

## Lower Class Representation in the Film *Shoplifters*

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the representation of the lower class and social reality in Japan through the film *Shoplifters*. This film is analyzed using the representation theory of Stuart Hall, with critical discourse analysis. The characters in the film are members of a marginalized social class who voice problems of poverty, stigmatization, family problems, and social alienation that on the other hand, are clashed with humanism values. The result of this study indicates that *Shoplifters* is a social critique that represents the lower class in Japan. The humanistic side shown by the characters through their attitude and dialogue becomes a paradox, as an effort to fight the stigmatization of the lower class that has taken root due to sociohistorical factors. Japan's advancement has an impact on the alienation which they tried to overcome by building social cohesion in the form of *a family*.

**Keywords:** representation, social class, *Shoplifters*, Japan

### Abstrak

Tulisan ini membahas representasi kelas bawah serta realitas sosial di Jepang yang disuarakan melalui film *Shoplifters*. Film dianalisis menggunakan teori representasi dari Stuart Hall, dengan pendekatan wacana kritis. Tokoh-tokoh dalam film merupakan anggota kelas sosial yang termarginalkan yang menyuarakan masalah kemiskinan, stigmatisasi, persoalan keluarga, serta alienasi sosial yang dibenturkan dengan nilai-nilai humanisme di sisi lain. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *Shoplifters* merupakan kritik sosial yang menjadi representasi kelas bawah Jepang. Sisi humanis yang ditampilkan melalui sikap dan dialog antartokoh menjadi paradoks sebagai upaya melawan stigmatisasi kelas bawah yang telah mengakar akibat faktor sosiohistoris. Kemajuan Jepang membawa dampak alienasi yang coba diatasi dengan membangun kohesi sosial dalam bentuk sebuah *keluarga*.

**Kata kunci:** representasi, kelas sosial, film *Shoplifters*, Jepang

### Introduction

Film is a mediated reality. A film can represent the social reality. One of them that represents the lower-class reality in Japan is *Shoplifters* (in Japanese: *Manbiki Kazoku*) by director Hirokazu Koreeda. The film premiered at the Cannes Film Festival on 13 May 2018 and won the Palme d'Or award. In Japan, the film was released on June 8, 2018 and won the Mainichi Film Awards for Best Film, and the Asia Pacific Screen Award for Best

Feature Film. *Shoplifters* was also nominated for Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film and a Golden Globe nomination.

*Shoplifters* tells about a group of people who live together and call themselves 'a family'. They use the last name Shibata so that their identity is known as the Shibatas. The Shibatas consists of Hatsue Shibata whom they call "grandmother", Osamu, Nobuyo, Shota, and Aki. Osamu is a construction worker, he acts as the father in the family. Nobuyo, described as Osamu's 'wife', works in the laundry. Aki, a teenager, and a boy named Shota, who was told like Nobuyo and Osamu's son, but in fact he is the child Osamu found in a car in the pachinko parking lot. Osamu and Shota used to shoplift at the supermarket to meet their daily needs.

One day, Osamu and Shota saw a little girl sitting alone outside a house. She is Juri, whom they then brought home. Juri's parents are abusive. Then the Shibatas took Juri, cut Juri's hair and changed her name to Lin to disguise her identity. Juri felt affection with the Shibatas. The harmonious family begins to crack when Hatsue dies and they decide to bury her body in the house to hide her death from the state so that they can still get Hatsue's pension money. In the end, Shota had an accident and broke his leg. When Shota was treated at the hospital, their identities were revealed, one by one.

Poverty, crime, and an ignorant society contrast with the image of Japan as a developed, orderly, safe country, and a society that lives in harmony. This is a condition that is almost never mentioned when people talk about Japan. That there is an 'untouchable' and inferior class. This class can be traced from the term *burakumin*<sup>1</sup> in the past. Even though the caste system has been abolished a century ago, there are still many people whose jobs are considered dirty and lowly are discriminated. There is stigmas to the lower class, for example rude, cruel, uneducated, etc<sup>2</sup>.

This paper aims to see the representation of the lower class in Japan through the film *Shoplifters*. In *Shoplifters*, the lower class is identified with poverty, uneducated, and criminal, but there is a humanist side that is almost missed when people talk about this class. The negative stigma makes people more focused on the criminal side only, even though there is another side they want to voice.

