



Androgynous Representation in “The Boy and The Heron” *A Semiotic Approach to Visual and Linguistic Identity*

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ABSTRACT

Androgynous representation in Japanese animation offers a space to explore gender identity beyond binary norms. This study analyses the character Kiriko in *The Boy and The Heron* (2023) using Peirce’s semiotic approach, with primary data consisting of selected visual scenes and transcribed dialogues. The analysis shows that Kiriko predominantly uses masculine linguistic features such as the pronouns “*omae*” and “*ore*”, rough interjections like “*ora*” and “*oi*”, and masculine sentence-ending particles “*zo*” and “*sa*”, creating a firm and authoritative speaking style. However, in several scenes, Kiriko also uses the feminine pronoun “*atai*”, reflecting flexibility in gender identity. Visually, Kiriko combines masculine and feminine elements through short hair, masculine clothing, and assertive gestures, while still displaying feminine expressions and roles in certain situations. Compared to earlier androgynous characters like Lady Oscar (*The Rose of Versailles*) and Utena Tenjou (*Revolutionary Girl Utena*), Kiriko’s identity shifts more fluidly between gendered expressions, reflecting a growing inclusivity in anime representations. These findings highlight that Kiriko embodies a fluid gender representation that challenges stereotypes and expands the gender discourse in Japanese anime. This study demonstrates how *The Boy and The Heron* contributes to a more nuanced and inclusive discussion on gender, and suggests that future research should examine audience responses and the broader cultural significance of androgynous figures in contemporary Japanese animation.

KEYWORDS

Androgyny; Gender Representation; Japanese Animation; Semiotics; *The Boy and The Heron*.

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INTRODUCTION

Animated films serve not only as entertainment but also as a medium for cultural and social representation, including gender issues. One of the evolving gender concepts in popular culture studies is androgyny, which refers to the combination of both masculine and feminine characteristics within

an individual (Huang, Zhu, Zheng, Zhang, & Shiomi, 2012). However, androgyny is often misunderstood and incorrectly associated with specific sexual orientations, whereas it is primarily related to gender expression and identity that transcend the binary categories of male and female (Atwood & Axt, 2021).

In Japan, gender construction remains strongly influenced by traditional norms, one of which is *ryosai kenbo*, a concept that defines women as ideal wives and mothers whose primary role is within the domestic sphere (Surya & Kaluge, 2021). However, with the rise of popular media, characters that challenge conventional gender norms have emerged. Japanese animated films, particularly those by Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli, frequently feature characters that do not fully conform to traditional gender categories, such as Nausicaä in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* and Lady Eboshi in *Princess Mononoke* (Napier, 2001). One such character representing androgyny in contemporary animation is Kiriko, a supporting character in *The Boy and The Heron* (2023).

Kiriko is chosen as the subject of this study because she presents a nuanced and explicit portrayal of androgyny that is still relatively rare in mainstream Japanese animation, especially in recent works by prominent directors such as Hayao Miyazaki. Unlike most characters in the film, Kiriko's androgynous identity is constructed through both visual and linguistic elements—her short hair, masculine attire, assertive gestures, and dominant use of *danseigo* or male speech patterns, which distinctly set her apart from other female characters who typically adhere to conventional gender expressions. Moreover, Kiriko is the only character in the film whose gender presentation consistently blends masculine and feminine traits, making her an important case for examining fluid gender representation. Her portrayal plays a significant role in the narrative, as her ambiguous identity challenges both the protagonist's and the audience's perceptions of gender, while also supporting the film's broader themes of transformation, acceptance, and individuality. This unique blend makes Kiriko a compelling subject for analysis within the context of gender and identity representation in Japanese animated films.

To understand how androgyny is constructed in Kiriko's character, this study employs Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach. Peirce developed a triadic model of signs consisting of representamen, object, and interpretant, which enables a deeper analysis of how visual and linguistic signs in the film contribute to meaning-making (Peirce, 1955).

