’ of Sadako.

From the novel series that started it all the original 1991 *Ringu* is the primary focus, though its sequel *Rasen* is also touched upon.⁵ The short stories published in *Birthday* that concern events from those books are also taken into consideration.⁶ The remaining books fall outside of the scope because the sequel books and their Sadako diverge from the original novel and have little to do with the rest of the franchise.

For the second stage, Hideo Nakata’s *Ringu* (1998) is of course the primary focus as it is the piece of media that would lead to the franchise we know today.⁷ Some attention will also be given to the somewhat forgotten original film adaptation *Ringu: Kanzenban* (1995) that was more faithful to the novel.⁸ While it must be acknowledged that the American remake of *Ringu* and its sequels played an important part in the worldwide fame Sadako enjoys today, I would argue they were not as formative to Sadako and her story, especially in Japan and will thus not be discussing them in this thesis⁹.

The third stage is the most difficult to grasp, which is reflected in the variety of media used. In contrast to the other stages, much of this media is promotional in nature as opposed

⁴ Balanzategui, “The Child,” 157-160.

⁵ Kōji Suzuki, *Spiraal*, trans. Peter de Rijk (Utrecht: A.W. Bruna Uitgevers, 2005). Originally published as *Rasen* in 1995.

⁶ Kōji Suzuki 光司鈴木, *Bāsudei* バースデー (Tōkyō: Kadokawa Shoten 東京: 角川書店, 1999). Kōji Suzuki, and Glynne Walley, *Birthday* (New York: Vertical, 2007).

⁷ *Ringu* リング, directed by Nakata Hideo 中田秀夫 (Japan: Toho 東宝, 1998), 95 min, DVD.

⁸ *Ringu: Kanzenban* リング 完全版, directed by Takigawa Chisui 瀧川治水 (Japan: Amuse Video アミューズ・ビデオ, 1995), 95 min, <https://youtu.be/Fv9rw2BXg0Q?si=HMwq1cdvPIJz4yww>.

⁹ The American films have the story rewritten to take place in America and Sadako Yamamura was thus replaced by Samara Morgan. Though they are visually similar and have some shared aspects, they are different characters.

to being considered part of the ‘main’ franchise. It is the media in which Sadako is turned into something comical, cute and harmless as opposed to frightening and lethal. This includes official works such as manga like *Sadako-san and Sadako-chan*, figurines, photoshoots and the promotional social media accounts of Sadako, as well as fan works that portray or have taken considerable inspiration from Sadako to create cutesy or desirable imagery or stories.¹⁰ This thesis will, however, limit itself to official media.

Any analysis of Sadako Yamamura in this thesis will be guided by the analytical framework of monster studies, for which this research primarily relies on Cohen’s *Monster Theory*.¹¹ The nature of monster studies – much like its subject matter – is impossible to pin down and define with fixed methods. Instead, monster studies shows ways of approaching the analysis of Monsters and the Monstrous to form a deeper understanding of the origins and impacts that can be found in reality.¹² It should be noted that in this case a Monster, the Monstrous, is understood to be that which can not be accepted by a given standard. As such monsters are in some cases different from the more common use of the word monster, that being a frightening and repulsive creature that will commonly default to being evil. Sadako is one example of a Monster who is not very monstrous in the classic sense. Visually Sadako is neither repulsive nor frightening and even her role as an evil monster can be called into question.

A core principle of monster studies is that a Monster is in some way a reflection or embodiment of something real, of a societal fear or desire manifested as a monster in the imagination of people. This means that to understand a particular monster, it is often necessary to take a multidisciplinary approach. Monster studies, then, helps with figuring out angles of analysis, but does not facilitate the research method itself.

Monster studies very often goes hand in hand with gender studies. Monsters tend to be gendered and the way in which they are can betray societal norms and taboos. In the case of *Ring*’s Sadako the relevance of gender studies rings true even beyond its synergistic

¹⁰ Aya Tsutsumi, 津々巳あや, and Noriaki Sugihara 杉原憲明, *Sadako-san to Sadako-chan* 貞子さんとさだこちゃん. (Tōkyō: Kadokawa Shoten 東京: 角川書店, 2019).

¹¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 37-58. Originally published in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3-25.

¹² To differentiate Monster/Monstrous as used in monster studies from the regular usage of those terms I capitalize the analytical concepts.

potential with monster studies. The ways in which Sadako's fictional life has been shaped by her identities as a woman and as an intersex individual require a gender studies lens to be properly understood. Furthermore, Sadako's presence as a character in reality has been moulded into gendered stereotypes which is another angle that will be explored.

Literature Review

Monster studies as we know it today is a relatively recent discipline and primarily born from a Euro-American background, but the study of monsters which lies at the core of monster studies goes back much further and has a diverse and global history. While this thesis utilizes the current form of monster studies it is important to acknowledge the long history of the discipline and especially the evolution of the study of monsters that happened in Japan, which is the focus of this research.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's 1996 *Monster Culture (7 Theses)* is often considered to have laid the foundation for modern monster studies, also known by the name Monster Theory after this work.¹³ Cohen presents seven theses for what meanings a monster might have and how we can attempt to understand them. The theses themselves are open to interpretation and mere examples of how one can approach Monsters. Cohen explicitly does not believe in unified theory, stating that "we live in an age that has rightly given up on Unified Theory".¹⁴ Being impossible to truly grasp or nail down lies in the nature of the Monstrous and so no such thing as an absolute method exists for their analysis. Instead, what Cohen provided is a demonstration of what monster studies can do – a glimpse of what it has to offer.

Below I will discuss Cohen's seven theses to further explain the purpose of monster studies while also introducing ideas and scholars that helped form the discipline and inspired Cohen.

Cohen's first thesis states "The Monster's Body Is a Cultural Body", and describes Monsters as "an embodiment of a certain cultural moment".¹⁵ A Monster is created and given meaning by its cultural context, it 'captures' a moment and a place. The work of Derrida and specifically his concept of *différance* lies at the core of this idea. This means that a Monster's meaning is dictated by its real and imagined context. Even if a Monster seems to persist or propagate through time and crosses cultural boundaries it will no longer be the same Monster.

¹³ Cohen, "Seven Theses," 3-35.

Asa Simon Mittman, "Introduction: The impact of Monster and Monster Studies," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman, and Peter J. Dendle (Oxon, New York: Routledge 2016) 2.

Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, "Introduction: A Genealogy of Monster Theory," in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020) 29.

¹⁴ Cohen, "Seven Theses," 37.