Previously, Pang and Kurokawa (2020) conducted a research focuses on two of Kuroeeda's films, entitled *Nobody Knows* and *Shoplifters*. Pang and Kurokawa see the two films as interrelated from a legal-social perspective. They explained that there are three social issues in the two films related to law in Japan: (1) the child welfare system; (2) the changes in society; and (3) awareness of the group as a member of society. Research on *Shoplifters* is also conducted in undergraduate thesis research. One of them

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<sup>1</sup> From <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34615972> the term *burakumin* which means "hamlet people", comes from the feudal era. It originally referred to separate communities made up of people whose jobs were deemed dirty or tainted by death, such as executioners, butchers, and funeral directors. The lowest, known as *Eta*, which means "abundance of filth", can be killed without punishment by members of the Samurai if they commit a crime. In the mid-19th century, a judge declared that "an Eta is worth one-seventh of an ordinary person". Although generally considered offensive, the term *Eta* is still used today. A letter received at the abattoir expresses sympathy for the animals slaughtered "because they were killed by *Eta*". The caste system was abolished in 1871 along with the feudal system, but barriers to integration remained. Marginalized *Burakumin* communities are widespread throughout Japan.

<sup>2</sup> Mike Sunda, a BBC journalist who covers a butcher shop in Japan, writes that it is not only those with *burakumin* ancestry who bear the stigma. The historical link between certain occupations and this historical category of outcasts is very strong so that all workers in slaughterhouses face the risk of discrimination, regardless of whether their family history is not *burakumin* (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34615972>).

is by Fatimah (2019), who examines the ego defense mechanism of Nobuyo's character using Sigmund Freud's psychological theory. A similar analysis model is done by Fihadiena (2020) who analyzes the inner conflict and self-defense mechanisms of Shota's character with Freud's psychoanalysis, while Ihsani (2020) analyzes the image of poverty in *Shoplifters* using a film narrative structure approach.

This research is different from previous studies mentioned before. This paper discusses the representation of the lower class in *Shoplifters* using Stuart Hall's representation theory with critical discourse analysis as methods. This research is expected to be useful in the study of Japanese culture, especially the study of representation in films. Film as a cultural product plays a role in representing the 'voice' of the lower class so that with Hall's representation theory, it is hoped that this paper can contribute to conveying criticism of social conditions in Japan. This is important because studies of the lower class in Japan are still rarely done. Thus, this study aims to see the discourse reproduced through the representation of the lower class in the film.

## Method

Borrowing from German language, the term representation can be understood in two words: *darstellen* and *vertreten*. The word "darstellen" refers to the notion of "illustrating", while "vertreten" means "the act of being a proxy or agent, who will speak on behalf of the party he represents" (Noviani, 2020). Hall (in Jhally, 1997) states that "... So the notion of something which images and depicts, and that which stands in for something else, both of those ideas are kind of brought together in the notion of representation". So when we talk about the idea of something as an image, representing, or speaking for something else, the idea refers to 'representation'. Hall explained that representation is the way in which meaning is given to the things that are depicted through pictures or whatever, on screens or words on the page that represent what is being talked about. Although not the only, but the media is one of the most powerful and broad systems for the circulation of meaning. Media involves power; through what media, what channel, to whom is the target, and so on. Therefore, power is closely related to representation (Hall in Jhally, 1997).

There are three forms of representation, namely reflective representation, intentional representation; and constructionist representation (Hall, 2003). Reflective representation is language or various symbols that reflect meaning. Intentional representation is how language or symbols embody the speaker's personal intention, while constructionist representation is how meaning is reconstructed 'in' and 'through' language. Hall was in a constructionist position (Hall, 2003). He initiated two approaches to study representation: semiotic approaches and discourse approaches. Borrowing Foucault's concept of discourse, Hall stated that representation is the production of knowledge through discourse (Hall, 2003). According to Foucault (in Miller, 1990), "Every point in the exercise of power is a site where knowledge is formed. Instead every established piece of knowledge permits and assures the exercise of power". Discourse shapes and constructs certain events and brings them into recognizable narratives in culture. Each representation can be seen as a political issue. There is the dominant class and the marginalized class.

Marx (in Santos, 1970) mentions that speaking the concept of class can only be done by looking at the process of capital production, the process of capital circulation, and the capitalist production process as a whole. He wrote:

*“The owners merely of labor-power, owners of capital, and land-owners, whose respective sources of income are wages, profit, and ground-rent, in other words, wage-laborers, capitalists, and land-owners, constitute then three big classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production” (Marx in Santos, 1970).*

Furthermore, Santos (1970) explains that the class concept appears as the personification of the central economic category of a particular production system. Production systems in history exist only in combination with other production systems and other socioeconomic factors of the same system. Thus, class can be understood as a relation related to capital ownership. Who controls more capital, is the dominant one, and vice versa. Foucault (in Powell, 2015) labels everything related to class struggle as *politics*, and everything that originates from and is a consequence of class struggle as *culture*, which is expressed in human relations and in institutions.