Based on this background, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does Peirce's triadic semiotic analysis of visual elements represent androgyny in *The Boy and The Heron*?
2. How do linguistic signs in Kiriko's character reflect the concept of androgyny based on Peirce's semiotics?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how animated films, as cultural products, represent gender in a more flexible and dynamic manner and how signs within the film contribute to shaping broader discourses on gender identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotics in Media Analysis

Semiotics is the study of signs and how they generate meaning within various social and cultural contexts (Sobur, 2003). One of the most influential theories in this field is Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic model, which categorizes signs into a triadic relationship consisting of the representamen, object, and interpretant. According to Peirce, a sign (representamen) only acquires meaning when associated with an object that it represents and interpreted by an observer (interpretant) (Kartini, Fatra Deni, & Jamil, 2022). This triadic structure provides a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed through visual and linguistic signs, making it a valuable tool in media analysis.

In film studies, Peirce's semiotic framework is used to examine how visual and linguistic elements contribute to meaning-making. His theory classifies signs into three main categories: icons, indices, and symbols. An icon is a sign that visually resembles its object, such as a drawing or photograph (Budiman, 2011). An index is a sign that has a direct causal or existential connection to its object, such as smoke indicating fire (Sobur, 2003). Meanwhile, a symbol derives its meaning from social conventions and cultural agreements, such as the color red representing courage or prohibition in certain contexts (Budiman, 2011). These semiotic classifications enable a systematic analysis of how signs function within films, facilitating the interpretation of deeper meanings that extend beyond their surface-level representations.

This study applies Peirce’s semiotic model to analyze how Kiriko’s character is visually and linguistically constructed in *The Boy and The Heron*. The analysis focuses on how clothing, gestures, and speech patterns serve as signs that shape Kiriko’s androgynous identity, demonstrating how gender representation in Japanese animated films is communicated through visual and linguistic elements. By utilizing Peirce’s triadic framework—comprising the sign, object, and interpretant—this study systematically identifies and interprets visual and linguistic features associated with Kiriko. For each selected scene or utterance, visual or verbal elements are examined as signs (representamen), the actual referent or concept they represent is identified as the object, and the meaning constructed for the viewer or listener is regarded as the interpretant. Through this analytical process, the study aims to uncover the underlying semiotic structures that contribute to Kiriko’s portrayal as an androgynous character, highlighting how animation can serve as a medium for complex gender representation.

The Concept of Androgyny in Japanese Media and Culture

Androgyny is a gender concept that refers to the fusion of both masculine and feminine characteristics within an individual, without being confined to traditional gender categories (Wijayakusuma, 2021). The term originates from the Greek words “Andro” (man) and “gyne” (woman) and was later expanded in psychological studies by Bem (1974). Bem argued that androgynous individuals possess flexibility in expressing both masculine and feminine traits, adapting their gender expression according to social contexts (Cheng, 2005). In Japan, androgyny has been embedded in various forms of art, media, and popular culture, reflecting a complex relationship between traditional gender norms and evolving representations of identity.

Historically, androgynous representations can be observed in Kabuki theater and Takarazuka Revue, where male actors portray female roles (*onnagata*) in Kabuki, while female performers take on male roles in Takarazuka productions (Isaka, 2023). In contemporary Japanese media, androgynous characters frequently appear in anime and manga, with notable examples including Lady Oscar in *The Rose of Versailles* and Utena in *Revolutionary Girl Utena*. These characters challenge gender boundaries by adopting

masculine attire and behaviors while maintaining certain feminine attributes, thus blurring the lines between traditional gender roles (Kotani, 2006). Moreover, in Japanese pop culture and fashion, androgyny is widely embraced, particularly within Visual Kei subculture, where individuals—regardless of gender—adopt flamboyant and gender-fluid styles, further complicating conventional notions of masculinity and femininity (McLeod, 2013).

This study applies the concept of androgyny to analyse how Kiriko in *The Boy and The Heron* embodies both masculinity and femininity, not only in physical appearance but also in behavioral expression. As a character who defies traditional gender expectations, Kiriko presents a nuanced representation of androgyny within Japanese animated films. By examining how Kiriko’s androgynous traits are constructed through visual and linguistic elements, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of gender representation in Japanese media and the broader discourse on non-binary identities in animation.

Previous Studies on Androgyny in Media

Research on the representation of androgyny in media has been widely discussed in previous studies. Poleva (2021), in her article “*Androgynous Motives in the Novel Pobeg Kumaniki (Bramble Sprout) by Lena Eltang*,” examines how androgynous characters in modernist literature are constructed through gender perception shifts, self-representation as the opposite sex, and interactions with other characters. The study emphasizes that androgyny is not merely a form of gender expression but also a symbol of the search for identity balance. However, this research focuses on narrative analysis in literature without considering the visual and linguistic aspects that shape the representation of androgyny in other media forms, such as animated films.

