

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Rhapsody in August (1991)

Akira Kurosawa

OVERVIEW

We have seen Kurosawa at work on the nuclear holocaust theme. *I Live in Fear* tracked that theme, as it followed the mind life of a wealthy industrialist, in Tokyo, who with aging grew increasingly terrified, that the nuclear holocaust dropped on Japan might be repeated. There was no evidence to support that fear, but pure neurotic anxiety, backed up with memories; that was enough to light the fire of terror. The terrified patriarch of that earlier film, fearful for himself and for his family, plans to escape with the family, to Brazil. In the present film we take a second kind of look at the terror in question. We are working from a contemporary Japanese novel this time, and studying the world situation from the inside, as it were, as it impacted three generations of a Japanese family, as they lived the 'miracle economy of postwar Japan. First there is the elderly woman, Kane, who lost her husband in the bombing of Nagasaki, and who, at the time of the film, is spending the summer caring for her four grandchildren. While the grandchildren are with her, the lady learns of the existence of a long-lost brother, Suzujiro, who lives in Hawaii, and wants her to visit him before he dies. With this turn to the story Kurosawa opens up a new theme for his work, the place of Japanese American relations in the mind of defeated Japan. In fact one might say that the entire concern of the present film, with interpersonal relations on the sociological level, is conspicuously not the Kurosawian way of building a film. We are far more accustomed, from this director, to work in which the eye leads the way and history quickly consumes the present.

Auteur The conclusion of the foregoing paragraph should open our eyes to a couple of salient traits of Kurosawa the workman in film. (It is relevant to slow down at this point, for the film we are addressing is the next to final film the director created, and thus a vantage point from which to look back on his entire opus. If we look back on the opus of Kurosawa what do we find in the way of family studies, of the intricacies of relationship that, for example, make up so much of the dignity and power of the novel? (Novel and film have reason to be thought together, for they represent primal and recurring expressions in the two genres, one of them work of imagination, the other of eye and techne interwoven.) In the opus of Kurosawa we find abundant sensitivity to interpersonal relations but relatively little to family intricacy. (The best examples of that kind of intricacy, in Kurosawa's work, might be 'No regrets for our youth,' 'I live in fear,' 'Ran,' or 'Throne of Blood,' of which only the first two render back the kind of family intricacy we might expect in a Victorian novel, or, for example, in Kurosawa's most beloved Dostoyevsky. The concern sets demanded of the highly successful cinematographer differ sharply from those demanded of the successful novelist).

Film It is worth noting that the present film is one of the three Kurosawa directed films in which a female plays a leading role. (The other two instances are *The Most Beautiful* (1944) and *No Regrets for our Youth*, 1946. (The former film involves a variety of women workers in a wartime factory, with no individual woman highlighting the show, while the latter film, unique in Kurasawa's creative repertoire, opens to us a full life portrait of a strong but broken woman, Yukie, who immerses herself in the Japanese university level protest against thirties Japanese militarism. The saga of this young and gutsy intellectual—does she push your thought forward to Simone Weil or Edith Stein, comparable female heroes of the Second World War?—tracks her courageous female loyalty onto the land, after she has returned her lover's ashes to his parents, and committed herself to a remaining farm life on the land. In fact, given this potent female portraiture, one has to wonder That Kurosawa did not give himself more extensive opportunities to put women at the center of his films.

Historical background The present film dives straight into the historical conundrum presented to us at the end of the Second World War. The war generated intense bitterness, with major atrocities to show for

itself. Many individuals on both sides lost loved ones, and suffered the kind of lifetime loss that took Kane's joy from her. Of course the infrastructure of the entire country was crushed. Yet what we call the Japanese 'postwar economic recovery' intervened onto Japanese cultural and economic life. It was to the interest, of the western allies, that they should rebuild Japan into a thriving economic partner, and it was just that path of rebuilding the defeated, that the allies followed. They passed seemingly endless investment into the reconstructing of Japanese cities, and in the process enriched both the Japanese and their western conquerors. It was against this backdrop that Kurosawa set 'Autumn Rhapsody,' which takes a cultural snapshot of the paradoxical world situation that faced the Japanese after the war. From Kane herself the impact of her personal history spreads out multi directionally. Her husband was her link to traditional pre-war Japan. Her two sons grew up as full members of the economic miracle, which was part of the new Japan. The lady's relation to the rapidly changing world around her grows even more complex when, in the midst of taking care of her four grandchildren for the summer, she receives news of a long lost brother in Hawaii, and of his urgent desire to meet her in Hawaii before he dies. The actuality on the ground, that her brother's son is en route to visit her, is a further reminder that a big new diversified world is moving in around her.