Sajarwa (2021) explained that social class refers to the hierarchical differences or stratification of people in society or culture. He stated that a community mostly has social groups, but not all have the same type of social class categorization. To explained about social class, Bourdieu (via Sajarwa, 2021) stated that a class does not only rely on historical thought or political economy, but also class practices that include tastes in clothing and various social choices in everyday life. Furthermore, Bourdieu explains that social class preserves their social life from generation to generation, especially intellectuals and the upper class (Sajarwa, 2021).

To analyze this film, an observation method was used through scenes and dialogues. Critical discourse analysis is carried out in order to gain an understanding of the representation of Japan's lower class society through this film. Regarding critical discourse analysis, van Dijk (1993) stated:

*“It is primarily interested and motivated by pressing social issues, which it hopes to better understand through discourse analysis. Theories, descriptions, methods and empirical work are chosen or elaborated as a function of their relevance for the realization of such a sociopolitical goal. ... Central to this theoretical endeavour is the analysis of the complex relationships between dominance and discourse” (van Dijk, 1993).*

From the excerpt, it is understood that critical discourse analysis is a method that studies how power, domination, and inequality are enforced, reproduced, and opposed by texts and discourses in social and political contexts. Critical discourse analysis takes an explicit position, and thus seeks to understand, expose, and ultimately fight inequalities in society.

Descriptive data collected in the form of dialogues and scenes. Dialogues and scenes that have significance are taken as data. Significance is seen from the relevance of conversations and scenes with representations as objects of study. Furthermore, from the dialogues and scenes that have been taken, an analysis is carried out by connecting the reality in the film with social reality in Japan. To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, the analysis was assisted by external data taken from library sources such as books, journals, articles on the internet, and Kuroeeda's interviews published in digital media. Thus, the discourse, which, according to Hall (2003) is a production of knowledge reproduced through the scenes and sentences in the film will be understood.

**Results and Discussion**

For analysis, the data are taken from scenes and dialogues. The analysis focuses on the stigmatization and the paradoxes in the film. Furthermore, the representation of the lower class will be analyzed. Analysis will be divided into two part, (1) stigmatization of the lower class; and (2) paradoxes and the representation.

**(1) Stigmatization of the lower class**

Stigmas are grouped into several categories: criminal, poor, low-class job, abusive/rude behavior, and low education. The following table listed the categories of the stigma. One category may be displayed in several scenes and dialogues. In the table, one category is taken along with examples of actions that represent the stigma.

**Table 1.** Stigma of the lower class

No.	Category	Description
1	Criminal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shoplifting (Osamu, Shota, Nobuyo)</li> <li>• Fraud (Osamu, Nobuyo, Hatsue)</li> <li>• Persecution and murder (Osamu, Nobuyo)</li> </ul>
2	Poor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small house with three generations of family members</li> <li>• Outdated furniture</li> <li>• Uncertain income</li> </ul>
3	Low class job (blue-collar worker)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Construction worker (Osamu)</li> <li>• Laundry worker (Nobuyo)</li> <li>• Night club worker (Aki)</li> </ul>
4	Abusive/rude behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Husband-to-wife violence (Juri's father to his wife)</li> <li>• Father-to-child violence (Jury's father to Jury)</li> <li>• Disrespect while eating (eg, talking when mouth is full)</li> </ul>
5	Low education	Shota, Aki, and Juri do not go to school

(Source: author's primary data, 2021)

There are several scenes that explain each category. For example, the stigma that the lower class is close to crime. In this film, crime is shown with action of theft and fraud, for example they fake their identities, hide children from the authorities, hide Hatsue's death from the state apparatus, etc. In terms of work, they reflect typical lower-class jobs, such as laborers (Osamu and Nobuyo) and night club girl (Aki). Likewise in terms of education. School-age children in the Shibata family do not go to school. Osamu told Shota that only the children who cannot study at home who go to school. *So, if one can study at home, then no need to go to school.* This is what Shota told to Juri so that they believed that there was no need to go to school.

**(2) Paradoxes and the representation**

The analysis will be associated to the social, political, and cultural context in Japan to take a deeper look at the position of *Shoplifters* as a social critique. It started with discussion about the image of Japan that is being campaigned to the public. This image is one of the strategies of public diplomacy (soft diplomacy), known as "Cool Japan". Cool Japan is a cultural diplomacy as well as nation branding to introduce Japanese culture abroad. This idea became a direct policy by the Cabinet and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) as cultural agents (Iwabuchi, 2019). This section is divided into two topics: the image of Japan and the representation of the lower class in the film.