Meanwhile, Zulkifli and Haris (2021) explore how androgynous female characters in animated films are used to challenge gender norms. Their study finds that the acceptance of androgynous characters in films is highly influenced by cultural contexts, where Western animation is more open to masculine female protagonists compared to animation from more conservative cultures. However, their research focuses primarily on character analysis in relation to social norms, without examining how visual and linguistic

elements contribute to constructing androgynous identities in animation.

Unlike previous studies, this research analyses the representation of androgyny in Japanese animated films through two primary aspects: visual and linguistic elements. By applying Peirce's semiotic approach, this study examines how icons, indices, and symbols in visual elements (such as clothing, gestures, and facial expressions) and linguistic choices (such as the use of *danseigo* and *joseigo* in Kiriko's dialogue) construct a non-binary gender identity. Thus, this research not only fills the academic gap in androgyny studies in Japanese animation but also introduces a new approach by integrating both visual and linguistic analyses within a semiotic framework.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using semiotic analysis to examine the representation of androgyny in *The Boy and The Heron* (2023) by Hayao Miyazaki. Semiotic analysis is chosen as it allows for an in-depth examination of visual and linguistic signs that construct the concept of androgyny. The study adopts Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework, which focuses on the triadic relationship between representamen, object, and interpretant, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how meaning is constructed within the film. Data were categorized manually using coding tables, where each relevant visual scene or line of dialogue was identified as a sign (representamen), linked to its referent (object), and analysed for its interpreted meaning (interpretant) in the context of androgynous identity. Initial coding involved grouping examples of masculine and feminine linguistic features, gestures, and visual cues, which were then systematically classified based on their semiotic function. This process allowed for a structured analysis of how specific visual and linguistic markers contribute to the formation of Kiriko's androgynous identity.

The primary object of this study is the character Kiriko in *The Boy and The Heron* (2023), analysed from both visual and linguistic aspects. Data consists of selected scenes featuring Kiriko, specifically focusing on facial expressions, body movements, clothing, and the use of male speech patterns (*danseigo*). These elements serve as key indicators in examining how Kiriko's androgynous traits challenge traditional gender representations in Japanese animation.

The scope of analysis in this study is limited to scenes and dialogues in which Kiriko's androgynous traits are clearly depicted. Only scenes where Kiriko demonstrates salient masculine or feminine linguistic features—such as the use of *danseigo*, masculine pronouns, or body language typically associated with male or female characters—were selected for analysis. Scenes where Kiriko does not exhibit marked androgynous characteristics were excluded to maintain focus on the construction of gender identity. This purposive selection ensures that the data analysed are directly relevant to the research objectives and allows for a more in-depth semiotic interpretation of Kiriko's representation.

The data collection process is conducted through documentary analysis, where the film is observed multiple times to identify visual and linguistic signs relevant to androgyny. Each scene containing androgynous elements is recorded and categorized based on Peirce's semiotic model, ensuring a structured and systematic analysis.

Data analysis follows Peirce's triadic model of signs, which consists of representamen, object, and interpretant. Representamen refers to the physical form of the sign as it appears in the film, such as Kiriko's clothing, hairstyle, and speech patterns. Object represents the concept conveyed by the sign, in this case, Kiriko's androgynous identity. Lastly, interpretant is the meaning derived from the relationship between representamen and object, which is analyzed within the context of Japanese cultural and social norms. By examining the interaction between these elements, this study aims to explore how *The Boy and The Heron* constructs and communicates androgyny through Kiriko's character, contributing to broader discussions on gender representation in Japanese animated films.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Representation of Androgyny Through Visual Elements

Kiriko's character in *The Boy and The Heron* is portrayed as someone who does not conform to conventional gender expressions. The visual elements constructing Kiriko's identity exhibit a blend of masculine and feminine traits, reflecting the concept of androgyny. Using Peirce's semiotic analysis, Kiriko's visual representation can be examined based on the triadic model:

representamen (the visible sign in the film), object (the meaning represented by the sign), and interpretant (the social interpretation emerging from the relationship between the representamen and the object).