¹⁵ Cohen, "Seven Theses," 38.

This transitions nicely into the second thesis: “The Monster Always Escapes”, which posits that even though Monsters are usually vanquished, banished or exorcised, they tend to return.¹⁶ Monsters will resurface across time and space to embody new things. It is thus exactly their fleeting nature which allows them to always ‘escape’ and then return, to escape the confines of their stories. Whenever the curtain falls for a Monster, a new incarnation shall simply take the stage.

The third thesis: “The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis” starts getting into the perceived threat of a Monster.¹⁷ The very existence of the Monster threatens to break the system, the logic upon which a culture is built. The monster exists outside of the order of things and refuses to be categorized. Trinh T. Minh-ha’s idea of inappropriate/d others, applied to Monsters by Haraway, shows the other side of this.¹⁸ For is it truly the Monster that seeks exclusion or is it the system that refuses to acknowledge certain groups? The inappropriate/d others are those that are made to be Other but attempt to reform the system to facilitate them as they are.

Cohen touches upon a lot of the same points in his fourth thesis: “The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference”.¹⁹ This time, however, the monster is “difference made flesh”.²⁰ Difference of any kind can be made Monstrous, but as Cohen explains: “monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual”.²¹ That which is unknown, that which is different, these Others are easily portrayed as everything undesirable. Cohen names Said’s Orientalism as an example of how the Othering of ‘the East’ meant it was ascribed many attributes opposed to the moral values of ‘the West’.²²

But sometimes the threat comes not only from the Monstrous Other, but from what it represents. In his fifth thesis: “The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible” , Cohen introduces another function that Monsters may have, namely that of prohibition.²³ By attributing all sorts of traits that are considered objectionable to a Monster, people are

¹⁶ Cohen, “Seven Theses,” 38-39.

¹⁷ Cohen, “Seven Theses,” 40-41.

¹⁸ Donna Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others,” in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020) 465.

¹⁹ Cohen, “Seven Theses,” 41-45.

²⁰ Cohen, “Seven Theses,” 41.

²¹ Cohen, “Seven Theses,” 41.

²² Cohen, “Seven Theses,” 44.

²³ Cohen, “Seven Theses,” 45-48.

discouraged from expressing those traits themselves. The idea of this normalising and disciplinary effect of the Monster can be seen as an application of Foucault's ideas about power.²⁴

This is taken a step further in the sixth thesis: "Fear of the Monster Is Really a Kind of Desire".²⁵ The suppression of the Monster may mirror the suppression of one's own hidden desires and so the Monster becomes a vessel of imagination, a way to explore forbidden desires like "the possibilities of other genders, other sexual practices, and other social customs".²⁶ This method of reading the Monster resembles Freud's psychoanalysis in its emphasis on repression and (forbidden) desires.

Another one of Freud's concepts whose use has been adopted in monster studies is that of the uncanny or 'unheimlich'.²⁷ About the uncanny Freud says "it may be true, that the uncanny [unheimlich] is something which is secretly familiar [Heimlich-heimisch], which has undergone repression and then returned from it".²⁸ The Monster – then – is the uncanny made flesh. Alternatively, the Monster may be considered as an embodiment of Kristeva's concept of the abject. Kristeva disagreed with Freud's clear-cut and binary ideas on repression and introduced the abject as "that what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite".²⁹ Ultimately, it all comes back to the Monster's refusal to be categorized, its unassailable freedom which is both the threat it poses and that which is the subject of desire.

Cohen's seventh and final thesis is that "The Monster Stands at the Threshold ... of Becoming". This thesis can be seen as the culmination of all the previous ones as it bases itself on the ideas established there. A Monster is created by a people, a culture, it reflects that which is banished or failed to be recognized. The Monster is therefore as real as we are, and its existence cannot be extinguished. No matter how many times the Monster is pushed away, it will return without fail so long as culture exists. By listening to the Monster, we may learn

²⁴ Cohen, "Seven Theses," 46-47.

Michael Foucault, *De Wil tot Weten: Geschiedenis van de Seksualiteit 1*, trans. Peter Klinkenberg et al (Nijmegen: SUN, 1984) 50-51, 100-101.

²⁵ Cohen, "Seven Theses," 49-52.

²⁶ Cohen, "Seven Theses," 50.

²⁷ Weinstock, "Introduction", 29.

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020) 77.

²⁹ Julia Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020) 97.

about that which normally goes unseen. From the Monster's perspective 'new' possibilities and problems can be observed, though those have been there all along of course. In the words of Cohen himself: "These monsters [...] ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expression. They ask us why we have created them".³⁰

Sadako herself and perhaps the very story that is *Ringu* are Monsters, too. As will become clear in this thesis, many of Cohen's theses can be applied to Sadako and the mode of thinking that monster studies provides is crucial to understanding what Sadako the Monster is trying to tell. Of course, it cannot be stressed enough that much of the groundwork of this discipline is West-centric while Sadako is born from a Japanese cultural climate. Fortunately, this thesis is not the first to bridge that gap.

Raechel Dumas does exactly that with her book: *The Monstrous-Feminine in Contemporary Japanese Popular Culture*.³¹ She discusses Monstrous women in Japanese media. The original *Ringu* novel and the Hideo Nakata film adaptation are also discussed at one point, giving special attention to the way Sadako both challenges and conforms to patriarchal gender norms. The concept of Monstrous-Feminine Dumas works with originates from Barbara Creed, a feminist film theory scholar who has analyzed horror through psychoanalysis and feminist theory.³² Creed herself leans on Kristeva's abject for developing her concept of the Monstrous-Feminine. The application of Western theory within a Japanese cultural context is thus demonstrated to not be an issue when given proper care. It is important to note that none of these three scholars identify themselves or their work as monster studies, instead being part of Japan studies, gender studies, or film studies.

³⁰ Cohen, "Seven Theses," 52.

³¹ Raechel Dumas, *The Monstrous-Feminine in Contemporary Japanese Popular Culture* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan - Springer International, 2018) 38-56.

³² Barbara Creed, "The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis," in *The Monster Theory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 211-225

Chapter 1: The Novels – Birth of Sadako

Ringu

Sadako Yamamura's rise to fame may be mostly thanks to her appearances in films, but her origins and thus the origin of the Ring franchise are found in the 1991 novel: *Ringu*. From the success of this first novel, a sequel novel and a whole novel series would come to be while also branching out into film which would become the Ring franchise. But all of that started here, with the story of Asakawa Kazuyuki who, together with his old classmate Ryuji Takayama tries to uncover the secrets behind a series of deaths that are connected by a mysterious videotape.