Plot Rhapsody in August is a film about three generations of a Japanese family, and their differing responses to the atomic bombing of Japan by the United States. The central figure here, and the major female portrayal in Kurosawa's opus, is Kane, an elderly woman now and prone to increasing symptoms of what today we would call dementia. She lost her husband in the bombing of Nagasaki and has two children who grew up in postwar Japan, beneficiaries of the Japanese economic miracle. She also has four Japanese grandchildren. At the same time, she becomes aware of a long lost brother who lives in Hawaii, and who wants her to come visit him while he is still alive. In other words the film spreads a wide canvas over the cultural complexities of America, which followed the conclusion of World War II in the Far East. Meanwhile Kane's brother has a son, Clark, who has been brought up in America and who is anxious to visit his Japanese relatives. Kane, we see, has already been trapped in the vise of history, and the pressure emanating from Hawaii only adds to her sense of the need to act.

While visiting their grandmother near Nagasaki, Kane's grandchildren are able to see the place where their grandfather, Kane's husband, had been killed. As they mull over the personal tragedy of Kane, they come to feel more understanding for her loss, while they come increasingly to pick up the sense that the United States is the oppressor. As this sense begins to settle down over the extended family, Kane's nephew Clark arrives in Japan to to meet his aunt, and to attend a memorial service for Kane's husband. (By this time the Hawaii family has received the letter in which Kane describes the death of her husband, an inevitable course of conflict between the two branches of the family.) To everyone's relief, Clark and Kane offer one another the olive branch, offering each other a memorable handshake. In the midst of this entente cordiale between the two relatives, Clark receives news that his father in Hawaii has died, and that he must go home.

When Clark leaves, Kane begins to sink back into her dementia, to be haunted by memories of her husband and to be confused about time and place. In a heavy storm, Kane is beset by the idea that she needs to save her husband, from an impending atomic blast. Her mind is gone.

CHARACTERS

Kane , the grandmother
Tadao Kane's son
Machiko Tadao's wife
Tamoko Tadao's daughter
Shiniro Tadao's son.
Yoshie Kane's daughter
Tateo Yoshie's son
Clark Kane's nephew

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Kane, the elderly Japanese lady at the center of the present film, is the center of the numerous characters who circulate around her. She is beset by the memory of her husband, who was killed in the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. She is affected with dementia, as the film opens, and is subject to delusions, yet she is relatively aware of the attitudes and learning paths of her extended family; for instance she reaches out to her cousin in Hawaii. In the end the pressures of her own past, with its painful memories, is too much for her and she walks off into the storm.

THEMES

Family Family grows in importance for Kane as she loses her husband, ages, and finds herself cut off from other sources of support. When first we meet her she is entertaining her children, and soon after she becomes acquainted with her family in Hawaii. With each move outward into her family she recovers more of herself. Family is an emerging concept.

Loss Wherever there is war there is serious loss. The Second World War in the East was known for loss and exceptional accompanying brutality. Kane suffered, fatally in the end, from the loss of her husband, who was killed in the Nagasaki bombing. Slowly she built her life back, until in the end the pain was overwhelming for her. She had nothing to replace it with.

Decline Kane represents a classic case of aging decline. We would say that she is lonely, isolated, and depressed, so that when a strong blow of fate occurs, as in the finale of the film, she is blown away to her death.

War War is the ultimate expression of conflict, the recognition that there is no amicable solution to deepening stress between parties. In the present film war has introduced, between Kane and her American relatives, a bitter enmity, grounded in the death of Kane's husband, which no amount of good intentions seems likely to disperse.