One of the key aspects of Kiriko's androgynous representation is her physical appearance, which merges both masculine and feminine features. This is evident in her hairstyle and facial structure. In Figure 1 (55:10), Kiriko is shown with short hair, a characteristic generally associated with masculinity in Japanese culture. According to Peirce's semiotic model, the short hair functions as the representamen (the observable sign), the object is the cultural concept of masculinity attached to this hairstyle, and the interpretant is the audience's interpretation that Kiriko displays masculine traits. However, this short haircut is combined with long, curled eyelashes, a strong visual marker of femininity. Here, the long eyelashes serve as the representamen, the object is the cultural association of such eyelashes with femininity, and the interpretant is the perception of Kiriko's feminine qualities. This combination of signs creates an ambiguous identity, making it difficult to categorize Kiriko as purely masculine or feminine, and positions her as an androgynous character within the visual narrative. Additionally, Figure 2 (55:44) highlights Kiriko's sharp and defined facial features, which contrast with the traditionally softer and more delicate facial characteristics commonly associated with Japanese women.

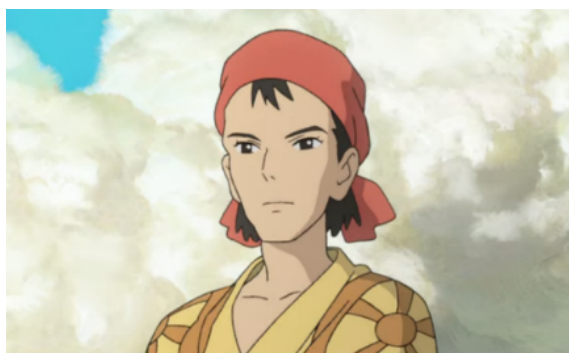


Figure 1: Portrait of Kiriko with short hair and long eyelashes.



Figure 2: Side portrait of Kiriko showcasing a defined facial structure.

Beyond facial features, Kiriko's clothing and accessories also play a significant role in constructing her androgynous identity. In Figure 3 (55:18), Kiriko wears long trousers and rubber boots, attire typically associated with men rather than women, who are more commonly depicted wearing skirts or traditional clothing. According to Peirce's semiotic model, the trousers and boots function as the representamen (the observable sign), the object is the cultural notion that such clothing is masculine, and the interpretant is the audience's perception of Kiriko as displaying masculine traits. The choice of trousers thus serves as a visual marker that blurs gender boundaries, as historically in Japan, women were expected to wear more feminine attire. Furthermore, Figure 4 (55:42) depicts Kiriko wearing a bandana, a unisex head accessory. Here, the bandana acts as the representamen, the object is its association as a gender-neutral or non-binary item, and the interpretant is the understanding that Kiriko's gender presentation cannot be easily categorized as either strictly masculine or feminine, further reinforcing her androgynous identity.



Figure 3: Portrait of Kiriko wearing trousers and rubber boots.



Figure 4: Portrait of Kiriko wearing a bandana.

Kiriko's gestures and physical activities also reflect strong masculine expressions. In Figure 5 (55:23), she is seen carrying a knife attached to her waist. According to Peirce's semiotic model, the knife serves as the representamen (the observable sign), the object is the cultural association of knives with male roles—both as tools for work and as symbols of self-defense—and the interpretant is the audience's interpretation of Kiriko as displaying masculine qualities, particularly those related to physical strength and independence. Carrying a weapon is more commonly associated with male characters in Japanese films, where women are rarely depicted engaging in physically demanding labor or carrying tools traditionally linked to male professions. Additionally, in Figure 6 (58:04), Kiriko is depicted rowing a boat, a profession historically performed by men. Here, the act of rowing a boat becomes the representamen, the object is its status as a male-dominated activity in Japanese tradition, and the interpretant is the perception of Kiriko breaking conventional gender roles and reinforcing her androgynous identity.



Figure 5: Portrait of Kiriko carrying a knife.



Figure 6: Portrait of Kiriko rowing a boat.