As demonstrated above, summarising the story of *Ringu* in a single sentence without even mentioning Sadako Yamamura is surprisingly easy, even though she has proven to be the most memorable character by far. The videotape in question is of course a product of Sadako's fate, as readers come to learn over the course of the story, but it is left up to the reader's interpretation whether Sadako intentionally left that legacy behind. Indeed, unlike nearly every piece of media Sadako stars in after this debut, the book *Ringu* does not truly allow Sadako to take the stage, at all.

Sadako Yamamura is long dead by the time the plot in *Ringu* starts and is thus conveyed to the reader only through recollections by other people, the videotape that stored some of Sadako's memories and visions, and what the main characters can piece together from old pictures and documents. In terms of in-person appearances, the only instance in which Sadako appears is when her skeletal remains are recovered from the well in which she died.³³ Despite protagonist Kazuyuki seeing Sadako's skull as the face of the living Sadako he had seen in an old picture, Sadako is dead. Events such as the above hallucination and other such happenings that could suggest Sadako is still in the living world in some shape or form are ultimately not followed up on, and if we are to consider the sequel novel even denied outright.

Sadako being dead should come as no surprise to people familiar with the franchise, but it is the lack of a life in death that stands out. Unlike almost all retellings of the story, the original *Ringu* was not a ghost story – in fact, the author had not even intended for it to be

³³ Suzuki, *Ring* (Dutch), 208.

horror but thought of it as a detective story.³⁴ Sadako's status as an active Monster in the original telling of her story is purely in the past, with the presently unfolding events being a consequence of Sadako's death while not actively influenced by her from beyond the grave. This is in stark difference with not only the rest of the Ring franchise, but also with the legacy of traditional Japanese yūrei or onryō in *kaidan*, that Sadako has become inextricably linked with.³⁵ So if she is no ghost, and has no active hand in what happens to the protagonists, what makes her a Monster? The answer to that question is two-fold; on the one hand there is Sadako's past in which she can be recognized as a Monster, and on the other there is Sadako's role in the overarching plot.

Sadako is the daughter of a mysterious woman with psychic powers, and she has also inherited psychic powers herself. In fact, her powers far exceed those of her mother. Being a psychic makes Sadako and her mother Other, which has grave consequences. Sadako's father is a researcher of paranormal powers and is working together with her mother to prove the existence of – and explore – psychic powers. Though seen as novel and interesting at first, the public sentiment soon turns against the duo, dismissing their validity. The public backlash and ridicule drives Sadako's mother to her eventual suicide and indirectly causes her father to become chronically ill. Sadako thus learns to keep her powers to herself as much as she can, but even that is not enough. While chasing her dreams of becoming an actress she is caught projecting her thoughts to a television. This indirectly leads to her having to abandon her dreams and being remembered as the 'creepy girl' years later.

Sadako and her mother as Monsters are rejected by society for being different. They do not seek exclusion, and Sadako even goes as far as to hide away the things that would make her othered. Despite that they end up as inappropriate/d others, excluded by a society that refuses to accept and acknowledge them. The suffering they go through because of this is

³⁴ Asamiya Unga 朝宮運河, "Suzuki Kōji's new horror novel *Ubiquitous* interview: unravelling the mystery of human progress with a plant theme 鈴木光司さん最新ホラー長編「ユビキタス」インタビュー 植物テーマに人類進化の謎に迫る," *Good Life With Books*, 29-03-2025, <https://book.asahi.com/article/15685360>.

当時はホラーにまったく関心がなかったからね (笑)。『リング』を書き上げた時、おれは最高に面白い推理小説を書いたつもりだったんです。だから編集者から「面白いホラーでした」といわれて仰天したの。

³⁵ Balanzategui, "The Child," 156.
Crandol, "Ghost in the Well," 204.

what leads to the cursed videotape manifesting, becoming the threat that drives the story, becoming the monster.

But before we dive deeper with this analysis there is another important facet of Sadako as a person that needs to be pointed out: Sadako is intersex. Sex and gender identity, and by extension sexuality, are common points of analysis in monster studies.³⁶ Monsters that embody these can be simultaneously real, other, and threatening to a heteronormative society, while for people who find themselves represented by these monsters it can be freeing to watch the embodiment of what makes society shun them fight back against the oppressive norms of society. Sadako's identity as an intersex woman does not play an overly prominent role in the story or even in the flashbacks detailing her past, but that is only superficially. The author's intentions are difficult to unravel from Sadako's purposefully obscured intentions and thoughts in her somewhat vague backstory, but it leaves much room for interpretation.

It is important to firstly acknowledge my own positionality, I am a transgender woman and have been active in the field of gender studies for years, having particularly immersed myself in gender identities. My perspective on gender-related topics – which includes intersex identities – is thus quite different from the perspective of Suzuki when he was writing *Ringu* in 1991.

Sadako's intersex identity – when it comes up - is primarily used as a narrative tool to other Sadako from those around her. Intersex people are of course real, and Sadako's condition is based on real conditions: an outwardly female body with breast growth and a vagina while often lacking a womb, having XY chromosomes and testicles. However, Sadako's condition is ultimately fictional as the last symptom given in the novel is completely made up: “for some reason every single person with this condition is a beauty”.³⁷ This charm that is attributed to Sadako's intersex condition comes up a few times when people remark on her captivating but somewhat odd beauty. When first confronted with an image of Sadako, protagonist Kazuyuki describes her as having the prettiest face he had ever seen and immediately questions why he did not simply say she was the prettiest woman he had seen. He then thinks to himself that as a woman Sadako is somewhat lacking a certain

³⁶ Sex, gender, sexuality and genitalia have historically had a presence in Japanese monster culture as well. Manami Yasui, *Nerawareta shintai : yamai to yōkai to jendā* (Tōkyō: Heibonsha, 2022), 93-132.

³⁷ Original text: “なぜかこの症候群の人間は美人ぞろいなのである。”, my translation. Suzuki, *Ringu*, 155.

feminine roundness in her face.³⁸ Only near the end of the novel is it revealed that Sadako is intersex, a fact that up to that point likely had only been known by Sadako, her parents, and the man who had raped her.