### 1. The image: "cool" Japan

The image of Japan in public (internationally, especially) is that of a developed country, both in terms of technology, industry, and culture. Japanese is described as a modern society that is disciplined, hardworking, but still adheres to traditional values. The image of 'harmony' is always echoed by the Japanese government as Japanese character and culture. Soft diplomacy echoed by the Japanese government is known as "Cool Japan" and focuses on popular culture. In 2008, Doraemon was appointed as *Anime Ambassador*.

*Minister Masahiko Komura asked the character to "travel around the world to introduce Japan" (MOFA 2008). Doraemon, as a popular character for young people throughout Asia, was given the task of letting people around the world "know more about the positive side of Japan through Japanese anime, which are universally popular" (MOFA 2008). Komura's words also demonstrated his belief in the potential of manga to enhance Japan's soft power. A further expectation was that this 'Anime Ambassador' would attract attention to other Japanese cultural fare, such as music or high technologies, and thus promote Japan's presence all over the world (Nakamura, 2013).*

The hope from the worldwide anime ambassador is that Japan and its culture will be increasingly known internationally. Nakamura explained that pop culture is considered a "main asset for Japan's international relations", because the middle class in Asia is familiar with the "modern and liberal face of Japan" through *manga*, drama, and J-pop (Nakamura, 2013).

Unfortunately, this soft power through popular culture cannot be fully said to be successful. In terms of technological and industrial progress, it can be said to be successful. Japan's industry is one of the largest. However, in terms of popular culture in the international market, currently Japan can be said to have lost to its neighboring country, South Korea. Take an example, the film *Parasite*, which won an Oscar. When *Parasite* won, all of South Korea dissolved into euphoria of joy (Margolis, 2020). On the other hand, this is not the case in Japan. When *Shoplifters* won the Palm d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, there was no celebratory euphoria like there was among South Koreans (both living in Korea, and Koreans abroad). The Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, who had campaigned for "Cool Japan" for years, did not seem to want his country's dark side to be seen in public. Citing [www.thedailybeast.com](http://www.thedailybeast.com) (June, 14, 2018),

*While Abe has been silent about the film, his political allies have lashed out at the movie and the director. They have accused Kore-eda of promoting shoplifting, condoning crime, and making political propaganda.*

*It would seem apparent that Kore-eda isn't making a heavy handed political statement in the film; he's simply showing a side of Japan that the ruling coalition would prefer people didn't see. It's not a film depicting an anime world, or a shiny Japan full of robot helpers, amazing technological advances, teenage girls singing pop songs in skimpy clothes, or a nation flourishing under Abenomics. It's one of the most accurate depictions of modern hardships we've ever seen on screen.*

This film carries political implications. Kuroeeda was heavily criticized. He is accused of supporting shoplifting, condoning crimes, and making political propaganda. Kuroeeda's film shows the dark side of Japan, the side that the ruling class wants to hide. The excerpt above mentioned that *Shoplifters* is not a film that depicts the world of anime, or Japan that sparkles beautifully with sophisticated and technological advances, or Abenomics's success. This is clearly contrary to the image of a cool Japan, as Abe campaigned through "Cool Japan".

The concept of *honne-tatemae* can be used to explain this situation. According to Sugiyama-Lebra (in Naito & Gielen, 1992), the term 'honne' is one's natural, real, or inner desires and tendencies, while 'tatemae' refers to standards, principles, or rules by which one is bound, at least outwardly. On the basis of these differences, Japanese people think that adults should understand both sides of the other person and express the relevant side in a situation (Orihashi in Naito & Gielen, 1992). When in public, Japanese people tend to hide their true desires if they go against the prevailing social standards or norms. They will not speak frankly so that the situation will always appear stable, harmonious, according to good standards and norms. Associated with the film *Shoplifters*, it makes sense when the state apparatus tries to present only the bright-side as the image of the state. Dark sides should not be exposed to maintain good standards and harmony. Films that are 'dark' are considered to be able to tarnish the image that has been built so far.

## **2. Lower class representation in *Shoplifters***

Representation is closely related to power. Representation is presented to naturalize the view of the audience so that it seems as if "that's all" is the meaning that is carried so that this is a form of ideology that through its power presents representation, carries meaning by "closing language, meaning, and stopping the flow" (Hall in Jhally, 1997). In the film, social and political issues are voiced through the characters. There are three findings related to the representation of the lower class as follows.