Despite Kiriko's dominant masculine traits, the film also highlights her feminine aspects. In Figure 7 (01:14:11), she is shown pouring tea for Mahito and the heron, executing the motion with grace and warmth. According to Peirce's semiotic model, the act of pouring tea serves as the representamen (the observable sign), the object is the cultural association of tea-serving with traditional feminine roles in Japanese society—such as hospitality and maternal instincts—and the interpretant is the audience's perception of Kiriko as embodying feminine qualities despite her overall androgynous identity. Furthermore, the background of this scene features a purple dress hanging on the wall, which can also be read semiotically: the purple dress acts as the representamen, the object is its cultural symbolism as a marker of femininity, and the interpretant is the suggestion that Kiriko retains a connection to her feminine side. These elements work together to illustrate the fluid interplay of masculine and feminine traits in Kiriko's character.



Figure 7: Portrait of Kiriko serving guests in her home.

Through these visual elements, Kiriko represents a gender identity that transcends traditional male or female categories. By retaining short hair while maintaining delicate facial

features, she embodies a balance of masculine and feminine traits within one individual, aligning with the concept of androgyny, where a person can possess characteristics of both genders without fully conforming to either.

Additionally, Kiriko's character deconstructs traditional Japanese gender stereotypes. In Japan, women are often associated with gentleness, motherhood, and elegance (*ryosai kenbo*), whereas men are expected to embody strength, assertiveness, and bravery. Kiriko defies these expectations; she is portrayed as independent, strong, and self-reliant, yet she also retains feminine elements in certain scenes. This duality challenges conventional gender norms in Japanese media representation.

Beyond personal identity, Kiriko's visual representation can also be understood as a symbol of gender fluidity in contemporary Japanese culture. By presenting a character whose appearance does not explicitly conform to one gender, *The Boy and The Heron* reflects the emerging acceptance of diverse gender expressions in Japanese media. This shift indicates that Japanese animation is beginning to explore gender representations beyond binary classifications, opening space for non-traditional identities in animated storytelling.

The social interpretation of Kiriko's character aligns with the changing representation of women in Japanese popular culture. Historically, female characters in Japanese films were constructed within two dominant categories: (1) the graceful and nurturing woman (*ryosai kenbo*), typically portrayed as ideal mothers or wives, and (2) the strong but still conventionally feminine woman, such as Nausicaä from *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984). However, Kiriko surpasses these categories, not only as a physically strong woman but also as someone whose visual identity embodies gender fluidity rather than adhering to rigid feminine or masculine traits.

Furthermore, Kiriko's presence in the film can be interpreted as a challenge to Japanese gender norms. While Japan maintains strict social and professional expectations regarding gender expression, the depiction of characters like Kiriko encourages discussions on gender flexibility in modern Japanese culture. By showcasing a female character who is both strong and independent yet nurturing and emotionally expressive, the film offers a fresh perspective on female representation in Japanese animation.

From an audience perspective, Kiriko's character provokes discussions on how women should be represented in media. By demonstrating that a female character can be powerful and self-reliant while still possessing emotional depth and warmth, *The Boy and The Heron* presents an alternative narrative to conventional female portrayals in Japanese animated films.

Representation of Androgyny Through Linguistic Elements

Beyond visual elements, speech style and language choice play a crucial role in shaping Kiriko's androgynous identity. In Japanese culture, language is closely tied to gender identity, with clear distinctions between *danseigo* (men's speech) and *joseigo* (women's speech). Kiriko is portrayed as a female character who consistently uses *danseigo*, which is uncommon for women in Japanese society.

Using Peirce's semiotic model, Kiriko's language use can be analysed based on representamen (linguistic signs used in the film), object (the meaning represented by these signs), and interpretant (the social interpretation arising from the relationship between representamen and object). Table 1 below outlines specific examples of Kiriko's linguistic choices in *The Boy and The Heron*.

Table 1. Linguistic Features of Kiriko's Speech in The Boy and The Heron.