Much like her psychic powers, Sadako's intersex condition Others her and is thus something Sadako hides away. It is also a classic example of Cohen's third thesis: the category crisis, with her mere existence contradicting a binary view on sex.³⁹ Sadako is not a man, and her womanhood is at risk of being stripped away, leaving her in a hard to categorize in-between, a position that makes her a social outcast. Her inability to bear children further separates her from the expectations placed upon her as a woman, and even becomes important to the plot when the protagonists realize that the virus contained in the cursed videotape could be considered a child of Sadako. Creed and Dumas posit that tropes of the Monstrous-Feminine often center around motherhood and childbirth.⁴⁰ The conclusion that the intersex Sadako could be mother to a deadly cursed videotape leans towards a broad fear of the 'unnatural' Other that perverts an idealised notion of motherhood.

On at least two occasions Sadako's eerie beauty – which is linked to her intersex condition – is met with sexual violence from men with disastrous consequences. First, her dream of becoming an actress is ruined when the founder of her acting troupe becomes obsessed with Sadako over her beauty and mysteriousness – her psychic powers.⁴¹ In a drunken state he proclaims he will storm her apartment and make her his. What really happened after that is left up in the air, but the next day he died suddenly in a similar fashion as those who would later be victims of Sadako's videotape, and Sadako left the troupe. It is not a stretch to say that he really did attempt to force himself on Sadako but was not able to overcome the powerful psychic. The second attacker raped Sadako despite her fighting back, found out about her being intersex and finally murdered her.

Though Sadako's intersex identity is not given as a reason for the brutal murder, a connection between the two is easily made. The rapist – who is also doctor – was aware of the existence of Sadako's condition and explains that if it were not for that he likely would

³⁸ Suzuki, *Ringu*, 211.

Suzuki, *Ring* (Dutch), 157.

³⁹ Cohen, "Seven Theses," 40-41.

⁴⁰ Creed, "The Monstrous-Feminine," 220-221.

Dumas, *Japanese Popular Culture*, 2, 3, 58.

⁴¹ Cohen's sixth thesis argues fear of the monster is really desire and applies here almost perfectly. The otherness of Sadako (both the eerie beauty from her intersex condition and mysterious psychic powers) spur the attempted rapist on.

have been frozen in shock from finding out she is intersex. The intersex identity seems to not have mattered much in this case, but it is acknowledged that if it had been someone else it likely would have.⁴² Furthermore, the rapist's – and by extension, the author's - insistence on mentioning and explaining Sadako's condition alone points to it being something that they considered a somewhat shocking revelation. Still, being intersex is presented as a facet of Sadako, not as her entire character. That, combined with how none of the characters react to her condition with disgust or shock, makes for a somewhat surprisingly respectful approach for the time.

Sadako embodies those who fall outside of a rigid system of sex and gender binarism, but also the strict norms and struggles women often encounter in their lives. In her life, Sadako was a tragic victim in a chain of unfairness and misfortune. From her mother being driven to suicide by society's oppression, to her dreams being shattered while suffering from isolation, impossible expectations and unwanted sexual advances and aggression. And finally, while she had already lost nearly everything she was raped and had her secret forcefully exposed by one of the doctors that were supposed to treat her father. Sadako had lost everything and gave up on life due to the ways in which society – the world – seemed to reject her. And so, she left that same world a vengeful parting gift.

The other way in which Sadako can be considered a Monster is more straightforward: it is the curse that drives the plot of the novel. As Sadako passed, the smallpox virus she had been infected with by her rapist together with Sadako's psychic power took on a new form. As she lay dying in that well her life flashed before her eyes and she projected those thoughts along with the mutating virus, and this curse persisted even when Sadako passed on. Years later the psychic broadcast would accidentally be caught on a videotape, finally manifesting the curse and starting the novel's story.

Protagonist Kazuyuki gets himself infected while looking into the deaths of the first victims and enlists the help of fellow protagonist Ryuichi to solve the mystery before the 7-day deadline. *Ringu* plays with the conventions of more traditional ghost stories but

⁴² I disagree with Dumas's claim that the rapist was provoked to violence by the discovery of her condition (p. 39). Dumas cites *Ringu* directly but takes the quotes out of context to misrepresent what is actually said by the rapist doctor Jotaro Nagao character. Jotaro's violence against Sadako and his attempt to destroy her had nothing to do with her intersex identity, but were an almost instinctive reaction to the death threat Sadako had issued him telepathically. In fact, his initial reaction to her "sickly beautiful body" was weirdly very compassionate, considering he was in the middle of raping her. For the actual texts see for instance: Suzuki. *Ringu*, 255-257, Suzuki, *Ring* (Dutch), 188-189.

ultimately does its own thing. More traditional ghost stories would usually have the ghost haunting those directly and indirectly responsible for their woes, only to be appeased by either achieving their goal or being properly laid to rest.⁴³ The protagonists uncover Sadako's identity, visit her birthplace, confront her killer, and even find her remains and return them to her remaining family for a proper burial, but it is not enough. Sadako's ghost is not looking for appeasement, in fact, it appears that Sadako is truly gone and not even a ghost remains. All that is left is the mutated virus that has taken on unnatural psychic properties along with Sadako's scorn towards society and only wishes to propagate itself as a virus would. The only way to cure oneself, as is revealed at the end of the novel, is to pass the curse on to someone else.

Though it cannot be said to be Sadako herself, the 'monster' that chases the protagonists of the story is still part of her. Sadako is no longer solely a victim and has evolved into a form of mindless, untargeted vengeance. Of note is that where for monsters and especially Japanese traditional ghost stories, the argument can often be made that in becoming a 'monster' they claim an agency that they had lacked before. Their monstrous form frees them from the metaphorical societal shackles that bound them, and they can at last fight back against the oppression they suffered.⁴⁴ The Sadako in this novel is different. While she does succeed in laying the groundwork for her revenge against the world, she enjoys little agency in it herself.

Rasen

Rasen – known as *Spiral* in the English translation - is the sequel novel to *Ringu* but needs to be covered separately due to rather drastic changes to direction of both the story and its characters owing to the fact the novel had not been planned for while working on *Ringu*.⁴⁵

⁴³ Crandol, *Ghost in the Well*, 211-212.

Zack Davisson, *Yūrei: The Japanese Ghost* (Seattle: Chin Music Press, 2020) 87-97, 111-120, 185-186, 197-198.

Satoko Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki in Transition: From the World of the Samurai to the Vengeful Female Ghost* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020) 24-25.

⁴⁴ Shimazaki, *Edo Kabuki*, 27, 132-133; Crandol, *Ghost in the Well*, 211-212.

⁴⁵ Fujitelevision Inc., “鈴木光司インタビュー,” www.fujitv.co.jp, 22-01-2000 (accessed through web.archive.org, 29-06-2025.)