### **a) Lower class stigmatization and paradoxes in *Shoplifters***

In *Shoplifters*, the scene opens with two people who appear to be father and son, shoplifting in a supermarket. They are Osamu and Shota. They looked at the surrounding situation, then parted towards different shelves. They team up where Shota stuffs a few cups of instant noodles, while Osamu covers Shota's action with his body.



**Figure 1.** Osamu and Shota shoplifting at the supermarket (00:02:37)

In the scene above, Osamu pretending to be shopping. He stood with his back to the person behind him to cover Shota who was about to shoplift. The camera focuses on Shota so audiences can clearly see their action. Shoplifting was also done by Nobuyo at the laundry where she worked. Nobuyo picked up the things left on the laundry clothes. In the first half of the film, the audience is told that three shoplifters are the main characters. This scene records the criminal act of theft which instantly tells the audience the focus of the film.

The Japanese title of this film is “Manbiki Kazoku”. The word “manbiki” means “to steal; shoplifting”, while “kazoku” means “family” (Matsuura, 2005) so the full title becomes “The Family of Thieves”. This title can be interpreted as controversial. Since the 1970s, Japan has viewed 'perfectly Japanese' as a family with the husband as the head of the family as well as the breadwinner, and the wife as a professional housewife in taking care of and raising children. This is in line with the concepts of *ryousai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) and *kyouiku mama* (mother's education). This idea later became a normative model of the family in Japan (Roberts, 2016). So, using the word 'kazoku' or 'family' means there is the involvement of father, mother, and child, which (supposedly) has a positive meaning. But the word 'manbiki' has a bad connotation, it is an act of violating legal norms and rules so that “manbiki kazoku” become a phrase that has a negative meaning: *a criminal family*.

When Koreeda was invited by Yoshimasa Hayashi (Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, and Science and Technology) to celebrate his success at the Cannes festival, Kuroeeda refused. After the rejection, he was denounced as "Anti-Japan". In his message, Kuroeeda said, “*Reflecting on the past, when the film industry became united with the 'national interest' and 'national policy,' I tend to think that keeping a clear distance from government authority is the right thing to do*”<sup>3</sup> indicating that Kuroeeda did intend to 'speak out' unfettered by the incumbent government's agenda. He saw that the Japanese films of the previous period were not able to voice the lower class. All of

<sup>3</sup> In <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20180730/p2a/00m/0na/008000c> further Koreeda said that some people questioned why he stayed away from the government during the Cannes festival. Koreeda argues that even when the government is a sponsor, the government should not only put the interests of the state first. The Japanese government sounds positive about Koreeda's success, but it probably is not. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said the winning film would "increase the expansion of Japanese content overseas", while PM Abe at the Tokyo International Film Festival said, "The content industry is the main pillar of Japan's economic growth". In response to this, Koreeda replied, "Film is not 'content'. ...and film is not a means to earn money from abroad but an art form. The thought that values national and economic interests over culture is a strange thing in film". Kuroeeda is worried that combining films with the interests of the state will produce films that only prioritize state policies.



those are support the national interest. Therefore, in his works Kuroeeda seems to keep his distance from the state.

Through his film, Kuroeeda wants to present a class that has been excluded, even considered not exist. The secretary general of the Liberal Democratic Party, Toshihiro Nikai, in a 2018 speech said that there are no homes in Japan where people go hungry, implying that there are no poor people in Japan<sup>4</sup>. In fact, the class gap is even wider (Hashimoto, 2000). However, what is interesting in this film is, it shows the warm side of a traditional family (which is now increasingly being eroded), how the emotional bond grows between people with the same fate: poor, victims of violence, victims of layoffs, criminals, and uneducated. There is a collective memory among them, how the government ignoring them. Kuroeeda regrets that people only focus on their crimes, regardless of the human side there, that being poor does not make them selfish. People tend to judge without looking at the factors behind it: social inequality that is ignored by the state, regulations that do not protect the lower class, and sociohistorical factors that give rise to stigmatization of the lower class.

In a scene of a family dinner at home (see table 1), it is shown how a family with three generations gathers in a narrow tenement: grandmother, children, and grandchildren (00:05:01). The situation of having dinner together at Shibata's house is shown, plus Juri, an abandoned child that Osamu brought home. The atmosphere was warm, with everyone chatting with each other, sometimes with their mouths still full of food. Seeing the condition of Shibata's house, it seemed that the house was narrow for five people to live in. In addition to being narrow, the selection of furniture colors and lighting is also arranged in such a way that the house looks dreary and dull. The director seems to convey a contrast with other family homes that are not visible in this scene.