Linguistic Feature	Example (Scene & Timestamp)	Explanation
Personal Pronouns (Pronomina Persona)	お前名前何という (58:33) <i>Omae namae nanto iu</i> "What is your name?"	" <i>Omae</i> " is a masculine and informal pronoun used by men, giving Kiriko a dominant and direct speaking style.
	何でお前がおれの名前を知っているんだよ (01:04:29) <i>Nande omae ga ore no namae o shitte irun da yo</i> "Why do you know my name?"	" <i>Ore</i> " is a first-person pronoun almost exclusively used by men, reinforcing Kiriko's masculine speech.
Interjections (<i>Kandooshi</i>) and Rough Expressions	同じだおら! (57:01) <i>Onaji da, ora!</i> "It's the same, hey!"	" <i>Ora!</i> " is a strong and masculine exclamation used by men to express excitement or assertiveness.
	おい! 起きて食べな (01:03:20) <i>Oi! Okite tabena</i> "Hey! Wake up and eat."	" <i>Oi!</i> " is a commanding interjection, commonly used by men in casual or authoritative contexts.
Sentence-Ending Particles (<i>Shuuji</i>) Used by Men	すぐわらわ達が来るぞ! (01:00:36) <i>Sugu warawara-tachi ga kuru zo!</i> "They (the warawara) will be here soon!"	" <i>Zo!</i> " is a sentence-ending particle used by men to add emphasis and assert dominance in speech.
	彼らはせつしよはできない。殺すのはおれの仕事さ。 (59:45) <i>Karera wa sessho wa dekinai. Korosu no wa ore no shigoto sa.</i> "They can't perform mercy killing. Killing is my job."	" <i>Sa</i> " is typically used by men to indicate confidence or detachment.
	おい! 起きて食べな (01:03:20) <i>Oi! Okite tabena</i> "Hey! Wake up and eat."	" <i>Na</i> " is used as a commanding particle, giving Kiriko a dominant and authoritative tone.
Use of Female Pronouns (<i>Joseigo</i>) in Certain Scenes	あたいはずっとここにいるんだよ (01:04:41) <i>Atai wa zutto koko ni irun da yo</i> "I'll always be here."	" <i>Atai</i> " is a first-person pronoun used by women, especially those from working-class backgrounds or with strong personalities.

Kiriko's use of *danseigo* conveys several key messages related to gender identity and androgynous representation.

First, Kiriko's speech directly contradicts traditional gender norms in the Japanese language. Historically, Japanese speech patterns are clearly divided by gender, with men using more direct, assertive speech, while women are expected to speak in a polite, softer manner. Kiriko breaks this norm by consistently using masculine speech patterns, reinforcing her strong and independent identity.

Second, her speech reflects a balance of masculine and feminine traits. Although Kiriko predominantly uses masculine speech markers, her occasional use of "*atai*" (a first-person pronoun for women) demonstrates that she is not strictly confined to either gendered speech pattern. This linguistic fusion reinforces her androgynous identity, aligning with her visual representation as a character who blends masculinity and femininity.

Third, Kiriko's language serves as a tool for challenging gender norms in Japanese society. In Japan, speech is not just about communication but also a marker of gender and social status. By speaking like a man, Kiriko rejects restrictive linguistic traditions, proving that speech should not be strictly categorized based on gender expectations.

Finally, her use of aggressive expressions like "*oi!*", "*zo!*", and "*na!*" reflects a dominant and confident personality. These speech patterns not only signal masculinity but also emphasize her assertiveness and independence, reinforcing Kiriko's identity as a character who defies conventional female roles.

From a sociocultural perspective, Kiriko's linguistic choices challenge Japan's rigid gender-based language system. Several interpretations can be drawn from her speech:

First, Kiriko's speech offers an alternative gender identity within Japanese culture. In

traditional Japanese society, women who use *danseigo* are often perceived as impolite or rebellious. However, Kiriko's character reshapes this perception, showing that using masculine speech can signify confidence and self-reliance rather than defiance.

Second, her speech reflects the evolution of gender representation in Japanese media. While traditional female characters in Japanese films often speak softly and politely, Kiriko represents a shift towards stronger, more independent female characters who use language to assert their authority and challenge gender roles.

Finally, Kiriko's linguistic androgyny represents freedom in gender expression. Her speech patterns show that language should not be limited by gender, emphasizing that individuals should have the freedom to express themselves linguistically without being restricted by societal norms.

Implications for Gender Studies and Japanese Animated Films

The analysis of Kiriko's character in *The Boy and The Heron* reveals that androgynous representation is constructed not only through visual elements but also through linguistic choices, both of which contribute to a non-binary gender identity that does not conform to rigid masculine or feminine categories. These findings have important implications for gender studies in Japanese culture, as well as for the representation of women and non-binary identities in Japanese animated films.