<https://web.archive.org/web/20000122222140/http://www.fujitv.co.jp/tx/kumorepo/ringiv/interview.html>.

Much can be said about *Rasen*, but this thesis' focus is *Rasen*'s representation of Sadako. A lot is left ambiguous about her true motivations and plans, but she is much more of an antagonist in this story. Where in *Ringu* Sadako was essentially an innocent victim, *Rasen* represents her as something evil with agency. She is still victim of the abuse described in *Ringu*, but now she knowingly and willingly spreads her curse with little regard for the people sacrificed. Sadako's end goal – either complete domination over or the eradication of humanity – is intertwined with that of the virus.

There are two different goals the virus is trying to accomplish: both being connected to Sadako. The explanations given in the novel are all conjecture by the characters, but those are all the author provided readers with. The first goal is mutating into a more efficient form: spreading from one person to another is too slow and instead the virus uses its hosts to reach a new and more effective medium. This has to do with the second goal which is rebirth: Sadako did not want to die, and this desire translates into the virus literally rebirthing Sadako through one of its hosts. Then Sadako can accomplish her dream of becoming an actress after all, but her motivations for wanting to become an actress are called into question. It is now connected to her revenge on society by spreading the virus.

A more subtle but equally if not more important change in the representation of Sadako is how she interacts with other people. The same Sadako who in *Ringu* seemed to have trouble interacting with others and whose only sexual experience has been being raped, seduces the protagonist and has sex with him. Before undressing and having intercourse though, Sadako made sure to turn off all sources of light to hide her intersex condition. Upon finding out that the woman he had sex with was Sadako, the protagonist faints from shock. The fact that Sadako is intersex is also highlighted. More so than in *Ringu* Sadako's intersex identity and Monstrousness or Otherness are a shock factor in *Rasen*.

This approach is most obvious when Sadako reveals that her rebirth has changed her anatomy and she is in possession of both testicles and a womb, making her as she calls it “complete”. The protagonist reacts in pure horror. Sadako is seen as a new species of human that threatens to take over the world by being able to autoreproduce – essentially – true copies of herself. This suggestion of an evil “complete” intersex person seeking world dominance lacks all the respect Sadako's intersex condition was given in *Ringu*. Furthermore, her depiction as Monster is line with Cohen's fourth thesis as Sadako is quite literally difference made flesh, a whole new species of human that threatens to usurp ‘us’ with its aberrant sexual

nature.⁴⁶ The perversion of motherhood, both by killing the host with her rebirth and by her self-birthing nature, echo tropes of the Monstrous-Feminine as well.⁴⁷

Sadako is now fully portrayed as a monster. She functioned as a Monster in *Ringu* because of her role in the story and her embodiment of social groups and issues, but *Rasen* actively antagonizes her. The trend of making Sadako more shocking, more sensational, more sexualised, more evil and more monstrous is one that we will see more off.

Birthday

Birthday is not the third book in the series, instead being the fourth novel releasing as something of an epilogue to the first three through three short stories adding to the three previous novels. The third novel *Loop* and its epilogue in *Birthday* will not be considered for this thesis due to how far removed it is from the original story. In line with what is described above, Sadako is presented as even more wicked and manipulative. The first story details Sadako's rebirth and the experience of the host as she delivers Sadako to the world and subsequently dies. In doing so it contradicts Sadako expressing pity over her hosts death in *Rasen*. *Birthday* reveals the reborn Sadako knowingly left her host for dead with a grin on her face that is described as not seeming to carry any meaning beyond having "the stench of malice".⁴⁸

The second story is about Sadako's time at the acting troupe, before her death. Like in *Rasen*, Sadako is highly manipulative and employs her sexuality and psychic powers to seduce and influence people in the troupe. The most significant alteration is that Suzuki seems to double down on Sadako being the mastermind behind everything. Sadako hopes a future comes to pass where recording films will be possible on something as small and widespread as a cassette, and laments that she would be too old by then. The future she hopes for not only comes to pass, but also becomes the medium to spread her curse. Her problem of growing old is solved through her rebirth. While it is never explicitly stated, the suggestion that Sadako orchestrated the events that transpire in the novels is hard to miss.

⁴⁶ Cohen, "Seven Theses," 41-45.

⁴⁷ Creed, "The Monstrous-Feminine," 222.
Dumas, *Japanese Popular Culture*, 59-60.

⁴⁸ Suzuki and Walley, *Birthday*, 44.

The agency that Sadako seemed to lack in *Ringu* she now has in spades. Sadako is no longer an innocent victim, but has become a fearsome mastermind with untold powers who seems to pull all the strings in secret. But everything is kept ambiguous, perhaps Suzuki himself does not know Sadako's intentions. He has completely forgone giving her a coherent motivation and instead tries to make Sadako as inexplicable, mysterious and unsettling as possible. It is hard to find a reason to her actions. Perhaps then, this ambiguous and hard to understand nature of Sadako is exactly what Suzuki intended for her. Sadako is presented as a malevolent force that transcends human comprehension, but the true extent and nature of it is intentionally kept vague, as if the reader is not meant to try to understand her.⁴⁹ *Birthday's* Sadako is presented as a one-dimensional monster, an abstract evil stripped from the humanity she had in *Ringu*.

⁴⁹ Sadako's motivations and sense of morality defy comprehension and her ability to orchestrate future events are so far beyond human capabilities that it calls Sadako's humanity into question. This Monstrousness is not quite captured in any particular one of Cohen's theses but finds some similarity with the fifth: guarding the borders of the possible.

Chapter 2: The Films – Sadako and the Onryō Connection

The success of Suzuki's *Ringu* led to not just the novel series, but also notably inspired the film adaptations that would catapult the franchise into fame. George Iida's *Ringu: Kanzenban* (1995) television film may have been the first adaptation, but it was quickly dwarfed by Nakata Hideo's alternate take on the story with his *Ringu* (1998).⁵⁰ Nakata's *Ringu* and the Sadako portrayed in it came to define the franchise as it is known today, but the role that its forgotten predecessor had should not be ignored. In this chapter the second 'stage' of Sadako will be explored through a brief look at *Ringu: Kanzenban* and a more in-depth exploration of *Ringu* (1998).

Ringu: Kanzenban

Sadako's first venture into film is in *Ringu: Kanzenban*. It is often hailed as being the most accurate-to-the-book adaptation from any film in the franchise and while there is some truth to it, it is only by technicality. Other film adaptations of Suzuki's *Ringu* make far-reaching alterations to the characters and story and so by comparison *Ringu: Kanzenban* indeed stays close to the source material. But staying close to the source material does not mean it does not stray from it, and the alterations it does make are all the more interesting for it.