In representation, what is *absence* is as meaningful as what is *presence* (Hall, 2003). Because, the *absence* gives meaning to the *presence* at that time. Shibata's house cannot be interpreted as a low-class family home without comparing it to a house inhabited by one or two generations, bright modern Japanese furnishings, a bright and spacious house. This contrast is only shown when Hatsue visits the home of Aki's biological family, whose father is an office employee<sup>5</sup>. A family that fits the *perfectly Japanese* models. This scene represents the condition of poverty, which is conveyed visually through several things at once:

- 1) a narrow house with three generations living together (grandmother, children, grandchildren). This extended family model is typical of traditional families which are now changed a lot;
- 2) furniture that looks worn and dark in color reflects the gloomy conditions;
- 3) job of the member of family (Osamu is a construction worker, Nobuyo is a laundry worker, Aki is a night club girl). This is typical work which is considered lowly;

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<sup>4</sup> Nikai spoke about Japan's demographic crisis. He said that people who don't want to have children are 'selfish' because in Japan there are no poor people. This statement then garnered many comments (in <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/07/13/business/poverty-japan-underclass-struggles-achieve-upward-mobility/>)

<sup>5</sup> In the 00:56:58 scene, Hatsue visits Aki's biological family (Aki is daughter of her husband with another wife). Through this scene, we can see the contrast of the two families' houses. Aki's family consists of only Father, Mother, and children, with a brightly painted, neat house, modern furniture, and looks spacious and beautiful to look at.

- 4) children's education (Shota doesn't go to school, Aki doesn't go to college either). This condition reinforces the stigma of lack of education among the lower classes so that it is 'natural' for them to be uncivilized;
- 5) ethical behavior. For example, etiquette while eating. They are depicted eating while chatting with their mouths full, then Osamu brandishing chopsticks in front of Hatsue's grandmother while eating, and so on, which is considered unethical in Japan. This ethic is considered low and impolite, in contrast to the high ethic of the educated.

*Shoplifters* represent the lower class stigma that has taken root in society. But on the other hand, the humanist aspect is shown through the intimacy, honesty, and affection between them<sup>6</sup>. Take another example, when they gave some of their food to Juri (00:06:03). Poverty does not make them selfish. There is a paradox here, where a positive image which is identified as a trait of the upper class, is raised in the life of the lower class. This does not appear in most Japanese films. Films, especially if they are funded by the government, will usually support the interests of the state. Kuroeeda can be said to be a collective subject who speaks through his characters. He wanted to make visible people who were forgotten or ignored by the state apparatus. Furthermore, he stated that as a filmmaker, he wanted to play a role in making this lower class more visible<sup>7</sup>.

#### **b) The imagined family**

After World War II, the family system in Japan has changed from traditional family to modern family (Devi, 2015). The traditional family is known as *ie*, which is a family that runs a business from family property (*kasán*) and is a family business (*kagyóu*) (Aruga in Devi, 2015). The concept of *ie* was abolished after the war and the Japanese family system was 'nuclearized' (Pang & Kurokawa, 2020). This has developed until now where the family system has become a nuclear family, in line with social dynamics in Japan<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, when Nobuyo heard Juri's mother screaming that she did not want to give birth to Juri (00:07:54). Nobuyo was down to hear Juri's parents quarrel. Nobuyo and Osamu finally decided not to send Juri back. They took care of Juri like their own children. In another scene, Nobuyo hugs Juri and says, "If your parents told you that they beat you because they love you, it's a lie. If you really love your child, this is what you will do (hug)" (00:50:31).

<sup>7</sup> From <https://lwlies.com/interviews/hiro-kazu-kuroeeda-shoplifters/> when asked "Do you feel like artists and filmmakers have a responsibility to challenge the political establishment?", Kuroeeda answered "As an individual I do express my stance against government policies, about their law changes, security and the rights of people. That's publicly known and that's nothing to do with film. As a filmmaker it's not that I want to make a film about that opposition, it's more about people committing crimes or in poverty, the people that are an inconvenience to the government, who are not being seen, people we try to hide. My films try to make visible the kind of people that the government wants to forget or ignore. I see my role as a filmmaker as to make them more visible rather than making a protest."