As a widely consumed medium, films play a crucial role in shaping and transforming societal perceptions of gender. In Japanese cinema, female representation has often been constructed based on dominant social norms, such as the *ryosai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) ideology, which idealizes women as gentle figures dedicated to domestic roles (Surya & Kaluge, 2021). However, in recent decades, gender representation in media has undergone significant transformations, particularly in animated films. Kiriko's character exemplifies how film narratives can challenge traditional gender norms by portraying a female character who is strong, independent, and defies conventional gender expressions. Her depiction provides an alternative representation of female and non-binary identities in Japanese media, suggesting that women do not need to be confined to feminine behavior, clothing, or speech to be recognized as strong individuals.

The concept of androgyny is not new to Japanese culture, as gender fluidity has been explored in various forms of traditional and modern art. Historically, Japanese theater, such as Kabuki and Takarazuka Revue, has engaged with non-binary gender expressions, where male actors portray female roles (*onnagata*) in Kabuki, while female performers take on male characters in Takarazuka productions. Similarly, anime and manga have long introduced androgynous characters, such as Lady Oscar in *The Rose of Versailles* (1979) and Utena Tenjou in *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (1997), both of whom challenge conventional gender roles through their clothing, behavior, and speech. Kiriko adds to this legacy of gender-fluid representation in Japanese popular culture, reinforcing the notion that female characters do not have to conform to traditional expectations of femininity.

One of the most significant implications of Kiriko's portrayal is its potential impact on the representation of female and non-binary identities in Japanese animation. Her character challenges the stereotype that strong women must still adhere to traditionally feminine attributes, demonstrating that a female character can speak assertively, dress androgynously, and still maintain emotional depth. This broader representation of gender could influence future Japanese animated films in several ways. First, it could encourage greater diversity in gender representation, making room for more characters who do not strictly conform to male or female norms. Second, it could help shift societal perceptions of gender roles, especially among younger audiences who consume popular media. While Japan still maintains strong social expectations regarding gender expression, characters like Kiriko contribute to normalizing more fluid gender identities. Third, her portrayal introduces a new archetype for female characters, breaking away from the two dominant female character types in anime: the gentle, idealistic woman (commonly seen in romance anime) and the strong yet traditionally feminine heroine (such as Nausicaä in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984)). Instead, Kiriko represents a female character who embraces masculinity without sacrificing her sense of self.

Kiriko's character also serves as a bridge between masculinity and femininity, highlighting that gender identity does not have to exist within a strict binary framework. She dresses and speaks like a man but also expresses femininity in certain moments, reinforcing the idea that gender exists on

a spectrum rather than as a rigid division between male and female categories. Her representation aligns with broader discussions in gender studies, particularly in the context of Japanese society, which continues to enforce clear distinctions between masculinity and femininity. By presenting a character who defies these traditional expectations, *The Boy and The Heron* contributes to a growing discourse on gender fluidity and the evolving portrayal of gender in Japanese animation.

Through its depiction of Kiriko, *The Boy and The Heron* illustrates how Japanese animated films are beginning to embrace more diverse and complex gender identities. As society moves toward greater recognition of non-binary and gender-fluid identities, media representations like Kiriko's could help shape more inclusive narratives in Japanese pop culture. By combining strong masculine traits with moments of feminine expression, Kiriko challenges traditional gender norms and paves the way for a broader understanding of identity that transcends binary classifications.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the representation of androgyny in Kiriko's character from *The Boy and The Heron* using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach. The findings indicate that Kiriko blends both masculine and feminine characteristics through visual and linguistic elements, forming a non-binary gender identity. Visually, her short hair, masculine clothing, and assertive gestures contrast with moments where she exhibits feminine expressions and traditional roles like serving tea. Linguistically, she predominantly speaks in *danseigo* (men's speech) with masculine pronouns and assertive expressions, yet occasionally uses *joseigo* (women's speech), illustrating gender fluidity in language.

Kiriko's representation challenges traditional gender norms in Japanese media, reinforcing the idea that gender exists on a spectrum rather than a rigid binary. Her character reflects the shifting portrayal of female and androgynous identities in anime, joining the ranks of Lady Oscar in *The Rose of Versailles* and Utena Tenjou in *Revolutionary Girl Utena*. By portraying a gender-fluid character, *The Boy and The Heron* contributes to a more inclusive discourse on gender representation in Japanese animation. Future research could explore how audiences perceive androgynous characters and

how gender representation continues to evolve in the anime industry.

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