Though there was less than a month between the release of the second instalment of Suzuki's *Ringu* book series: *Spiral*, and the release of *Ringu: Kanzenban*, this film appears to set up for the events that transpire in *Spiral* where the original *Ringu* did not.⁵¹ The actions of Sadako in *Ringu: Kanzenban* are noticeably different from what was described in the novel. An incestuous sexual relationship between Sadako and her father was added that serves no other role than to Other Sadako and establish her as immoral. The sexual assault and subsequent killing of Sadako is recontextualized by having Sadako be in a relationship with the doctor. It is still rape since Sadako does not consent and even explicitly says no, before seeming suddenly okay with it after the doctor declares his love for her. Unlike the book, the doctor is shocked and appalled upon finding out Sadako is intersex, which incurs Sadako's

⁵⁰ George Iida is also known as Joji Iida.

⁵¹ *Ringu: Kanzenban* リング完全版, 1:23:50 to 1:24:25. Sadako implants an unidentified baby into Mai Takano. While the method and moment are different, this is parallel to the events in *Spiral* where the cursed tape plants Sadako in Mai.

wrath. Sadako attempts to strangle the doctor who then attempts to strangle Sadako in return and throws her into the well. This scene reads as an attempt to frame doctor Nagao's murder of Sadako as an act of self defence, which is not what happened in the novel.

The most impactful change, however, is that Sadako manifests as a ghost and claims the cursed victim's life herself – expressing glee as she does so – as opposed to the book where she herself is truly gone and the virus is the real threat. During the flashbacks that show Sadako alive, she looks no different from a normal girl. Like in the novel Sadako is considered especially beautiful, but any mention of her somehow lacking femininity is left out. Her normal appearance remains true even as a ghost, though she does show the occasional monstrous glimpse. One such example is in the true climax of the film – Ryuichi's unexpected death after the protagonists thought they had lifted the curse – when she strangles Ryuichi with suddenly grotesque looking hands.⁵²



Figure 1:
Scene from *Ringu: Kanzenban* (1995): Sadako strangles Ryuichi.

It also should be noted that Sadako mostly wears white clothing. Though the clothing itself is nothing out of the ordinary, the white could be a deliberate nod to the classical depictions of ghosts in Japan. Interestingly, as a ghost Sadako is fully naked. The way Sadako dressed was never put much emphasis on in the novel.

⁵² *Ringu: Kanzenban* リング完全版, 1:24:48 to 1:25:10.



Figure 2:

Scene from *Ringu: Kanzenban* (1995): Sadako's ghostly appearance.

Even as a ghost, Sadako looks like an ordinary person. However, this frame shows a brief moment in which Sadako takes a more monstrous appearance. The light darkens and turns blue, a ghostly wind sends her hair flying and her pupils seem to vanish. It also highlights Sadako's nakedness.

Overall, *Ringu: Kanzenban* stays close to the novel's deeper exploration of Sadako as a person, but erodes some of her victimhood and humanity. Instead of humanizing her, the unravelling of Sadako's past now serves to dehumanize and emphasize her otherness through immoral behaviour and sexualisation while cutting back on the subtly humanizing scenes where Ryuichi would speculate what her thoughts and feeling could have been. Sexualization is named as a common trope of the Monstrous-Feminine by Dumas.⁵³ Her appearance as a ghost further solidifies Sadako as not only a Monster, but as truly monstrous.

As a Monster, Sadako's intersex identity is made more important to the plot than before, with the murder of Sadako now explicitly linked to the rejection of her transgression of the boundaries of sexual binarism. The sexual violence Sadako suffered, though it is downplayed compared to the novel, also remains present. In fact, the way in which Sadako chokes Ryuichi with her hands resembles the mutual strangling that happened before her death. But unlike the sympathetic Monster that Suzuki's Sadako was, *Ringu: Kanzenban* goes

⁵³ Dumas, *Japanese Popular Culture*, 2, 27.

above and beyond to assign her the role of a malevolent Monster, an incestuous intersex murdering ghost.

Ringu (1998)

Three years after the release of *Ringu: Kanzenban* a new film adaptation of the by then seven-year-old *Ringu* novel would get its theatrical release and change not just the Ring franchise, but the entire genre of J-horror forever.⁵⁴ Nakata Hideo's *Ringu* is a departure from the previous versions, reimagining the characters and story it bases itself on.⁵⁵

Nakata's version changes the protagonist Asakawa from the male Asakawa Kazuyuki into the female Asakawa Reiko (who shall be referred to as "Reiko" from this point onward). Ryuichi is changed from an old friend to ex-husband. This changes the character dynamics and motivations drastically, but for this thesis the most notable change in this regard is that between Reiko and Sadako. Unlike the original Asakawa, Reiko was distraught upon learning Sadako's fate, and showed great empathy. When finally discovering the skeleton of Sadako, instead of being mesmerized by the beauty of an illusion of Sadako's visage like her original counterpart, Reiko cradles Sadako's remains with a tender but sad expression as if she had been her own daughter.⁵⁶ Reiko thus acts as a foil to Sadako, in the face of a lethal curse cast upon not just her but also her son she finds it in herself to empathize with and not assign blame to her would be killer. Sadako on the other hand holds on to her grudge no matter what, spreading death indiscriminately. This suggests a contrast between the 'motherly forgiving woman' Reiko and the 'monstrous and vengeful' Sadako, assigning monstrousness to a 'wrong' femininity or perhaps a lack of a 'correct' femininity.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Crandol, "Ghost in the Well," 200-201.

The J-Horror Virus, directed by Sarah Appleton, and Jasper Sharp (Wimborne: Big Mushroom Productions, 2023).

Michael Dylan Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) 206.

⁵⁵ J. Lopez, "THE RING," www.theringworld.com, 09-06-2007 (accessed through web.archive.org, 29-06-2025.) <https://web.archive.org/web/20070609085402/http://www.theringworld.com/ring.php>.

⁵⁶ *Ringu*, 1:20:00-1:21:40.

⁵⁷ Dumas, *Japanese Popular Culture*, 3.



Figure 3:
Scene from *Ringu* (1998): Nakata's Sadako, manifested.