<sup>8</sup> To show this change, Pang & Kurokawa (2020) begins an explanation with the traditional family—a post-war three-generation household. In 1955, 33.2% or one in every three families had three generations living under the same roof. In 2010, this figure fell to 7% or one in every 14. Families are becoming increasingly fragmented. Between 1975-2005, the number of households with one male breadwinner, full-time housewives, and unmarried children fell by a third. In addition, the number of marriages has also dropped dramatically. As births decline, the average age of the Japanese population has grown without the younger generation to provide care to the elderly. The dissolution of the Japanese family does not indicate that the nuclear family or even the extended parent family has disappeared. Nuclear families, experiencing a gradual decline, reached 56.4% of all households in 2010 and are predicted to decline to 51.5% by 2030.

In *Shoplifters*, the traditional form of family can be seen from the Shibatas, or at least, what they want to build. There are three generations living together. In one scene, Osamu was playing with an inflated plastic bag, then he kicked it like a father playing football with his son, while occasionally having a conversation by himself (00:45:19). Osamu asked Shota several times to call him "Father" even though Shota never complied. Osamu was patient without ever forcing Shota, as a father being patient to his son.

There is also a conversation between Nobuyo and Shota after taking Hatsue's pension (01:23:07). A croquette seller called Nobuyo "Mother". Nobuyo seemed happy to hear that. There is also a conversation that shows psychological wounds related to family, when the police officer told Nobuyo that Juri went back to her family (01:42:51). Nobuyo could not believe it because she had heard that Juri's mother did not want to give birth to Juri, did not love her, or even hurt her. Nobuyo thought that to be a mother, it is not only about giving birth, but also having to give love.

Officer: 「子供にはね、母親が必要なんですよ。」

“Kodomo ni ha ne, hahaoya ga hitsuyou nan desu yo”  
(Because the child needs her mother)

Nobuyo: 「母親がそう思っただけでしょう。」

“Hahaoya ga sou omoetai dake deshou”  
(That's what his mother thought, right)

「生んだらみんな母親になるの？」

"Undara minna hahaoya ni naru no?"  
(Does giving birth automatically make you a mother?)

Officer: 「でも産まなきゃ母親になれないでしょう。」

“Demo umanakya hahaoya ni narenai desho”  
(But you can't be a mother if you don't give birth)

When arrested by the police, Nobuyo and Osamu are accused of kidnapping Juri. Nobuyo was sad because she loves Juri and so does Juri. Then the officer asked how Shota and Juri called her.

Officer: 「子供二人はあなたのことなんと呼んでますか？」

“Kodomo futari ha anata no koto nan to yonedalama?”  
(How do those two kids call you?)

「ママ？おかあさん？」

"Mama? Okaasan"  
(Mom? Mom?)

Nobuyo cried after hearing the question (01:43:54). Some of these scenes show that they are longing for warm traditional family ties. There are bonds that are not always connected by blood, but by mutual care for one another. It was this bond that they wanted to have with each other as a family.

In a conversation, Hatsue said that Juri might want to go home, but Nobuyo did not think so. She thought that it would be better if one could choose their family. A family built by a bond of caring each other. Nobuyo called it “kizuna” or *bond*. Hatsue then said that she 'chose' Nobuyo as her family (00:43:46). The ideal family they voiced for was

represented in the scene when they went on a picnic to the beach. In that summer picnic, they all looked happy. Their togetherness on vacation is like a whole and happy family. The director wanted to show to the audiences is, “this is what family is like”. As Hatsue watched the five members of her 'family' play in the waves, she mumbled “Thank you”. This hinted at the existence of a 'kizuna' between them despite not having blood relations.



**Figure 2.** The Shibatas vacation to the beach (01:15:44)

*Kizuna* has meaning for Japanese people. *Kizuna* means 'bond between people—a relationship based on mutual trust and mutual support'<sup>9</sup>. To the Japanese, *kizuna* does not just mean family ties, but more than that. *Kizuna* covers the nation as a whole<sup>10</sup> and is preserved as part of the culture. Through the character Nobuyo, this bond is voiced, that *kizuna* (supposedly) is not limited, either by blood or social class. This paradox is presented through dialogues between characters. Through this film, a happy ideal family is actually raised by a class that is considered as *other*.

### **c) The irony of Japan's advancements and social alienation**

Japan's progress and prosperity was not without side effects. Dependence on technology and other material things keeps people away from their nature as social beings. This can be seen from the lack of closeness in the family. In *Shoplifters*, it is shown by Aki's biological family. Aki's parents thought that Aki went to a college in Australia. They did not suspect anything at all when Aki never came home. Likewise Aki, she overcomes her separation by becoming part of the poor but warm, the Shibatas. However, even so, she still had a wall with the rest of the family. The same condition can be seen at Aki's workplace. Aki's customers are lonely men who cannot talk much. In one scene, one of his customers, Mr. Number 4 can only lean on Aki's lap while crying. Likewise Aki, she was crying while hugging her customers (01:00:54). She said that hugging and strengthening each other like that was warm. This indicates an irony, that there is a problem of social alienation behind the Japan's advancement.