It is important to understand that in this film too, Sadako appears as a vengeful ghost and thus exercises agency and intent in the deaths she leaves in her wake. The visual design of Sadako in this film – with long, flowing black hair and a white gown – evokes the image of a female onryō as they appear in classic kaidan, a centuries old legacy that Sadako has fully made her own since then.⁵⁸ The theme of revenge in death had always been there, but Nakata was the first to make the connection to the cultural legacy of onryō. From the beginning there has been Sadako's death inside a well which can be taken as a nod to *Banchō Sarayashiki*'s female onryō Okiku. In addition, 1998's *Ringu*'s most iconic scene: Sadako's climactic manifestation at the end of the film where she crawls through the television screen into reality to kill Ryuji, features a prominent close-up on Sadako's eye. This can be taken as reference to *Yotsuya Kaidan*'s Oiwa, a female onryō whose appearance is defined by her disfigured eye.⁵⁹ It almost seems as if Sadako's entire character is simply: onryō.

⁵⁸ Balanzategui, "The Child," 158.

Anna Ellis-Rees, "Victim or Monster? Fear and Female Revenge in Three Contemporary Japanese Horror Films," in *Beyond Kawaii*, ed. Brigitte Steger, Angelika Koch, and Christopher Tso (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2020) 231-232.

⁵⁹ Davisson, *Yūrei*, 92.



Figure 4:
Scene from *Ringu* (1998): Sadako emerging from the TV.



Figure 5:
Scene from *Ringu* (1998): Close-up shot of Sadako's eye, a possible nod to Oiwa.

Nakata's Sadako and her past are kept more of a mystery than previous iterations. There are very few scenes in which Sadako is clearly visible, and not even one reveals her face or has her talk. The piecing together of her life and death is superficial and lacks personalization. Any notion of wanting to become an actress is absent and first-person accounts of her are reduced to just her grandfather. The circumstances of her death are completely rewritten into her supposed father knocking her unconscious and throwing her in a well because – presumably – he feared her power. Unlike the lengthy interrogation and flashback of the original story, it is a very short fragment.⁶⁰ No sexual assault happens and consequently her intersex identity is also cut entirely. In *Ringu: Kanzenban* Sadako is also Othered by tinkering with her personality and humanity, but in a very different way. Nakata's Sadako is neither sexualised nor is she portrayed as especially immoral.

Moreso than her previous iterations, this Sadako is meant to frighten her audience. In this transformation Sadako sacrifices most of her personhood to become an utterly incomprehensible but ever-present threat. Her Monstrousness here comes mostly from embodying a malevolent unknown, aside from her otherness as a psychic and her transgressions of gendered expectations.

⁶⁰ *Ringu*, 1:12:09-1:12:20.

Chapter 3: Popular Culture – Sadako Beyond the Monstrous

There is one more stage that must be discussed, albeit briefly: the cutesified Sadako. As previously mentioned, Nakata's *Ringu* was a massive success and paved the way for many sequel films. Meanwhile Suzuki has also continued writing books in the *Ringu* series, which has five at the time of writing this thesis. All that is to say *Ringu* has grown into a massive franchise. Also a part of the franchise is a large variety of marketing materials, collaborations and merchandise all overseen by Kadokawa Corporation, publisher and owner of the franchise. What is interesting about this is that the Sadako portrayed in these materials could not be more different in tone from the horror icon seen in *Ringu*.

Sadako has become an idol-like existence who happens to act in horror films as her side gig. She makes a guest appearance at a baseball match, does a cutesy photoshoot, makes live appearances and runs personal social media accounts.⁶¹ Or rather, people posing as 'the real' Sadako do those things, but with it being orchestrated by Kadokawa itself this is about as real as Sadako can get without actually crawling through the fourth wall.

In 2011 a Twitter (now X) account was made for Sadako, and at the time of writing this thesis this account still seems to be in use. The account is primarily used to promote *Ringu* franchise related goods, but the posts are always written in-character. Strwn in-between are also simple more personal and relatable in-character posts like New Year's greetings, wishing students good luck on their exams and reminiscing about an anime film she likes.

"In-character" here refers to that these posts are intentionally written as if Sadako herself is the one posting, but of course this version of Sadako is quite different from the ones discussed in previous chapters. In multiple instances Sadako has labelled herself a "JK", an acronym referring to *joshikōsei* or high school girls, and this is reflected in her writing style too. The posts contain ample amounts of emoji and other markers stereotypically associated with young women. The account often reminds us that it is run by Sadako by explicitly identifying as her or by commenting on her liking of white dresses, mentioning being located inside a well, or referring to Kōji Suzuki as her 'great father'.

⁶¹ Twitter: 貞子 <SADAKO> 公式 (@sadako3d), <https://x.com/sadako3d>.

A Tiktok and Youtube account were also created in her name in 2019 and 2022 respectively, though these are no longer being updated at the time of writing this thesis.⁶² Sadako's persona as described above carries over. Her Youtube channel, humorously titled *Sadako no ido gurashi* or 'Sadako's well life', reveals in its description that it is intended to document the daily life of the actress Sadako. Not an actress who plays Sadako, but Sadako herself who is apparently an actress. The videos are cutesy and humorous in nature.



Figure 6:

Screenshot of a handful of video's from Sadako's YouTube channel. Some examples of video topics include going on her first date, being scared from her own movie, demonstrating her psychic powers, dying her hair rainbow colors, sharing her 'teenage high schooler' morning routine, and much more. At the time of writing this thesis there are 117 videos uploaded to the channel.

This modern representation of Sadako heavily leans into an idol or online influencer persona, but cutesified Sadako is not restricted to such a mascot-like function. She has – in varying degrees of cutesification – made appearances in official published works too. A good example of this is the manga *Sadako-san to Sadako-chan*.⁶³ This comedy manga serves as an official spin-off to the film *Sadako* (2019). While the film is a true horror film with Sadako as

⁶² YouTube: 貞子の井戸暮らし (@sadako_official), https://www.youtube.com/@sadako_official.

Tiktok: 貞子 Official (@sadako_kadokawa), https://www.tiktok.com/@sadako_kadokawa.

⁶³ Tsutsumi, and Sugihar, *Sadako-san to Sadako-chan*.

a lethal and frightening monster, the manga and its Sadako are best described as funny and cute.

Lastly, Sadako-themed merchandise of all kinds is overwhelmingly of the cutesified variety. Digital stickers of Sadako – among other things – making a heart sign with her hands are available for LINE, and small figurines striking the same poses could be obtained from gachapon machines. 2025 even saw Sadako getting a cutesified and somewhat eroticized figure in the Kotobukiya *Bishōjo* line.