This fear of alienation was also whacked the lower class. Each characters in *Shoplifters* seeks warmth and affection through the family they build. This is a kind of strategy that they deliberately build to get rid of this fear by building social cohesion and living with other people. This reflects the mental health problems caused by social alienation that

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.japan.go.jp/kizuna/about\\_kizuna.html](https://www.japan.go.jp/kizuna/about_kizuna.html)

<sup>10</sup> Retrieved from <https://japantoday.com/category/features/kuchikomi/kizuna-takes-many-forms-in-post-disaster-japan-including-marriage-and-infidelity> it is stated that *kizuna* is getting stronger after the 2011 earthquake

plagued the country's progress and prosperity. This condition is exacerbated by societal norms that tend to be 'silent' so that the situation remains harmonious.

In Japan, generally the care of people with mental health problems is borne by the patient or his family. Mental illness is not seen as something that requires professional treatment. Japanese people are socially shaped to feel ashamed if they cannot take care of their mental health. Although treatment for mental health is available, nearly two thirds of sufferers never seek help from a healthcare professional (Desapriya & Nobutada, 2002). In *Shoplifters*, we can see people who are silent about their mental health. Aki and her customer, Mr. Number 4, are the examples. The unfulfilled affection is also seen in other characters, such as Nobuyo, who at the end admitted that she hates her mother. Each character has a psychological wound that they do not reveal as an implication of social norms that are 'silent' in order to maintain harmony.

Mental health is one of the social problems facing Japan. In 2016, depressive disorders were ranked 12<sup>th</sup> and self-injury was ranked 8<sup>th</sup> in terms of disability-adjusted life years in Japan (Nishi et al, 2019). There is a need for affection that is not obtained in relationships with family, friends, or society in general so they look for ways to fulfill the lack. Technological advanced is accused of being one of the factors that weakens human relations. In one of his dialogues with Osamu, Nobuyo said that Juri has great empathy for other people (00:35:17). This should not have been her as she experienced a lot of violence in her home. Nobuyo argued that people who are treated badly by others should not be kind to others, should not have great empathy because of human nature not to care for each other. This shows the condition of the people who are ignorant of their surroundings, giving rise to the fear of being alienated.

The fear of alienation is also seen in the elderly. There is a phenomenon called 'kodokushi', the fear of the elderly dying in solitude (in this film, Hatsue). Japan is experiencing a demographic crisis, where the number of older people outnumbers young people. Due to the low birth rate, even parents who do not have children live alone until they die. In Japan, elderly *kodokushi* is a prominent socio-medical problem with 45% of those living alone (versus 15% of those living in a spouse's household) (Toyama & Poudyal, 2021). This fear is voiced through the character of Hatsue. She had no family so she chose to live with Osamu and the others. She also gave up part of her husband's pension to be used for the family's needs. Osamu and the others also called Hatsue "grandmother". This choice is an attempt to naturalize the condition. Their imaginative family is an effort, a social cohesion they build to fight against social conditions.

## Conclusion

Japan has been imaged as a developed country with harmonious culture and society. *Shoplifters* shows the dark side of Japan through the poor, slum, uneducated, and criminal, the Shibatas. They represent voices that are not heard by the state. This film is a social critics that shows paradox and irony in the midst of the advancement of Japan. Based on the analysis, several conclusions can be drawn. *First*, *Shoplifters* are a representation of the Japanese lower class who are rarely touched. The film is a social critique to the ruling class. The director as a collective subject, was trying to show the social class whom the state apparatus ignored. *Second*, the humanistic side that is shown through the attitude and dialogue between the characters becomes a paradox as an effort to fight the stigmatization of the lower class that has taken root due to

sociohistorical factors. *Third*, social alienation is still a problem amid the echo of the 'Cool Japan' slogan as a public diplomacy.

This research focuses on the study of representation of the lower class that is rarely voiced in analyzes of Japanese popular culture. Apart from the stigmatization and paradoxes discussed in this paper, there are still various aspects that are still rarely studied, such as the topics related to gender, social deviance, education, and others. The future research is expected to be able to further examine the representation of the social classes so that it will enrich the study of Japanese popular culture.

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