Figure 7:
Product image for ‘HORROR bishōjo Sadako’ figurine.

The cutesified third stage Sadako has not entirely replaced the monstrous Monster Sadako of the second stage, but it certainly has changed the image of Sadako as a whole. There is little Monster left in this sanitized and loveable Sadako, who now neatly fits into society as a stereotypical ‘JK’ who is more ‘idol’ than she is ‘ghost’. What is left of Sadako’s original person has been broken down into smaller, more digestible elements such as ‘lives in a well’ and ‘wears a white gown’.

The insignificance of a narrative to her character, and the sexualization and cutesification of Sadako have undoubtedly aided her adoption by otaku culture and arguably

even mainstream culture in Japan. Hiroki Azuma's concept of database consumption seems very applicable here and further exploration in future research could be valuable.⁶⁴ However, doing so properly requires looking into fan works and that fall outside the scope of this thesis.

⁶⁴ Ian Condry, *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story* (London: Duke University Press, 2013), 196-197.

Conclusion

The goal in this thesis was to take a closer look at the changes Sadako Yamamura underwent over time as a character, in her story, and as a Monster. Monsters are products of culture and carry deeper meanings, the same is true for Sadako. For the sake of simplification, the depictions of Sadako handled in this research have been separated into three distinct stages: novel, film, and broadly speaking popular culture.

The massive Ring franchise that Sadako is part of started with a single novel that portrayed Sadako in a very different way than anything that came after it. It stands out that this Sadako is first and foremost a very human character who has a tragic backstory. In life, Sadako was Othered due to her psychic powers and identity as an intersex person. Sadako as 'unnatural' Other risks exclusion from society and does her best to fit in, touching on various ways of understanding the Monstrous. Most telling is her intersex identity, which refuses a binary view on sex and thus enacts a category crisis.

Sadako's story is one of a tragic victim of an unaccommodating society. If it were not for her parents being shunned, her intersex identity being something she needed to hide away at all costs, and the misogynous objectification of women, Sadako could have lived a happy life. But she did not, she suffered from and died to her oppression. So even if Sadako with her deadly cursed videotape and her threat to social constructs are the Monster in this story, it is a sympathetic one. One that inspires compassion, empathy and sadness rather than hate and fear.

The novels that follow have a drastically different approach. Sadako's Monstrousness is doubled down on while her humanization comes undone. Sadako is presented as cold and calculating, causing innocent death after death with no remorse, an all-knowing evil. Her intersex condition is further Othered and played as a shock factor, as it is what makes her a new species of human that threatens to take over the world. The empathetic Sadako, embodying an Otherness that is excluded but only wishes to be accepted, becomes a sensational and sexual villain.

The second stage, found within the films, follows a similar trajectory but is quite different in the end. *Ringu: Kanzenban* is the first to portray Sadako returning as a ghost after her untimely death. Sadako has gained agency, taking the lives of those cursed by her with her own hands and carrying out her own mysterious agenda. This not only serves to further paint Sadako as purposefully being malicious and evil but also may have been a stepping

stone for Nakata's later depiction of Sadako as full fledged onryō. The film has Sadako be in an incestuous sexual relationship with her father, ascribing immoral behaviour to the Monster to both further Other the monster and condemn the behaviour. Her intersex identity is again present and framed as shocking. Sadako is also thoroughly sexualised throughout the film, a common trope for feminine Monsters. The exploration of Sadako's past only highlights her Otherness instead of humanizing her.

Nakata's *Ringu* (1998) takes Sadako in a new direction and is what propelled Sadako into fame. It changes up the cast, cuts most of Sadako's backstory, and fully embraces the ghost story narrative that *Ringu: Kanzenban* introduced. Sadako's design aligns more with classical female onryō, placing her withing a long-standing legacy of female Monsters. Sadako in *Ringu* (1998) is kept more mysterious but is presented as a tragic victim of an unaccommodating world all the same, much in line with the legacy of female onryō. However, Sadako's intersex identity, and with it the sexual violence she suffered are cut out entirely. In fact, very little about Sadako's life is shown in the film going so far as to completely forgo her acting career. The humanization that book Sadako received is largely lacking in Nakata's film adaptation. Sadako is a somewhat tragic but mostly frightening existence. She is not sexually deviant nor is she an evil mastermind. She is presented as a supremely vengeful ghost..

The film is not shy about portraying Sadako carrying out indiscriminate murder without hesitation. This Sadako, too, was a victim and her lashing out against society at large is not entirely unfounded, but the strong yet subtle message about societal oppression and its disastrous consequences that was present in the original book it is based on is watered down and obscured. The larger message about the struggles of being a woman in a male-dominated society is – if present at all – buried deeply at the bottom of the well with Sadako, and Sadako's identity as intersex and the complex issues that brought her are cut entirely. Instead, the viewer is left to wonder if Sadako is not simply evil or unfairly punishing random people for the harassment her mother received and the betrayal of her father figure, both things only hinting at a larger societal commentary.

The Sadako that started it all is hardly recognizable in the many incarnations that followed, but the starkest contrast is with the third stage: the cutesified Sadako. The stages and many incarnations of Sadako are all different. They diverge, and in the end, she is fractured into small but recognizable aspects of her character. Sadako is reduced to her most

basic and memorable elements and reformed into a highly malleable version of herself, at the cost of much of her own identity. Sadako can still star in horror, but she is just as – if not more – successful as a cute idol-like personality.

Acting as if Sadako really exists, she communicates with her fans through social media and makes public appearances. Sadako and the Ring franchise are made more accessible through media releases of a comedic or cute nature and merchandise of all sorts. It is as if the Monster Sadako has finally emerged from her TV into reality but left her Monstrousness, and some of herself behind.

Sadako has been altered to suit many narratives and this final stage is perhaps the ‘ultimate’ version of that. She has a wide reach and works wonders for marketing and merchandise. This Sadako will often place herself neatly within accepted social categories. While this could be seen as a complete elimination of the Monster, it could also be said that this is an indication that the Monster is becoming more and more widely accepted. Though she had to be thoroughly sanitized, Sadako succeeded in becoming a beloved cultural icon. This more hopeful reading would suggest that the cultural climate is becoming slightly more accepting of things Other, though it comes at the price of identity and objectification.

So is this the end of the Monster that was Sadako? Her history of being intersex may currently be no more than a footnote, and her potential for the upheaval of cultural categories and norms may have dwindled, but this is by no means the end of that Monster. Because, after all, the Monster always returns.

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